



God at Work throughout History

the Story of Redemption

Dr. Timothy D. Stabell

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Dr Timothy D Stabell, Coordinator of Intercultural Studies Programme at the Briercrest College and Seminary in Canada, and Senior Lecturer at the University of Bunia and the Bilingual Christian University of the Congo in the D.R.Congo.

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1. Introduction

a. Why start here?

The organisers of our Forum wanted us to start our reflections by looking at the overview of history that is given to us in the Bible, which we sometimes call the Story of Redemption, the account of God's activity for His people. Why start here? I believe that we can give at least three reasons.

Firstly, we can cite the example of the Bible itself. In my personal reading lately, I have been struck by the number of times that the authors of different passages recount the story of God's people. Stephen, when he was accused by the Jews of opposing the Law of Moses and God's Temple (Acts 6 :13,14) defended himself before the Sanhedrin by telling the story of Israel and of Israel's constant rebellion, culminating in their insistence that their Messiah, Jesus, be crucified (Acts 7). This is but one example. We could also cite the first chapters of Deuteronomy, the words of Joshua in Joshua 24, those of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 9, Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9, the story of Israel as told in Psalms 105 and 106, or Paul's teaching in Acts 13, to mention but a few of the innumerable examples.¹

So why is this story constantly repeated? Here we have the second reason for this starting point for our Forum. It is that being human, being the sinners we are, we tend to forget this history. We allow ourselves to be distracted by the worries and pleasures of this world (Luke 8 :14). We forget our heritage as God's people. We replace it with other stories, that of our families perhaps, with their difficulties, struggles and inter-personal conflicts. "Aunt So-and-So envies us, bears a grudge against us, has always caused problems in our family. Hasn't she inherited her mother's witchcraft?..." Thus this family story becomes more important in our minds than the story of what

¹ How many times does God remind the children of Israel that He is the one who delivered them out of Egypt? In so doing he reminds them of the story of redemption. He is a God who intervenes in history to the benefit of His own.

God has done for His people, even though it is the latter which ought to have first place in our thoughts.²

The third reason for this starting point is this: the way we tell ourselves our story will have an impact on our daily life. If, for example, I am worried about my family's history and about the conflicts within my family – and I tell this story with reference to witchcraft – this will play a decisive role in determining how I interpret events in my life, how I think about problems that I encounter, and how I take decisions about how to act on those problems. On the other hand, if I see myself as part of the story of a saved people, delivered by God, saved by His powerful hand, the fact that I understand my life in the light of that story can completely transform my view of my life, the actions that I will take, and the way I will interpret things that happen to me by way of difficulties, challenges, problems, opportunities, etc.

b. The question before us

To be more precise, the question that we must ask ourselves during this Forum is this: in view of our history as a people saved by God, in the light of the story of this redemption which we have through Jesus Christ, how should we play our part today in an appropriate way regarding the type of witchcraft that we see now in the cities of the DRC, and more specifically still, when faced with this reality of children suspected or accused of being witches?

So before attempting to solve this question, let us look together at the big themes of our story as God's people.³ We will divide this into five acts (like the acts of a play): Creation, the Fall, the Exodus, the New Exodus in Jesus Christ, and the Final Victory.

2. The story of God's acts in human history

a. Creation

**“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
... “Let Us create Humans in Our image.”**

The first act in our story is that of creation. The Bible refers to this several times to help us understand the majesty, omnipotence, infinite goodness and the unfathomable wisdom of our God. As we often sing in Swahili, creation shows us that, “Hakuna Mungu kama wewe” – “There is no God like You!” (see Isaiah 46:9).

How can we understand the grandeur of our God? In the first place, it is creation that reveals this to us. Let us think, for example, of the distance between us and the stars in the universe that God

² To give another example, it is sometimes the story of our nation that dominates our thoughts. This is too often the case with American Christians: we boast of the developmental history of our country in every area: political, military, economic, religious. By telling our story in this way, we forget the wrongs we have done on the one hand and we emphasise the good that we think we have done on the other, and we end up overly full of pride. By stressing this version of the history of our country, we forget that our true history as Christians is not the history of our country but is that of God's people – a people which brings together believers from every nation of the world.

