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African Biblical Interpretation Revisited: The Case of the Gerasene Demoniac in Mark 5:1–20

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Abstract

Due to Enlightenment rationalism, Western scholarship has historically overlooked spirit possession and exorcisms in the New Testament. Most scholars have approached these practices peripherally and associated them with superstitious and pre-scientific societies, especially in Africa. Biblical scholarship, as a Western-dominated discipline, has inherited this perspective and has not fully utilised African experiences or hermeneutics to examine spirit possession in the Bible. In their inquiries, biblical scholars mainly analyse the gospels' demonic possession from a historical-critical approach, disconnecting it from contemporary experiences. This article discusses African biblical scholarship as an emerging field, emphasising its methodological approaches and contributions to biblical studies overall. It also explores spirit possession from an African perspective to rehabilitate this anthropological experience, which remains relevant in some current societies. It demonstrates that African biblical hermeneutics can shed light on biblical stories about possession and exorcism, offering valuable insights for modern readers. The story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1−20) provides the raw material for this treatment.

Introduction

The stories reported in the synoptic gospels about Jesus casting out demons describe a context that is similar to the African cultural worldview (Mbiti 1971:140−150; Mburu 2021:32−33). Consequently, their interpretation can be

illuminated by African anthropological experiences. However, these passages can seem irrelevant to some modern readers because they may point to a different worldview.

This article proposes an approach to investigating biblical spirit possession and exorcism through the lens of African anthropology. Since African biblical scholarship and its methodological approaches may be unfamiliar to some readers, I wish to begin with a survey of the history of African biblical scholarship and of Christianity in Africa. I will then discuss cross-cultural and post-colonial methodological approaches. In the second part, I will explore the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1−20) from an African perspective. To focus this project, special attention will be given to the East African region. This society traditionally believes in supernatural powers and the existence of ancestors' spirits that can possess and harm the living. It is also important to note that, in East African societies, traditional healers still play a key role in helping those possessed by evil spirits.

Towards an African Biblical Hermeneutic

History of African Biblical Scholarship

Many scholars have engaged in historical criticism to investigate spirit possession and Jesus' healings and exorcisms. Others have explored anthropological evidence, comparing Jesus with other exorcists in the ancient Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds. Therefore, the African cultural context and its postcolonial mindset have not interested many scholars. It was in the 1960s that some scholars began to develop a model that interprets the Bible from an African perspective (Ossom-Batsa 2006:91). In the 1970s, African hermeneutics became a discipline within biblical scholarship.

The consolidation of African biblical scholarship can be traced back to the 1966 theological conference of Ibadan (Mbiti 1986:73). To address the issue of a theology that was not adapted to African life, and aiming to make a theology that was relevant to the African context, African theologians gathered for a colloquium in Ibadan, Nigeria. They discussed various topics related to introducing African biblical interpretation as a new approach in biblical hermeneutics. The agenda included the Afrocentric reading of the Bible and

the inculturation of biblical hermeneutics. This new approach highlighted the application of the text to the audience in a postcolonial context (Mbiti 1986:73). Thus, for some Africans, African biblical hermeneutics appears more engaging and transformative.

A few years after this conference of African theologians, John Mbiti, the pillar of this emerging discipline, published an important work in which he discusses the encounter between the biblical texts and African traditional concepts (1971). At the same time, Edward W. Fasholé-Luke (1975) expressed his concern that Africans were not significantly involved in biblical exegesis. Since then, some other scholars have developed an increasing interest in African hermeneutics, seeking to make scripture relevant to the African worldview. Among others, I can mention Justin Ukpong (1994, 2000), who focused his two major works on the inculturation of biblical hermeneutics in the African context, and Loba-Mkole (2008), who joined Ukpong's intercultural biblical exegesis. The publication of *The Bible in Africa* in 2000 (West and Dube 2000) and of an *Africa Bible Commentary* (Adeyemo 2006) marked a decisive step that spurred new efforts in African biblical scholarship.

Over the last two decades, interest in African biblical scholarship has increased among scholars. Some among them are worth consideration. Gerald O. West (2012) focuses his research on how dialogue between the African context and the Bible allows for African appropriation of biblical texts. Mbengu D. Nyiawung (2013) is mainly interested in Jesus' identity from an African perspective. Kabiro wa Gatumu (2009) examines Paul's conceptualisation of supernatural powers and then compares it with the African worldview. Musa Dube is mainly interested in the postcolonial translation of the Bible into African languages and in reading biblical texts through the lens of feminist theories (Dube 2000; Dube and Wafula 2017). Elizabeth W. Mburu engages African hermeneutics, using what she calls the 'intercultural method'. She highlights the fact that the

> parallels between biblical and African cultures and worldviews can be used as bridges to promote understanding, internalization and application of the biblical text. (2021:32)

Finally, Andrew Mbuvi (2017) has provided us with a recent article in which he offers a survey of African biblical studies as an emerging discipline.

African biblical scholarship primarily aims to make theology useful to society as a whole. Those for whom theology is done are implicated in the process. Consequently, theological findings are relevant to the recipients. In other words, the audience, which has been oppressed and ignored, finds a theological platform where its members can find answers to their practical life (Nyiawung 2013:2).

