



God at Work throughout History

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.

Introduction

I'd like to start with the biblical story of redemption. Why start here? There are three reasons.

First, we can cite the example of the Bible itself. In my personal reading lately I've been struck by the number of times that the authors of different passages recount the story of God's people. Stephen, for example, when accused by the Jews of opposing the Law of Moses defended himself by telling the story of Israel and its rebellion, culminating in their insistence that their Messiah, Jesus, be crucified.

Being human, being sinners, we tend to forget this story of redemption. We are 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,' we say. 'She bears a grudge and has always caused problems in our family. Hasn't she inherited her mother's witchcraft?' Thus the family story becomes more important in our minds than the story of what God has done for His people, even though the latter ought to have first place in our hearts.

The third reason for starting with this is that the way we tell ourselves the story has an impact on our daily life. For instance, if I tell my family's story with relation to witchcraft, this determines how I interpret events in my life. On the other hand, if I see myself as part of the story of a saved people, delivered by God, this will transform my view of my life, actions and what happens to me.

In view of our history as a people saved by God, how should we play our part today regarding the type of allegations of witchcraft we see in the cities of the DRC, or more specifically, when children are accused?

To help answer this, let's look at the big themes of our story as God's people: creation, the fall, the exodus, the new exodus in Christ and the final victory.

Creation

Creation was made to show God's power and grandeur. He declared it very good and filled it with all the abundance of his blessings. Then he made man and woman in his image as co-stewards of the earth. What an honour.

What love, that God could entrust such authority to human creatures. Adam and Eve must have felt a deep love for God and we see in Genesis 2:23 that a real love reigned in this small community.

Where would the place of witchcraft be in such a scene where love holds sway? Witchcraft is motivated by jealousy, hatred, bitterness and selfishness. The rumours, gossip and suspicion that come with it show distrust of human relationships, and instead mutual fear and evil intent. But in the Garden of Eden, before the entrance of sin, there was only love, joy and communion between mankind and God. There's no place for witchcraft here. Neither witchcraft nor accusations of witchcraft belong where love prevails.

Why stress this? Because this love, peace and trust between man and God will be re-established in the new creation. God will not abandon his creation. He will reclaim it. In fact, still more importantly, He has already begun this work of reclamation, repair and restoration.

Where the Spirit of God is fully at work, where then is the place for witchcraft, or rumours about it? Such things don't have their base in love and communion, but in selfishness and fear. 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 in our teaching and in our pastoral care.

The Fall

According to African culture, death always has a cause and this cause is often witchcraft. If someone dies it is therefore necessary to identify the witch who killed the person.

But it is not helpful to attribute death to witchcraft. That only stirs up conflict and dissension. In Romans 5:12 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). We are all going to die and the cause of death is God's judgment on sin.

So the fall is very important. Adam and Eve rebelled against God, which had tragic consequences for the human race. The love and communion was spoiled and we embarked on a course of hatred, jealousy, mistrust and violence.

Their disobedience ultimately brought their own deaths, but also ours, through wars, oppression, injustice, famine, sickness and so on. 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.

In order to confront the problem of witchcraft and accusations of it, we need a biblical theology of suffering. The Bible shows us that first, our suffering is partly due to the sin of Adam; second, our own sin may sometimes cause us to suffer; third, we suffer sometimes because of the sins of others; fourth, sometimes we suffer for no apparent reason.; fifth, everything (even our suffering) works together for the good of those who love God; sixth, God is with us in our suffering and finally, He Himself suffered with us and for us in the person of Christ.

If every time we come up against unexplained difficulties we feel obliged to attribute them to witches, we will forget the multi-faceted teaching of the Bible about suffering.

Exodus

The third act of God's salvation is the exodus of the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. We know the main characters. But there are some magicians in Pharaoh's court who are worth a mention. They try to imitate Moses' miracles, but their petty magic becomes the butt of mockery. They turn staffs into snakes as Moses did, but Moses' snake has theirs for dinner.

So we see the Bible's message that occult powers are nothing before God. There is nothing in these powers that should make us afraid, amazed or demoralised.

When God delivered His people out of slavery, He was looking for a people who would be devoted to Him and trust Him (Exodus 19:4-6). So, it is forbidden for God's people to seek to know His hidden mysteries through any other means than those that God has revealed through His prophets. They must not consult diviners of any kind (Deuteronomy 18:10-14).

Here in Africa, these diviners say they can identify hidden witches who have caused misfortune. But for us, as children of God, this passage in Deuteronomy 18 forbids us from seeking them out. What should we say about pastor-prophets who claim the same sort of ability? The Bible prohibits all kinds of divination. Biblically speaking the identification of people as witches is not part of the ministry of a pastor.

God's purpose in delivering the Israelites out of Egypt was that they be his holy people (Exodus 19:4-6). This meant that they were to love him and love one another. First, the Bible requires God's people to have a deep love of God. God is both Almighty and shows loving kindness to us. We can and should trust Him in all life's circumstances. Once again there is no place for fear of witches or recourse to soothsayers for help.

The Bible also requires us to love one another (Matthew 22:39). Yet very often the rumours, 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. These are people for whom the people of God are required by Scripture to have a particular care. It is our responsibility therefore to come to their aid and defence.

The penultimate commandment (Exodus 20:16) forbids us to bear false witness against each other. 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 break the commandment of brotherly love.

So I suggest that the most powerful weapon we have against witchcraft and its effects, is not exorcism, but love.

The new exodus in Christ

During his life on earth, Jesus showed that He had authority and power over all Satanic and demonic forces. 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’.

The salvation that we have through faith in Jesus frees us from fears and anxieties about witchcraft.

The apostle Paul addressed the Church at Ephesus, a town that was a famous centre for occult powers. Yet does he talk about exorcising witches or protecting oneself from spells? No. His teaching affirms the power of God seen in the resurrection of Christ and his exaltation above all principalities and powers (Ephesians 1:20–21). He assures us that we are seated with Christ, and then simply tells us to stand firm having put on the armour of God.

The final victory

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. In the end, every evil caused by sin will be destroyed; every sin associated with witchcraft and accusations of it: jealousy, misunderstanding, mistrust and fear, and we will live in brotherly communion and love for each other and a total love for God, our saviour.

for the **Stop Child Witch Accusations** coalition

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