³ Besides, it is not for me to answer. We are all going to work to find adequate responses.

has created. The stars are so far away that it is difficult to explain this in kilometres. The scholars who study these things have decided instead to talk of “light years”, namely the distance that light travels in a year. Light has its own particular speed. It always travels at the same speed – neither slower nor faster. This constant speed is 300 000 km per second (!). So one can easily calculate the distance travelled by light in one year: 300 000 km per second times 60 seconds in a minute times 60 minutes in an hour, times 24 hours in a day, times 365 days in a year – which equals approximately 9 500 000 000 000 km per year.

Now, the star closest to us is 4.2 light years away (i.e. about 40 000 000 000 000 km). But still more astonishing, and in all honesty beyond our ability to understand, is the fact that other stars are millions, hundreds of millions, even thousands of millions of light years away from where we are in this vast universe. All of this, the Bible tells us, was created by God in a single word – “By the word of the Lord all the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth... For He spoke and it was done; He commanded and it stood fast.” (Psalm 33:6,9). It really is so – there is no other like our God. He is the Almighty One. So let us have full confidence in Him: nothing is difficult for Him.

This Creation, which God made to show His power and grandeur, He declared very good, and He filled it with all the abundance of His riches and blessings. And then He put the finishing touch to His creation by creating a man and a woman in His own image. That is to say, He created them to be stewards of the earth. He gave to both man and woman together the responsibility of ruling over this creation. What an honour! What a privilege! What love, that God could entrust such authority to this human creature! (Genesis 1:26–31).

At the sight of all the blessings they had received from their Creator, Adam and Eve must have felt a deep love for God. Furthermore, we see that a real love reigned in this small human community. Adam rejoiced over the marvellous gift that God had just given him: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23) It was not good that he should be alone, so God gave him a suitable and beautiful companion, in whom he could delight and with whom he could exercise his ministry as co-ruler of creation.

Why is all this important for our Forum? Let us consider a little. Where would the opportunity be in this scene for witchcraft? There are at least two points to note here. Firstly, where would the place of witchcraft be where love holds sway? According to people’s understanding, witchcraft is motivated by jealousy, hatred, bitterness and corrupt selfishness. Furthermore, suspicion and accusations of witchcraft, with the rumours and gossip that circulate about it, show distrust of human relationships, mutual fear, suspicion, evil intentions. But in the Garden of Eden, at least before the entrance of sin, there was only love, joy and communion between the human beings and their God, and between Adam and Eve as the first couple. Once again: where in all this would be the opportunity for witchcraft? Neither witchcraft nor accusations or suspicion of witchcraft can exist where love prevails.

Furthermore, man knew the greatness and majesty of his God. He saw the power of God in creation around him. He recognised His goodness in the abundant provision that God had placed at his disposal. He knew he could trust absolutely in this God. So what should he fear? If God is for us, who can stand against us? In Genesis 1 and 2 there is simply no place for the fear of witches.

Why stress these points? Because the love, peace, and trust between Man and God which characterised the first Creation as we see in Genesis 1 and 2 will be re-established in the New Creation in accordance with the will of God. In other words, God will not abandon His creation, this creation that He had declared to be very good, to the corruption of sin. He will reclaim it. In fact, still more importantly, He has already begun this work of reclamation, repair, and restoration.

What does the Apostle Paul say to the Corinthian Christians? “If anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17) He is already part of this creation which God is in the process of reclaiming. In Jesus Christ, God has already begun the work of restoration of creation so that this new creation will be characterised by the same qualities that we saw in Genesis 1 and 2: love, brotherly communion, peace, knowing God and a trust in Him that neutralises fear. Where the Spirit of God is fully at work, where then would be the place for witchcraft or for engaging with harmful occult powers; or for rumours of witchcraft, hearsay, gossip, accusations? All these things have their roots in selfishness, fear, jealousy, hatred, suspicion, mistrust, and ill will, rather than in love and communion. Love has no place for such attitudes. And it is the beauty of love and communion that God is re-establishing in the new creation that is the church of Jesus Christ. Let us make this our goal. Let us proclaim this good news in our teaching, our sermons, and our counselling or pastoral care.

b. The Fall

“The day you eat of it, you will die.”