Mbuvi helps us identify, in Mbiti's early work, some elements that should be expected within a framework of African biblical studies (2017:150). The most important ones are worth mentioning: first, critiquing Eurocentric biblical scholarship. Mbiti critiques the imposition of Western eschatological concepts into an African reality (1971:91−125). Second is foregrounding African religious and cultural presuppositions in biblical interpretation. By analysing the African conceptualisation of the 'living-dead', he demonstrates an eschatological aspect that the West had not conceptualised (1971:60−90). Third is recognising the failure of some methods used by Western missionaries, who presented the gospel message to Africans without recognising African religious realities (Mbiti 1971:151). Fourth is exposing the closer affinity of the African religious outlook to the first-century biblical worldview. Along these lines, Mbiti explores a variety of biblical texts by drawing parallels with the African worldview (1971:140−150). Fifth is misapprehensions of the biblical message in African societies due to translation issues. Mbiti analyses various nuances of verb conjugation that the translation of the Bible into African languages failed to convey (1971:26). Lastly, he proposes the inculturation of some African traditional beliefs and practices into Christianity.

As a consolidated discipline, African hermeneutics is diverse and engaged through various categories or approaches. Although these categories overlap, it is legitimate to mention some of them. First, feminist hermeneutics reads the text in light of gender issues and the restoration of female identity (Dube 2000; Mburu 2021:33−77). Second, the postcolonial approach reads the text through the lens of the long history of Western colonialism and imperialism to advance African socioeconomic emancipation (Ela 1980; Kithinji 2021; Maimela 1987; Nyiawung 2013). Third, inculturation hermeneutics engages a

dialogue between the biblical text and African culture to express the gospel through African worldviews. For example, scholars in this group attempt to build an African Christology that looks at Jesus from an African perspective (Bediako 1990; Kithinji 2023; Magesa 2004; Mbiti 1971:27−39; Mugambi and Magesa 1989; Nyamiti 1984; Stinton 2004; Ukpong 1994). Fourth, African Independent Churches, commonly referred to as the community/people-based approach, provide a popular reading for ordinary believers. People appropriate biblical narratives to their daily lives (Nthamburi 2002:15). Lastly, I can mention the interfaith or comparative approach, which reads the biblical text to highlight its relationship with other religions, such as African traditional religions or Islam (Magesa 2010; Ossom-Batsa 2006:95−101).

Brief Consideration of Christianity in Africa

The historical evidence attests that Christianity was known in North Africa long before 180 AD (Decret 2009:9−10). Among the key figures in this early church, history records some leaders and theologians who continue to be celebrated today, such as Tertullian of Carthage (140−220 AD), Origen of Alexandria (184−253 AD), Cyprian of Carthage (195−258 AD), and Augustine of Hippo (354−430 AD). The works of these church fathers still have valuable interest for modern scholarship and in the practices of the church.

However, recent research indicates that the majority of Christians in Africa live in sub-Saharan Africa, including East Africa, and Abraham Smith estimates their number at 470 million adherents (2010:64). The history of this sub-Saharan Christianity dates back three centuries and has been embedded in the context of colonisation. In this framework, in many African countries, 'the Bible has been read and understood within pre-colonial, colonial, struggle for independence, post-independence, neo-colonial and globalization contexts' (Dube 2012:1−2). Consequently, the interpretation of the Bible is firmly framed within the Western historical and theological worldview, which does not easily fit an African context. As a result, some African converts to Christianity have continued to practise their traditional religions as well. Building on Mbiti (1986), wa Gatumu rightly states that, despite the growth of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, the African church continues to face a pastoral and doctrinal problem regarding 'the belief that supernatural powers inhibit or enhance human life' (2009:16).

Reconstructing the World of Spirits in African Pentecostal Hermeneutics

Pentecostals significantly contributed to biblical hermeneutics that valorise the universe of spiritual beings in an African context. The arrival of Pentecostal churches in Africa has been traced back to the 1970s. It is with the rise of these churches that Christian healing came into focus. They mainly focused on an aspect of ministry that has been neglected in mainline churches: the gifts of the Holy Spirit and deliverance. The mainline churches interpret the Bible from a historical-critical perspective common to mainstream biblical scholarship. The merit of the historical-critical methods lies in focusing on the author's intent, which limits subjectivism. However, it reduces the Bible to 'an object of historical investigation' (Fee 2000:8). Furthermore, it underestimates the world of spirits prevailing in African traditional religions and disregards contemporary readers and their context (Habarurema 2024:72). In contrast, Pentecostals took seriously the warning of Saint Paul to the Ephesians:

> For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly place (Ephesians 6:12, NRSV, here and throughout).

This ministry, which valorises some traditional religio-cultural resources, contributes to a significant growth of Pentecostalism in Africa (Anderson 2014:189). Along the same lines, Pentecostal hermeneutics highlights 'the correspondence between African experience and the Bible' (West 2000:38). They sought to integrate the spiritual experience lived in their communities into the exegesis of the Bible (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:170).

In Pentecostal hermeneutics, the languages common to the African cultural worldview, such as ancestors and the supreme being, are used and correlated with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Kalu 2008:184, 266–267). Spiritual beings, including demons and angels, though invisible, are also believed to be active. They can attack and harm people (Avorti 2000:312; LeMarquand 2000:93). In some African cultures, such as in Rwanda, a significant category of spirits consists of the ghosts of the dead, known as *bazimu*. The *bazimu* are also

classified into different clusters. The most important is made up of one's extended family. They can return to possess and harm the living as a form of revenge or punishment against any violation of their commands (Habarurema 2024:70−71; Karamaga 1990:120).