— a window onto a Biblical theology of suffering

In 1985, we arrived in Beni in North Kivu. I was still new to my missionary ministry and in spite of the two years we had already spent in Oicha prior to being transferred to Beni, I still had much to learn about African culture. I was still a novice. Shortly after our arrival, there was a death in a family known to the church, and I accompanied the Senior Pastor (Rev. Kathembo Kyssando — a good friend and a brother in Christ to this day) to the place of mourning. The message that this brother preached that day made a big impression on me. He took as his text the passage in Romans 5:12 where we find these words: “Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin” (a verse that of course calls to mind Genesis 3 — the account of the Fall into sin). This choice of text, and the message that my brother gave on that occasion troubled me a little. I did not understand. I thought he ought rather to have spoken about the resurrection or the hope that we have in eternal life. Ought he not to have given a message of comfort for those who had just lost a member of their family? Or used the opportunity to proclaim the gospel to call non-believers in the congregation to put their faith in Jesus? But Pastor Kyssando chose instead to insist that death came into the world because of Adam’s sin and that we will all die one day. Why such a message? Where is the comfort in that?

It was only a few years later, I believe, that I realised what had motivated him to take this theme for his sermon; and now I can see that he was right to do so. As African pastors, you have undoubtedly already understood. Perhaps you too have already preached on this theme at a funeral. Implicit in what he had to say was another message that Pastor Kyssando did not spell out, but which is very important in our African context. What is it? According to African culture,

death always has a cause, and this cause is witchcraft. If someone dies, it is therefore necessary to identify the witch who killed that person. So my pastor friend, fully understanding this way of thinking, wanted to pre-empt these ideas and to prevent people from trying to identify and hunt down the witch. He therefore wanted to remind us that we are all going to die and that if we all must die it is because of God's judgment declared following the sin of Adam, not because of witchcraft. There is therefore no point in upsetting things during a funeral and sullyng the name of the family or causing conflicts and disruption (or even violence) within the family with rumours or accusations of bewitchment and so forth. Since that day, I have attended other funerals where the preachers have, in one way or another, spoken on the same theme. It is not helpful to attribute death to witchcraft. That only stirs up conflict and dissention. We are all going to die, and the cause of death is God's judgment on sin.

So the Fall, which is the second act in the drama that we are studying, is very important for our topic here at the Forum. Adam and Eve rebelled against God and allied themselves with God's enemy. This was treason with truly tragic consequences for the human race. First of all, the love and communion which had characterised the life of the first couple before the Fall were spoiled and the human race embarked on a course of hatred, jealousy, murder, mistrust and violence.

Moreover, the disobedience of the first couple brought about not just death for all people down to the present, but also all the sufferings to which we are exposed: violence in society, misunderstandings, wars, oppression, injustice, hard and unprofitable work, poverty, sickness, famine, pain, unemployment, bad luck, failure to succeed in our efforts to improve our living conditions. Why do we suffer? Why do we have all these troubles? Can we really and Biblically attribute all this to witchcraft, as so many do? Are these things not the consequences of sin; and even if there were no witches in the world, we would still suffer and die all the same.

So in order to confront this problem of witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft, we need, I believe, a Biblical theology of suffering. If every time we come up against unexplained difficulties we feel obliged to attribute these troubles to witches causing them, we will forget the multi-faceted teaching of the Bible about suffering.

Job also suffered much. If his friends had been Africans, they would have recommended that he seek to identify the witch who had caused the loss of his livestock, his children and his health. But his friends did not do that. The Bible does not attribute any part of Job's suffering to witchcraft – there is not even the hint of such an idea. His counsellor-friends attributed his suffering to his own sins (also wrongly, as we will learn, at least in his case). They said in effect, "since you suffer so much, you must have committed serious sins. If you confess them, God will heal you and will restore to you the happiness you used to know." That was their thinking. But Job knew that his conscience was clear and their explanation was wrong. If he was suffering, it was not because of hidden, unconfessed sins. No, he knew he was innocent before God. In desperation, he cried out to God asking for the opportunity to defend himself in the court of divine justice. "If only God would appear before me, I would be able to show that I am innocent", he said.

In the end, God did appear to Job: Emmanuel, God With Us in our sufferings, God with Job in his sufferings; not to give Job the opportunity to defend himself as he had asked, but rather to confront him. In fact, God said to him: "Who are you that you question my wisdom, my goodness, my power? If I do not tell you why you suffer, can you not trust me anyway? Is it always necessary to know the reason for your suffering? If I, God, have demonstrated my wisdom, my omnipotence

in all I have created; moreover, if I have allowed you to see me, to speak with me, to hear my voice, to meet me, is that not enough for you?" So Job repents, not of a sin that was the cause of all his suffering (as his friends had said) but of the fact that he had almost abandoned his trust in God, that he had questioned the wisdom and goodness of God towards His own. No, sometimes God wants us to accept suffering without knowing why – without blaming it on our own sins, but also without looking for the witch who has supposedly been the cause – simply to prove that we trust Him.

I repeat: the Bible contains rich and multi-faceted teaching on suffering. It shows us that (1) our suffering is partly due to the sin of Adam, (2) our own sin may sometimes cause us to suffer, (3) we suffer sometimes because of the sins of others, (4) sometimes we suffer for no apparent reason, but (5) everything (even our suffering) works together for the good of those who love God, (6) God is with us in our suffering, and, to take it further still, (7) He Himself suffered with us and for us in the person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus. Here is but a part of the Biblical teaching on suffering. But if we wish to explain everything by reference to witches, we cut ourselves off from the richness of the teaching which the Bible offers us. In English, we have a useful saying: 'if all you have is a hammer, everything resembles a nail'. If we think only of witchcraft as the source of our problems, we will be forever hunting witches.⁴

So we have a duty to know and to teach this multi-faceted theology of suffering that the Bible gives to us so that Christians resist the tendency to attribute everything to witchcraft. My personal impression is that those who know this teaching well will have less reason to seek explanations based on witchcraft to understand the reasons for their difficulties.

c. Exodus

“Let my people go, that they may serve Me.”

Deliverance:

“Let my people go...”

We now come to the third act in the story of the salvation work of God: the exodus from the land of Egypt. The children of Egypt were living in Egypt under a yoke of slavery. God, hearing their cries of anguish, decided to save them. And as the Bible says, he rescued them from the Egyptian authorities by His great power, “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 5:15; 7:19; 9:29 etc.). If creation declares the power of God, the redemption of the children of Israel does so too. Once again we see that, “Hakuna mungu kama wewe.” There is no one like our God. Here God uses His power to deliver His people from a politico-military power which made it impossible for them to do anything to save themselves. But their impotence was of no importance, because God is the Omnipotent One who took the initiative to free them. “Let my people go, that they may serve me.” And Pharaoh, despite all his power, all his resistance, could do nothing to stop the saving work of God. Once again, God becomes Emmanuel: God with the children of Israel in order to save them.

⁴ In fact it is hard to find a single passage in the Bible that attributes suffering to witchcraft.

The principal actors in this drama are therefore – (1) God in first place – playing the lead role: then (2) Pharaoh, who was also considered to be a god in the Egyptian religion (but a god whose powerlessness is unveiled before everyone); (3) Moses, God’s ambassador; and finally (4) the people of Israel, the passive object of this divine intervention.

But there are other actors in this drama that we should also mention: the magicians at pharaoh’s court. Let us simply note that the role played by these magicians is relatively insignificant. They are there for a few scenes, then they disappear, and we hear no more about them. These enchanters try to imitate Moses’ miracles, but their petty magic becomes the butt of mockery. They turn their staffs into snakes, a little like Moses did, but Moses’ snake had their snakes for dinner. God, through the hand of Moses, turned all the waters of Egypt into blood (the rivers and streams, the lakes etc.). So the magicians try to imitate God’s miracle by taking a small amount of water to do the same. But it is a small-scale imitation. They also succeed in bringing forth a few frogs after Moses had brought forth so many that they covered the whole land. So three times they managed to imitate the miracles of God, but only on a much smaller scale. However, the fourth time, when they “worked with their enchantments to bring forth lice... they could not... Then the magicians said to Pharaoh ‘This is the finger of God’.” (Exodus 8:18–19). This miracle was too much for them. Shortly afterwards, when God struck the Egyptians with boils, these supposedly powerful magicians are struck down just like everyone else. Then they disappear from the story. They are not mentioned during the other plagues.