These spiritual beings, remnants of dead persons who can inflict pain or destroy the body, inform my reading of Mark 5:1−20. I look at the text through the eyes of an African reader, living in the context described by the *Africa Study Bible*:

> We in Africa have a greater understanding of the power of the spirits than do most people in the Western world. Many of us witnessed first-hand the destructive power of and oppression of demons. (Jusu 2012:1433)

Potential Methodological Approaches in African Biblical Scholarship

African biblical hermeneutics emerges as a theological discipline. Its general trend consists of reading the Bible through an African worldview. This project follows some African biblical scholars, such as Mbiti (1971), who rightly consider a cross-cultural approach an indispensable tool for reading and interpreting New Testament texts because it enables readers to understand biblical texts from their own cultural and religious context. Most of the time, their works are informed by 'insights from cultural anthropology' (Nyiawung 2013:7). This is why the cross-cultural method can be a valuable tool for examining biblical texts.

As far as the cross-cultural reading of the Bible in an African worldview is concerned, one must recognise that colonisation and postcolonisation are two historical realities that are reflected in all areas of African life. Both have been embedded in the cultural setting. This is why, in their attempt to liberate their hermeneutics from colonial ideas, African scholars have explored the Bible through a postcolonial approach. In this regard, two interdependent methodological approaches appear relevant to the reading of the Bible from an African perspective: the cross-cultural approach and the postcolonial biblical method. Both trends of African biblical hermeneutics will be important to this article as a concretisation of African biblical theology.

The Cross-cultural Approach

African biblical interpretation is defined as an Afrocentric interpretation. It aims to use insights from biblical hermeneutics to address situations and concerns pertinent to African communities (Mbuvi 2017:154). Most scholars describe it as 'an encounter between the biblical text and the African context' (Ukpong 2000:11). They acknowledge that cultural realities inform their work and recognise the rootedness of their endeavours in socio-political realities (Dube 2012:18).

Postmodernity, however, with its subjective tendencies and 'scientific ethos' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988:11), seems far removed from the realities of biblical communities and may therefore have something to learn from African scholars. West writes that 'African culture may have resources to understand the Bible differently from Euro-American biblical scholarship' (2018:249). African scholars rightly argue that there are common elements between the African perspective and New Testament worldviews, particularly regarding spirit possession, exorcism, and other cosmological perspectives such as the porosity of the spiritual and physical worlds (Mbiti 1971:127−153; Mburu 2021:32−33). Both worldviews attribute the causality of demonic possession to spiritual agents. The natural causality introduced by modern scientists points to an entirely different cosmology, unfamiliar to both biblical and African worldviews. This argument is founded on belief in the existence of spiritual beings, who have power over the physical world and human beings. In East Africa, the spirits of the dead (*bazimu*) were traditionally considered lower divinities. Consequently, they have full control over the visible and invisible worlds (Karamaga 1990:120).[1] Even natural disasters were attributed to a demonic causality. It is legitimate to note that it is not fair to attribute to spiritual beings full dominion over the physical world. Though demons are still active, some phenomena cannot be explained by the intervention of demonic powers. The best attitude is to recognise both spiritual and natural causality. For example, on one hand, natural disasters, such as floods, and some illnesses

[1] This is a traditional belief, which is still persistent in some communities. However, I believe in both spiritual and natural causalities. For example, illnesses can be caused by diseases or spirit possession.

caused by diseases have no connection with demonic agents. On the other hand, demonic-related patients attest to the presence of malefic evil beings.

We need to be reminded that attempting to read the Bible in African culture is not a simple exercise. Western interpreters and Western interpretative lenses have long dominated biblical studies. Though the academy has been diversified, the Western perspective remains very dominant. Even when non-Western worldviews are considered, they are often mediated by Western scholarly studies. My purpose is not to replace the Western interpretation with the African one. Instead, I suggest considering insights from different approaches.

For an effective cross-cultural interpretation of a biblical text, Mbuvi proposes that

> even when Western methods are used by African scholars, they are incorporated into a creative impulse that even original proponents have never envisioned. (2017:153)

Rogerson adds a very important insight (2001:4). For him, any study needs to conduct a thorough survey of ethnographic literature on the area, focusing in particular on the chosen themes. This method expressly does not suggest that the context and worldviews on which it draws are the same as those generated or represented in the texts. Only some similarities are needed to begin a comparison with biblical societies. Because the history of Africa and its worldview have been marked by colonisation and its consequences, the cross-cultural approach is more effective when paired with the postcolonial method. In what follows, I discuss the contribution of the postcolonial approach to the study of the Bible in Africa.