Why emphasise this short chapter in the story of the Exodus? Because we are here to study a form of magic: witchcraft as it is known in contemporary Africa. Do we not see here that the Bible’s message is that occult powers are nothing before God? There is therefore nothing in these mystical powers that should make us afraid, amaze us, demoralise us or cause us to wander hither and thither looking for a solution. No. Our solution is God! As pastors, teachers of the Word of God, it falls to us to strengthen the faith of our flocks by showing them how much greater is the power of our God. Let us fight against fear. Let us fight against lack of courage. If God is for us, this God before whom those magicians could do nothing, then who can stand against us to make us fear?⁵

“...that they may serve Me.”

– a Biblical ethic for the people of God

When God delivered the people of Israel, he had a very specific goal that he wanted to accomplish. He was looking for a people who would serve Him, who would be for Him, devoted to doing His will, full of trust in Him, full of love for Him who had delivered them from the hand of their enemies. God did not save them from their sufferings just to give them freedom. He saved them first and foremost so that they would belong to Him and live according to His will.

‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My

⁵ One could also cite the case of Balaam who apparently tried to use occult forces to curse the people of Israel. In the end he was obliged to reserve himself by saying, “How can I curse him whom God has not cursed? (Numbers 23: 8), and further on, “Enchantment can do nothing against Jacob, nor divination against Israel” (Numbers 23:23). Once again it is evident that every other power outside the power of God Himself is nothing in comparison with his own sovereignty.

covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people: for all the earth is Mine, and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ (Exodus 19:4–6)

Just as Jesus would indicate later on, this Biblical ethic for God’s people has two dimensions: love of God and love for one’s neighbour. Let us look first of all at the first dimension with its implications for the theme of our Forum.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.’ (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). According to this paramount commandment, there was no place either to worship other gods nor (take note) to resort to other kinds of magic nor to trust in occult powers:

“There must never be found among you ...anyone who practises divination, an omen reader, a soothsayer, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, one who conjures up spirits, or who calls up the dead. Whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord... You must be blameless before the Lord, your God.” (Deuteronomy 18:10–13)

We see here particularly the rejection of all forms of divination, in other words, any attempt to know invisible or future truths that God has not put within our grasp in the visible creation (through scientific enquiry, for example) and has not revealed through His prophets (the inspired Word of God). Immediately after forbidding all these practices of divination, Moses tells them that instead of seeking to know hidden mysteries through occult sources of revelation, the people of God must wait until the Lord gives them a real prophet: ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your midst, from your fellow Israelites; you must listen to him...’I will put my words in his mouth and he will speak (to you) whatever I command.” (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18).

So it is forbidden for God’s people to seek to know through other means that which God has not revealed through His prophets. They must not consult diviners, nor marabouts, nor (for us today) the nganga-nkisi, nor the wafumu. Here in Africa, these diviners say they can identify hidden witches who have caused this or that misfortune. But for us, as children of God, this passage in Deuteronomy 18 forbids us from seeking them out. Furthermore, witchcraft accusations levelled by these diviners often contribute to conflicts in families and disturb the peace of society.

But one of the questions that I ask myself here is related to pastor–prophets who claim the same sort of ability. What should we say about them? In the community of which I am a member in the north east of the DRC, I have heard of a few cases where a pastor was officially censured for having labelled a member of his church as a witch. According to the leaders of that community, a pastor should not venture in this direction. To do so is to act as a nganga-nkisi, whereas the Bible prohibits all kinds of divination. Biblically speaking, the identification of people as witches is not part of the ministry of a pastor. There are people, like Simon in Acts 8, who identify themselves (freely, without coercion or torture) as sorcerers or diviners or magicians. In such cases, the duty of a pastor is to show such people the way to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, as Peter and John did for Simon. Even in the Old Testament, the forms of magic in question seem to have been practised by magicians or soothsayers who were publically known in their societies. Pharaoh’s magicians, Balaam, the magicians in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar, etc., practised their magic openly, even officially. This would also be true of the soothsayers, astrologers, magicians, etc. of Deuteronomy 18:10 and following. So when the prophets of the Old Testament denounced the

practice of magic (as in Micah 5:12) they were not referring to hidden witches whose identity had to be uncovered through divination or some special revelation, as some pastors claim nowadays. These sorcerer–magicians were known to everyone. They practised their magic in public. ***I do not believe that one can find a single example in the Bible of a servant of God who had to reveal through a prophetic word or a special act of divination the identity of a hidden witch.***