The Postcolonial Biblical Method

Postcolonial discourse can also make insightful contributions to African biblical hermeneutics. This approach enables the interpretation of the word of God to address the readers' problems. It considers the historical and socio-political situation prevailing on the continent. The word of God is interpreted and adapted to the reader's real context. Postcolonial scholars consider the fact that the Christianisation of Africa was embedded in a context of colonisation

and neo-imperialism. Postcolonial thought took root in the context of anti-imperialism. It is defined as 'an anti-imperial discourse that critiques the empire and its persistent legacies' (Go 2016:7). Since its beginning, it has emerged from the margins, as subjected people around the globe developed an anti-imperial mindset to protest and resist the metropoles of power. Later, this movement became an academic trend. Julian Go remarks that today when academics speak about 'postcolonial theory', they refer either to scholars who played a key role in the advocacy of postcolonial studies such as Edward Said (1978), Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha or to historians such as Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty who focused their works on subaltern studies (Go 2016:1). However, Go qualifies this group of writers as the 'second wave' of postcolonial thought because the early 'first wave' includes the pioneers of this tendency such as Frantz Fanon (1967), W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), and C. L. R. James (Go 2016:7).

In the 1980s, the postcolonial academic section reached biblical studies (Staley 2006:319). It was embedded in the willingness to contextualise biblical studies in marginalised societies. Fernando Segovia (2000) pioneered this new trend. Some other scholars followed Segovia to critique the Eurocentric focus of biblical studies during the period after the official decolonisation of African countries (Sugirtharajah 2002, 2006:74). Presently, a considerable number of scholars explore biblical texts through a postcolonial lens, including the following: Itumeleng Mosala (1989), Mahatma Gandhi (1997), Musa W. Dube (2012), Andrew M. Mbuvi (2017), Dube and R.S. Wafula (2017), Gerald West (2018), and Chin Ming Stephen Lim (2019).

In their critiques, African biblical scholars point out the underlying racism and the persistent colonialist and imperialist impulses that are pervasive in biblical studies in the modern West. This bias led to a failure to recognise works produced by African biblical scholars as 'authentic' biblical studies (Mbuvi 2017:156). African scholars adopted the postcolonial method in biblical studies as an attempt to address this problem. They recognise that the political colonial system incarnates an oppressive system for African subjects, which persists even after colonisation (Mosala 1989). They define postcolonial biblical criticism as the biblical method whose premise is to expose the colonial project in all its forms by examining the relation between empire, religion, power, and biblical interpretation to decolonise the colonised and formerly

colonised in all aspects of society (Dube 1997:20). For example, Julius Kithinji (2021) examines Jesus' authority in the Gospel of Mark and discusses how, in Africa, the colonisers used the gospel to legitimate their oppressive authority.

This approach consists of 'a reading of the Bible in which imperialist strategies are confronted, exposed, arrested by postcolonial subject' (Dube 2000:23; see also West 2018:246). Since both colonisation and decolonisation have impacted various sectors of African life, the postcolonial approach makes the Bible speak to Africans in that particular situation. However, its limitation consists of focusing more on the actual readers and disconnecting the text from its editorial intent. Mburu notices this limitation, but also observes a similar tendency in traditional historical criticism, which overlooks the context of the actual reader. To address this problem, she suggests an African hermeneutics of the Bible that stands on what she metaphorically calls 'a four-legged stool': the theological, literary, historical, and cultural context (2026:35−36).

Finally, one can argue that spirit possession is a relevant topic in African biblical studies. It enriches postcolonial discourse in both the neo-pragmatic and the socio-pragmatic approaches. Both trends shift the focus from authorial intent to the contemporary audience. The socio-pragmatic approach stresses the cultural and socio-political context of the audience (Anchimbe and Janney 2011). In contrast, the neo-pragmatic approach focuses more on linguistic features and the conceptualisation of realities with little involvement in people's lives (Gert 2023). In the synoptic gospels, Jesus is presented as an exorcist. He is accustomed to encountering spirits and casting them out from their hosts. Since the modern Western worldview disregards spiritual powers, it doesn't recognise the reliability of biblical exorcism stories. However, contrary to this Western bias, African scholars consider exorcism as culturally important and they highlight the affinity of biblical exorcism narratives with the African cosmological reality where physical events are understood to have spiritual provenance (Mbiti 1986:1). Scholars such as Mbiti (1970), Amanda Witmer (2012), and wa Gatumu (2009) state that, as has always been the case in Africa, in the first century the Graeco-Roman world believed that physical events may be caused by spiritual powers. This is why the postcolonial approach can become relevant to liberating the reading of biblical exorcism stories from the post-Enlightenment mindset.

In this first section, I have argued that Western scholarship overly dominates the field of biblical studies. However, I have mapped out some new methodological approaches initiated by African biblical hermeneutics. The following section applies the African biblical approach to a specific biblical passage. I propose to analyse the pericope of the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1−20).

The Case of the Gerasene/Gadarene Demoniac Story (Mark 5:1−20)

The Gerasene/Gadarene demoniac account (Mark 5:1−20, Matthew 8:28−34, and Luke 8:26−39) is the most articulated story among all gospel narratives about spirit possession and exorcism. This story depicts spirit possession, the demoniac, and exorcism in a worldview very close to the African experience. The passage can enrich our exploration of African readings of the Bible. This is why the following section examines the Gerasene demoniac story from an African perspective. It starts by exploring the Jewish and Graeco-Roman background to the Marcan exorcism tradition. Then, it provides a cross-cultural and postcolonial analysis of the pericope, utilising African anthropological literature. The main aim is to draw some analogies between the gospel tradition and the African worldview.

Cross-cultural Reading of the Gerasene Demoniac Story

The Demoniac from the Tomb in an African Worldview

Jewish and Graeco-Roman culture concerning spirit possession does not differ from the African cultural context. Demonology as a phenomenon was familiar to Africans, though the terminology lacks historical evidence. Impure spirits are attested in African anthropological tradition. The term *demon* (this is a Greek translation) appeared in early Bible translations in African languages done by Western missionaries. In these Bibles, 'impure spirits' and 'demons' were both translated as 'demons.' We can mention the first translation of the Bible in Kinyarwanda (*Bibiliya Yera* 1957) and the Setswana Bible (1857; Dube 2017:3−25). However, the intent was not to point out that they are synonymous. Instead, missionaries were very cautious about the term 'impure spirits', which were believed to be mainly dead persons' spirits or ghosts. They

wanted to wipe this African reality away from the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages. Consequently, the spirit beings from pre-Christian cosmology may have been minimised (Dube 2012; John 2019:12; Ndungu'u 2006:488−489).

When it comes to reading that 'a man with an unclean spirit met Jesus' (Mark 5:2), a great majority of Africans can easily think about dead persons' spirits that come to possess and harm the living or ghosts. In East Africa, the general belief is that the possessing spirits come from the dead, especially family members, or some restless spirits from harshly killed people. They can come from persons who died untimely, those who died with envy, or those who didn't receive respectful burial ceremonies (Avorti 2000:312; Erny 2005:121−122).

The Jewish conception of the spirits of fallen angels (1 Enoch 1−36) shares some similarities with the African spiritual worldview. The correlation between African and Jewish beliefs in the return of the spirits of the dead to possess and harm the living is demonstrated by some shared cults. For example, scholars have proved that the *Zar* (or *Sar*) spirit possession cult came from the Middle East and transited through Ethiopia before reaching northern and eastern Africa (Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, and Tanzania) long before the Christianisation of Africa. Presently, the *Zar* cult is common in many African countries as well as the Middle East, but with some local variations (Mianji and Semnani 2005:226).

Further, Enochic tradition from Second Temple Judaism is also very relevant to the African reading of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1−20. The book of *Jubilees* (chapter 10) testifies to the Jewish belief in the survival of the spirits of dead giants. *Jubilees* describes how they attacked Noah's grandchildren. Likewise, anthropologists agree that, in Africa, people believe in the immortality of souls. After the death of the body, the soul continues to exist and to act on the living (Erny 2005; Lambek 1988; Mbiti 1970:214). In East Africa, the emphasis is put on ancestors' spirits, especially of direct relatives who have been frustrated by the careless behaviour of the living towards them. They return as ghosts to avenge their frustration. Africans are always open to sharing their experiences of having been attacked by the ghosts. In

this regard, van Duijl reports some testimonies he collected from Ugandan society. The following is one among many:

> Possession began on a hospital bed, where late in the night I uttered words saying 'We want houses' and words like 'you abandoned us'. These voices were spirits from our ancestors. Actually, it was a combination of *omuzimu* and *emandwa,* who were seeking houses. They wanted to be brought back after being abandoned. They wanted a goat to be slaughtered for them, and I should take the blood of this goat to welcome the spirit back. My father, who used to practise rituals for ancestors, has died. I have ignored these rituals. The spirits then decided to manifest themselves through me. (van Duijl, Kleijn, and de Jong 2014:7)

This testimony fits the description of possessing spirits and the experience of possession in the Ugandan context as reported by various authors (Beattie 1969; Rubongoya 2003; p'Bitek 1963:15). In Rwanda, the phenomenon is very similar because the *bazimu* are believed to haunt their relatives and inhabit their bodies (Habarurema 2024:70−71). To cope with eventual attacks, sacrifices are offered to the ancestors. Second, across Africa, the evil spirits are not strange concepts to people because, as Mianji and Semnani observe, they have similar concepts in different African vernaculars with appropriate rituals to exorcise persons possessed by these harmful spirits:

> In Chad, there is the liban sheitan […]; among the Digo of the south Kenya coast, there is shaitani […]; and among Segeju Swahili speakers in Tanzania, there is shetani […]. Moreover, the form of Masabe spirit possession among the Tonga of Zambia […] resembles the Sudanese zār; the bori in Nigeria and North Africa; trumba and patros in Mayotte, Comoro Islands; saka or pepo among the Wataita of Kenya; takuka among the Ndembu of Zambia; holey (specifically, hauka) among the Songhay; and jnun curing activities, Iamadsha in Morocco. (2005:226)

To this open list, one can add *roho mbi* (evil spirits) in Rwanda and *shitani* (Satan), common to both Ugandans and Rwandans. As van Oyen remarks, it is worth noting that there are two words mostly used by the other synoptic gospels that seem closer to these African entities, but which do not appear in the Gospel of Mark: *διάβολος* and *πονηρός* (2011:104).

In current biblical scholarship, some scholars argue that, in biblical times, Jews identified possessing spirits with the souls of antediluvian giants (Bazzana 2020:60−133). This hypothesis is built on the story of the sons of God narrated in Genesis 6 and rewritten in the Second Temple Pseudepigrapha (the books of *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees*). The account is known as the myth of the fallen angels (or watchers). In both *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees*, demons are described as the souls of the dead giants or the descendants of fallen angels. The watchers transgressed God's commandments and defiled themselves by unlawfully having sexual intercourse with human wives, with whom they begot the giants, hybrid children: half angels, half humans (1 Enoch 6−11). From this disobedience resulted a severe death for their descendants (the giants) inflicted by God. Their human bodies were destroyed while their souls remained. They became *δαιμόνιον* (demons) who possessed humans and inflicted them with illnesses (1 Enoch 15:9, 15:11; see also Job 10).