So first and foremost, a Biblical ethic requires of God’s people that we have a deep love of God. Anyone whom we love we will also trust, especially if the One whom we are called to love also has the necessary power to help us: “God has spoken once, twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God, and loving kindness is also Yours, O Lord.” (Psalm 62: 11–12). If our God is both Almighty and also the One who always shows loving kindness to us, we can and should trust Him in all of life’s circumstances. Once again, there is no place for fear of witches, nor to have recourse to soothsayers or nganga–nkisi for any help. God is our Help. “God is our refuge and strength, a never–failing help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1; see also Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:26; 2 Chronicles 14:11, 32:8, etc.)

Secondly, a Biblical ethic requires God’s people to love one another. “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18; quoted in Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9, Gal 5:14: and James 2:8). This passage in Leviticus comes as the conclusion to a whole series of commandments about what we often call social justice: laws about the right of the poor to glean (verses 9–10), the prohibition on bearing false witness (verses 11–12), the rejection of all forms of oppression or extortion against a neighbour (verse 13) and so on. As Paul noted, “All [commandments] are summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” (Romans 13:9). Thus social justice is simply the application in various human relationships of the commandment to love one’s neighbour. However, this law of love is particularly important when one’s neighbour is poor, marginalised, powerless, unable to defend himself or herself (like the children we are speaking of in this Forum). So, in the law of Moses we have a whole range of rules which require the Israelites to show a special care for such people.

“You shall neither mistreat a stranger, nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict the widow or orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will become hot and I will destroy you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.” (Exodus 22:21–24; see also Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 10:17–19, 24: 17–22).

Yet very often the rumours and gossip and accusations of witchcraft are targeted at people who are marginalised in society: widowers and widows, orphans and other children, those who are in some way unable to defend themselves. Those for whom the people of God ought to have a particular care are too often targeted by gossip, accusations and persecution from the society around them. It is the responsibility of God’s people to come to their defence.

In addition to this, we must ask ourselves this question: to what extent can we trust the gossip that circulates about the witchcraft of this or that individual? The penultimate commandment of the ten commandments forbids us to bear false witness against others (Exodus 20:16). Love rejects the telling of lies that sully the name or destroy the reputation of a neighbour. However, too often in our churches, we go along with the spreading of rumours about witchcraft for which we have no proof, and in this way we break the commandment of brotherly love. Recently I heard such rumours about a pastor who has always been a good friend. Certain members of the church

were tarnishing his name. I found this very disheartened. And I ask myself the question: where is the love that we should have for one another? I believe that as leaders of the church of Jesus Christ, we have a duty to fight against such destructive tendencies and to forbid Christians from spreading this kind of gossip, rumours or slurs.

Let us remember the joy and mutual affection which characterised the social life of the first couple before sin entered into the world. This is what God wants to re-establish for these children by giving this commandment to love our neighbour. He wants us to live in peace, in joy, in mutual respect and in love for one another. Where our relationships are characterised by this atmosphere, there is no place for rumours and witchcraft accusations.

So I would suggest that the most powerful weapon we have against witchcraft and the effects of witchcraft in the church is not exorcism but love: firstly, love for God – a love that trusts Him in all things because He first loved us; and secondly mutual love for our brothers and sisters, Mums and Dads, uncles and aunts, in God’s family. Let us work hard to encourage our churches to demonstrate, by the power of the Holy Spirit, a love like this, and these witchcraft problems will no longer have any control over us.

d. The New Exodus

“He has delivered us from the power of darkness and has brought us into the kingdom of the Son of his love.” (Colossians 1:13 LSG)

Accomplished in Jesus Christ

The great failing of the law of the Old Covenant was its powerlessness. It could not change the hard heart of the sinner (Romans 7). God gave His law to the Israelites, but they did not obey it. Why? Because this law remained outside the heart of man – written on tablets of stone, not on their hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3). Thus the children of Israel, like all other nations, proved themselves incapable of living in accordance with the will of God. They had been physically delivered from Egyptian politico-military domination but they remained in a form of slavery to their own hard hearts. They were physically circumcised but spiritually impure (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 9:26; Acts 7:51) and thus unable to act in accordance with God’s will (Romans 2:27–29; 8: 3– 4, 7–9).