Building on the myth of the fallen angels, some scholars identify Mark's unclean spirits with these spirits of the dead giants who returned to haunt the living (Elder 2021:81−87). Along the same lines, Bazzana and Anna Angelini argue that Legion was possessed by the spirits of the dead (Angelini 2022:62; Bazzana 2020:72−79). If we consider this belief in being possessed by the spirits of the dead, the story of the Gerasene demoniac can be more accessible to an African worldview. The identification sheds light on both the possessing spirits and the location of their hosts. The possessing spirits can be associated with ancestral spirits. Additionally, as the dead no longer live among the living, they are expected to come from cemeteries where they dwell. For example, in Rwanda, it is commonly believed that malevolent spirits come either from active volcanoes or from the tombs (Erny 2005:128).

In summary, since the tomb is perceived as a privileged location for the demoniac, one can assume that the main cause of possession is the spirits of dead persons. This conceptualisation of spirits and their dwelling location

brings fresh insights to the interpretation of Mark 5. The person with whom Jesus was confronted was probably possessed by violent spirits of the dead. This is why his place was not among the living. Instead, he lived in the gravesite.

Jesus' Encounter with the Demoniac

When Jesus encountered the spirit-possessed man at Gerasa, the demoniac was the first to speak. Therefore, the speech of the demon seems ambiguous to the reader. Van Oyen wonders without an answer whether demons recognise Jesus' power as superior to their own, or if they were trying to get Jesus on their side (2011:114). Often, the exorcist speaks first and interrogates the demon. In this story, the demon wanted to resist the exorcism. In other words, the spirits wanted to intimidate Jesus, take control over him, and cause his exorcism to fail (Bazzana 2020:84). To remove this ambiguity, Jesus moves quickly to exorcise the spirit by inquiring its name, to which the demoniac responds: 'What is your name […] My name is Legion' (Mark 5:9). Stevan Davies notes that 'the speech and behavior of the person possessed are understood to be the speech and behavior of a demon' (1995:36−37).

> The spirit speaks and acts while the host is absent […] Hosts do not remember what occurred while they were in trance but they are told by others what happened. (Lambek 1989:35)

The anthropological study of exorcism demonstrates that, in almost all cultures, the encounter between the exorcist and the possessed begins with a struggle to know the nature and the name of the possessing spirit. Kapferer (1991) shows that this confrontation between the exorcists and the spirits is present in the rituals performed by Sinhalese Buddhists. In a similar inquiry, Lestrade illustrates that the first, long step in Rwandan traditional healing and exorcism consists of forcing the possessing spirit to reveal its name (1954:201–206). It is said that this identification is a decisive step toward exorcism. This is because, in the battle between the exorcist and the spirit, if the latter refuses to reveal its name, the exorcist becomes unable to perform the deliverance. Sometimes, the exorcist ends up being harmed by the spirit. In this case, the intervention of another more powerful exorcist is required. An experience similar to that cited above is examined by Lambek in his cross-cultural study of spirit possession. He observes that communication is not only established

internally between the possessing spirits and their human consociates but also that the curers enter into communication with the spirit (1989:40).

Jesus used his power, as the Son of God, to weaken the spirits that had unsuccessfully attempted to resist and prevent him from performing the exorcism. As I said above, if an exorcist becomes unable to control the spirits, a more powerful one is required. However, it was impossible in the case of Jesus. As we consider the Marcan view, there was no stronger exorcist than Jesus in Israel, not even in the whole Mediterranean region at his time. In this line of inquiry, the story of the Gerasene demoniac needs to be understood in the whole context of Marcan storytelling. Previously, Mark narrates the calming of the storm to illustrate Jesus' power over all kinds of forces, including natural disasters and unclean spirits (Mark 4:35–41). In this regard, the details offered in the pericope of the Gerasene demoniac serve to emphasise the extraordinary power of Jesus over evil spirits (Cohen 2010:157).

Jesus as an Exorcist

When it comes to reading the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is recognised as the exorcist who cast out demons. Further, even the demons recognised him as a powerful exorcist at the point they fell down before him, crying: 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me' (Mark 5:7). In light of such a revelation, Davies observes that, in the first eight chapters of his gospel, Mark is concerned with Jesus' identity and addressing the views of Jesus' opponents (1995:96). Davies assumes that Mark wrote his gospel to insist first on Jesus as the son of man, who came to deliver us, who suffered, died, and rose again. This means that the healing stories seek to highlight his identity.

Regarding his healing activities, many scholars draw parallels between Jesus' activities and cross-cultural healing by giving him different names according to cultural variations and traditions. For Meier (1991–2001), Jesus is an eschatological prophet, and for Peter Craffert (2008) Jesus is a 'Shaman'. For Morton Smith (1978), he is a magician, while for Stevan L. Davies, he is a healer (1995:36−37). For Michael Winkelman (1992:30–32), he is a medium, and for Amanda Witmer (2012) and Graham Twelftree (1993), he is an exorcist. Being aware of some differences with Jesus' healing rituals, all these expressions highlight Jesus' power over demons and various illnesses.