But Jesus came to accomplish a far deeper deliverance than that of the first Exodus. As we read in Colossians 1:13, through Jesus, God “has delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.”⁶ In this verse, Paul uses the language of the Exodus of the Old Testament to talk of a new and deeper exodus that frees us not just from politico-military oppression, but from the yoke of the domination of Satan and of sin in our lives. Through the

⁶ See also 1 Peter 2:9–10 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but who have now obtained mercy.” There again we hear clear echoes of Exodus to describe our liberation through Jesus. .

salvation that Jesus accomplished for us, we are freed from our slavery to sin in order to serve our God with love, joy and in communion with other saved people.⁷

During His life on earth, Jesus showed that He had authority and power over all Satanic and demonic forces. The people who saw him were amazed at this authority: “What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even unclean spirits, and they obey Him!” (Mark 1:27). Accused of turning to diabolical powers in his deliverance ministry, Jesus declared, “if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Matthew 12:28). He came to set the captives free, including those living under the domination of demons (Luke 4:18, 31–37). He gave to his disciples “the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.” (Luke 10:19). As we read in Colossians 2:15, in delivering us from our sins, God also “disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them through the cross.” So once again, we see that the believer has nothing to fear before the threats of occult forces. The salvation that we have through faith in Jesus frees us from these fears and anxieties.

In the new churches that he had planted all over the Roman Empire, the Apostle Paul proclaimed the good news of the power of God “which he worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (Ephesians 1:20–21). Paul was speaking to the Christians of the church at Ephesus – Ephesus, which was famous as a centre for occult powers. There were many people who practised magic and a form of witchcraft at Ephesus. If ever there had been a need to teach Christians about exorcising witches, or how to protect oneself against their spells, it would have been in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. But what do we find there? Not a single word on exorcism or deliverance of people possessed by demons or witchcraft. No, the teaching given to us assures us first of all that we are seated with Jesus in the heavenly places above all occult powers (2:6), and then he simply tells us to stand firm, having put on the armour of God – truth, justice, righteousness, faith, salvation, the Word of God and prayer (Ephesians 6:10–20). And these are not prayers of exorcism. Rather, these are ordinary prayers of intercession for the saints and servants of God: “Pray for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly as I ought to speak.” (Ephesians 6:19–20)

However, just as we saw in the first Exodus, it is not simply a question of deliverance by the mighty hand of God. We said that God’s intention in the first Exodus was to set apart for Himself a holy people who would love Him above all other things and who would devote themselves to working for social justice (loving their neighbour). The same is true here. Yes, Jesus delivered us through His death and resurrection. He won the victory for us so that we might be free. But He also did this to set apart for Himself a holy people: Jesus “gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.” (Titus 2:14). This is in fact the establishment of a new Israel. Jesus chose 12 apostles. Why 12? Because he wanted to show everyone that these disciples were the kernel of a

⁷The epistle to the Hebrews chapter 8 speaks of a new covenant that has replaced the old and according to which the law of God is now written not only on tablets of stone but on the hearts of His people (Hebrews 8: 8–13; citing a passage from the prophet Jeremiah 31:31–34; see also Ezekiel 36:26 and Deuteronomy 30:6)

new Israel – a reborn Israel, a renewed Israel, in accordance with the prophecies of the Old Testament (Acts 13: 32–33a; see also for example Ezekiel 37:1–14; Isaiah 60:1–3, 35:1–10). This will be an Israel full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17) which walks by the Spirit and not in its own strength and abilities (Galatians 5:16; Romans 8:1–17).

This new Israel will do what the Israel of the Old Covenant could not do because of the hardness of their heart. In Acts 4:34, we read that there was no one who lacked what he needed among the Christians of the church in Jerusalem because those who had the means were even selling their houses to ensure that the widows among them had enough to eat (see also Acts 6:1–7). As Jesus had said “By this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.” (John 13:35). Once again, where love and brotherly communion hold sway, neither witchcraft nor accusations or gossip of witchcraft will have any place. And it was this sort of love that marked out the new churches which were being born throughout the Roman Empire (see for example Ephesians 1:15; Colossians 1:3–4; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 3:6, 4:9).

I believe that one of the most important questions we must ask ourselves during our Forum is to know what is our duty – the duty which is placed upon us by this commandment to love – towards people who are the subject of rumours, gossip and witchcraft accusations. As we said earlier, more often than not, these accused people come from social groups that the Bible tells us to protect, of whom we should take particular care. Jesus came not only that we might be forgiven for our sins, not only that we might have eternal life, not only that we might be delivered from the powers of Satan and the demonic, but also to create for Himself a people devoted to good works – works of love, and especially love for the marginalised, the powerless, the weak, those who cannot stand up for themselves.

e. The final victory

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth.”

We don’t have time to fully develop this final point. Let us simply say that we see in the hope proclaimed to us in the New Testament a New Creation which will be revealed when Jesus comes again. We already have a taste of this New Creation in the powerful, life-giving, creative work of the Holy Spirit who is “the down-payment on our inheritance” (2 Corinthians 5:5). But on that day when Jesus returns, this New Creation will be brought in, complete, revealed in all its glory, and we will also be revealed as who we are in Jesus – the glorious children of God (Romans 8:19–23; Colossians 3:4; Revelation 21:1 and following). On that day, every evil caused by sin will be destroyed – every sin associated with witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft: jealousy, hatred, misunderstanding, mistrust, fear... and we will live in brotherly communion and love one for another with a total love for God our Saviour.

But we await, in accordance with His promise, a new heaven and a new earth where justice will dwell. (2 Peter 3:13)

So we say “Maranatha”, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20)

It is while waiting that we fight on and work, especially as leaders of churches, so that by the grace of God, we may “present to God every man, perfect in Christ Jesus.” Thus says the Apostle Paul., “To this end (we labour), striving according to His power that is powerfully at work in (us).”

(Colossians 1:28–29). This is why we are here at this Forum. May God bless our thoughts throughout our meetings together.

3. Conclusions or questions for discussion

- If we truly believe in a God who created all things, even the most distant stars, and if we also see the goodness of God and His wisdom through this Creation, why are Christians still sometimes afraid of witchcraft? How can the Biblical doctrine of creation help us?
- The importance of loving our neighbour was emphasised at least three times in the talk: (1) We saw the love that reigned before the entry of sin into the world; (2) We stressed that God required His children to love one another and especially to love the ones who are marginalised by society; (3) We saw too the love that characterised the early church and their care for the weak among them. What do you think of the idea that the most powerful weapon we have against witchcraft and against gossip and accusations of witchcraft is not exorcism but love?
- What can we do to nurture brotherly love among us? How can we make grow the love of Christians for our God, and the faith that we have in Him?
- Where do you see the reality of the New Creation in His church? Can you testify to what God is doing among the Christians you know to bring about a community of brotherly love and trust in God?
- What do you think of the English proverb quoted above: ‘if all you have is a hammer, everything resembles a nail.’ Why should we develop a richer and more multi-faceted theology of suffering? How could such theological reflection help us to tackle the problems surrounding witchcraft and accusations or suspicions of witchcraft?
- What are the important points which were suggested in this paper as forming part of a Biblical theology of suffering? Can you add other aspects of such a theology that are part of the Bible’s teaching?
- In the paper we heard: “My personal impression is that those who know this teaching well will have less reason to seek explanations based on witchcraft to understand the reasons for their difficulties.” Do you agree with Dr Stabell on this point? Why or why not?
- In the talk we heard “The Bible does not attribute any part of Job’s suffering to witchcraft”. I think we can go still further. The Bible never attributes someone’s suffering to witchcraft. Can you quote an exception to this rule?
- Why did this talk emphasise the derisory nature of the magic of pharaoh’s magicians? How can this help us in the fight against the problems of witchcraft or of suspicions and accusations of witchcraft in our churches and in our quarters?
- Do you agree that according to Deuteronomy 18, Christians are forbidden to consult nganga-nkisi or soothsayers? Do the Christians you know obey this faithfully?

- Do you agree that a pastor must never identify someone as a witch (someone who has not confessed to this of his own free will)?
 - The Bible tells us to take particular care of widows, orphans, and others who are destitute or marginalised in society. But according to this presentation, it is often these people, the weak, who are suspected of being witches. Have you reached the same conclusion? So must be done?
 - Have you seen cases where Christians have accused or suspected one another of witchcraft? Why? What have you tried to do to correct such a situation?
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Dr. Timothy Stabell, August 2014

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