Along the same lines, Smith (1978) assumes that Jesus was involved in healing activities as a 'magician'. Fritz Graf remarks that magic is a gift of the gods (1997:92). Consequently, since Jesus had the identity of the 'Son of the Most High God' (Mark 5:7), he defeated demons more effectively than any other exorcist. In the Gerasene demoniac's pericope and in all gospel episodes about exorcism, Jesus exorcises demons through no other action than speaking. Davies rightly noted that, in contrast to other healers, in the case of Jesus,

> magical techniques would not have been necessary if it were understood that a 'demon' was confronted face to face with 'the Holy One of God', for by the cultural definition the spirit of God would be more powerful than any demon of Satan. (1995:98)

Smith continues by remarking that the gospels minimise Jesus' practice of magic (1978:110). For example, in the case of Mark 5, Jesus does not *send* demons into the swine of pigs. Instead, he permits them to enter (Mark 5:13). However, the demons got out of their host and entered a herd of pigs. This fits well with both ancient Jewish (Matthew 12:43−45) and African beliefs in the possibility of a spirit or ghost moving from one host to another (Lambek 1988:716). Then, the swine rush down the steep bank into the sea. This is confirmation that the exorcism is effectively performed. The demons had left the man, and he recovered 'his right mind' (Mark 5:15).

Twelftree observes that this episode can be paralleled with many ancient and cross-cultural exorcisms by which the spirits pass from the person into some object (a pebble, a piece of wood) which could then be thrown away (1993:75). In a similar inquiry, van Oyen argues that, in his time, Jesus was not the only one to perform exorcisms (2011:100). Some other exorcists were operating in the Mediterranean region. He acknowledges that even today the same magic of exorcism happens in different cultures where it is believed that some illnesses are caused by evil forces or spirits that possess the human body (van Oyen 2011:100). Regarding Jesus' exorcisms as transformative performances within possessed persons and their society, Christian Strecker points out that Jesus' healing sessions did not happen in private like a magician. Strecker, instead, highlights the importance of the public in Jesus' exorcisms (2002:124−125). As far as the Gerasene demoniac exorcism is concerned,

Strecker observes: 'The destruction of the demoniac identity calls for the person's new placement within the social arena' (2002:128). This aspect is clearly discernible in the narrative of the Gerasene, who returned from social isolation at the tombs to the house of his family (Mark 5:19) (Strecker 2002:125).

One can conclude that, in Mark 5:1–20, Jesus is presented as a true exorcist who has full power to defeat Satan and his evil spirits. The ritual he performed is also present in African healing. Exorcists deliver those afflicted by demonic harm. However, in contrast to African traditional exorcism, in which many sophisticated formulas and medicines are required, the effectiveness of Jesus' exorcism resides neither in the magic words nor in the medicines. Instead, it resides in his person: Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Towards Postcolonial Perspectives

The account of the Gerasene demoniac has often inspired a political reading of the Bible. Scholars have used different features of this story to engage in socio-political discourse. Some scholars have built their arguments on the designation of the demon as *λεγιών*, which implies a political resonance. Thus, they see in Mark 5:9 a reference to Roman domination and to the colonised peoples' resistance to political occupation. In this line of inquiry, John D. Crossan argues that Mark names the demon 'Legion' to help his first-century audience connect 'demonic possession and colonial oppression' (1994:89). Bazzana critiques scholars who claim that there is neither Roman imperial allusion nor military connotation in Marcan storytelling (2020:85). For example, among many others, Sugirtharajah remarks that Mary Baird had suggested that *λεγιών* should be understood as literary (2002:92; see Baird 1920). For Adela Yarbro Collins, Mark may have used the term *λεγιών* only to highlight a big number of demons (2007:269). However, Bazzana says that Mark's choice is clear because Jesus had alternative words if he wanted to express something other than the Roman military presence (2020:85). Along the same lines, Davies also points out that 'an implicit critique of Roman power may be subtly present in the background of Mark 5:1–20' (1995:111).

Concerning the implication of a huge number of members in the legion, Bazzana agrees with Garroway, stating that 'Mark is inserting a high number

without really knowing or caring about the exact size or strength of a legion' (2020:86; see Garroway 2009:61−62). Paul Hollenbach and Ched Myers also support a socio-political reading of Mark 5:1−20 (Hollenbach 1981; Myers 1988). Myers frames his argument with the fact that Jesus subdued the strong man: likewise, the colonised can overturn the oppressing powers. Lastly, Jeffrey L. Staley reads Mark 5:15, 'clothed in his right mind', as postcolonial mimicry that deplores imperialism both in political and religious settings (2006). However, I am more interested in the socio-political implications of the language used in New Testament exorcisms.

Cohen points out that, by using the term λεγιών, Mark wants to show that Jesus can not only cast out demons but can also inspire people to drive out unclean colonisers (2010:157). Using the chiastic construction of the story identified by Francis Moloney (2002:102), Cohen draws a connection between the Roman legion and unclean animals:

> A possessed man approaches Jesus
> Jesus encounters the demons
> The swine are driven out
> Jesus encounters local Gentiles
> The cleansed man approaches Jesus. (Cohen 2010:157)

This chiasm illustrates how 'demons and gentiles occupy the same strata in the narrative' (Cohen 2010:157). This means that, while Jesus was fighting against demons, he also mimicked a battle against political forces. Cohen remarks that the gentiles may not have been able to decode Mark's imagery language. However, 'Jews who were living under occupation would know to whom and what Mark was referring' (Cohen 2010:157).

Such imagery-focused language was used in almost all colonised societies, where natives mocked the occupants with expressions that only an informed person could access. As far as East Africa is concerned, an example can be taken from Swahili-speaking communities in Tanzania, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where an expression of coded imagery was used in the context of divination but carried behind it the incitation to a revolt against colonisers: '*Mzungu atupwe jalalani*' (throw the white into the rubbish). Since the riddles are always in the form of question-answer, the

answer to this question was '*Machicha ya nazi*' (the yellow leftovers of the palm oil fruits). This divination was put into the agricultural context, and colonial officials never realised that it was an attack against their presence on the African land.

The famous ethnographic case by which a comparison is drawn between colonial occupation and the demon Legion as described in Mark 5 is found in an African film, *Les maîtres fous* (1955, 'The Mad Masters'), directed by Jean Rouch, about the *hauka* cults of Niger mimicking Europeans and Europeanised Africans to mock French and British colonial officials and their domination of Africans (Stoller 1995:129−133). Bazzana summarises the content of this film, which records the ritual activities of Nigerians living in the Gold Coast during the British occupation:

> The movie depicts the participants in the cult as they take up – in state of trance − the identities of colonial officials […] and perform actions that are identified as parodic imitations of colonial ceremonies. (2020:85)

The film has been interpreted in an anticolonialist context. Recently, many parallels have been drawn between *Les maîtres fous* and possession practices in different African cultures.

To explain how *Les maîtres fous* has some similarities with the Gerasene demoniac's story, Bazzana joins Kapferer to illustrate that the role of the European occupants consisted of breaking the traditional way of living by expanding their civilisation. To draw a parallel with Mark 5, defeating Legion illustrates the limited power of demons and consequently their inability to harm human beings (Bazzana 2020:90−91). Likewise, the film ironically depicts the colonial power as weak. Paul Stoller observes that the film seeks, above all, to articulate colonial tensions, showing how the powerless can engage in genuine resistance to the terror of the powerful colonisers (1995:130). He imagines, for example, a scene of spirit-possessed men who, during their sacrifices, eat dogs without any bodily harm. Christopher Burdon (2004) argues that Legion's story implies that fear on the side of the colonised is an antidote to liberation. Myers speaks of 'Binding the Strong Man' (1988). It is legitimate

to mention that the problem was not the foreign presence but the marginalising violence perpetrated against the natives.

Although the word 'Legion' has been understood as carrying both political and ethnic connotations, it doesn't mean that possession is political. Instead, Mark conceptualises a metaphorical language embedded in the common experience of spirit possession to describe a flawed political context. Taussig (1986) has rightly assumed that colonial violence in Asia and South America played a very important role in myth, possession, magic, and healing. The same experience is applied to African countries and other societies in development. Traditional healing and exorcism included some sessions against colonial presence on the land.

In summary, while Jesus was exorcising evil spirits, he and his Jewish audience were experiencing Roman occupation. They were enduring a public order imposed by Roman troops, and many brutal attacks against villages with catastrophic consequences. The attacks included burning houses, slaughter, systematic rape, heavy taxes, and a Roman desire to continue their domination (Horsley 2001:140). Mark describes Jesus' exorcisms along with imagery language related to that political situation. His language may imply a longing desire to gain their freedom. The same can be said of African societies. Reading Mark 5:1−20 in the postcolonial context does not only imply victory over evil spirits. It can also inspire their willingness to overthrow foreign domination and gain their full autonomy. In other words, in their struggles against various evils, Africans can gain inspiration and encouragement from Jesus' battle against malevolent spirits (Ndung'u 2006:485−486).

Conclusion

This article has shown that, due to Western dominance, mainstream biblical studies have often overlooked spirit possession. However, it has been noted that the rise of African biblical hermeneutics brought fresh insights into biblical scholarship. Two methodological approaches in this new trend were examined, namely the cross-cultural and the postcolonial approaches.

The discussion of Mark's story of the Gerasene demoniac from an African perspective has demonstrated that Mark inherits his conceptualisation of

harmful spirits from the Jewish tradition, particularly from the Second Temple period and Graeco-Roman beliefs. In these ancient cultures, some possessing spirits were believed to be the remnants of the dead giants (1 Enoch 6−11, Jubilees 10). Some anthropological literature was examined to draw an analogy to African beliefs in the spirits of the dead, which possess people. Consequently, exorcism is always utilised to drive out these unwanted spirits. So, it was shown that African biblical hermeneutics helps shed light on how Mark intentionally depicts Jesus as a powerful exorcist who casts out demons and inspires people in their struggles against various evils.

Finally, when it comes to examining biblical texts about spirit possession and exorcism, biblical scholarship can be informed by the African context for more insightful interpretations. If biblical scholars were aware of the affinities between the African context and what is reported in biblical narratives concerning spirit possession, they would support African biblical hermeneutics for more diversified works. I hope that this discussion will foster further consideration of the African context in biblical scholarship.

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