

The Lion, the Witch and the Cosmic Drama: An African Socio-Hermeneutic

Robert D. Falconer¹

Abstract

This paper intends to make a unique contribution in our interpretation of witchcraft in Africa by providing a socio-hermeneutic that is dramatic and meaningful. African theologians have sought to understand the ontology of witchcraft and its implications, as well as witchcraft accusations and possible solutions and remedies, which are all very important. This paper, however, offers something quite different, the possibility that witchcraft might have an important part to play in African cosmology, in the African cosmic drama. By employing Kevin Vanhoozer's work, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine*, and superimposing features of this work onto an African context, namely, African realities, we are able to explore issues such as witchcraft in light of an African theodrama. It is argued in this paper that witchcraft, as abominable as it is, plays an important role in God's 'most glorious theatre' as the antagonist. Nevertheless, before one explores the idea of

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

God's glorious theatre and the stage for Africa's cosmic drama, witchcraft must first be understood and defined. The atonement, the sacrificial death of Christ, on the other hand, takes centre stage in this drama. Without witchcraft and without the atonement, the African cosmic drama is insipid, without great meaning or significance. Further, it is of importance to know the performing parts in Africa's cosmic drama; these are identified and elucidated in order that we may know our part and perform it well in response to African witchcraft. Therefore, we too, together with the Triune God, have our performing parts to play in this cosmic drama.

1. Introduction

My interest here is in interpreting African realities in light of a cosmic drama thereby providing an African socio-hermeneutic which is not only fascinating, but, I believe, also helpful for the African Christian community. There are many aspects of African realities that we could consider, but in this paper I wish to focus on African witchcraft. I will begin by offering a brief overview of witchcraft, and then reflect upon God's glorious theatre, the stage for Africa's cosmic drama. This brings us to Africa's cosmic drama itself, where I will provide a hermeneutic and an argument for the important, yet negative, part which witchcraft plays in Africa's cosmic drama. Next, I shall demonstrate how the atonement of Jesus Christ is the centre stage for this cosmic drama. Lastly, the performing parts of the drama are identified and elucidated in order that we may know our part and perform it well in response to African witchcraft.

2. A Brief Overview of African Witchcraft

There is no doubt that witchcraft is feared in almost every corner of the African continent, in traditional African societies and perhaps, to a lesser extent, in contemporary urban settings. Whether witchcraft can be reasonably comprehended or not, and certainly it cannot be studied by any scientific methods,² is a matter almost entirely irrelevant, for its destructive contribution to African socio-disharmony is undeniable. For many Africans it is a poisonous black thread woven through the very fabric of their reality. Speaking of witchcraft, Kunhiyop (2008:377) has said, ‘This belief is not irrational; rather, it is a serious philosophical attempt to deal with the question of evil. It has its own natural logic.’³ For societies which do not have ready access to scientific explanations, witchcraft is perhaps not as illogical as one might suppose.⁴

² Khathide (2007) offers detailed discussions on the mystical means employed by witches and their craft in his book, *Hidden Powers: Spirits in the First-Century Jewish World, Luke-Acts and in the African Context* (2nd ed.). Cf. Onyinah (2002); Light (2012).

³ Ikuenobe (2000:128) argues, ‘It is reasonable to argue that the rationality of the metaphysical belief in witchcraft may be fundamentally construed in an internalist sense to involve the ability to see a coherence relationship among evidence, a set of background beliefs, and the belief. The belief in witchcraft exists and is meaningful for African people relative to the coherent context of their beliefs and lived experiences: this provides the basis for its understanding and acceptance. Thus, the rationality of the metaphysical belief in witchcraft cannot be determined, empirically, objectively, and out of context.

⁴ For the African the belief in witchcraft is deeply ingrained in their worldview. Diseases, accidents, untimely death, inability to gain promotions in office, failure in examinations and business enterprises, disappointments in love, barrenness in women, impotence in men, failure of crops and many other evils are said to originate from witchcraft. Witchcraft for the African is not an illusion and neither is it believed to be a figment of imagination. Instead, it forms part of the very fabric of reality (Awolalu 1996:81; cf. Falconer 2013:227).

We know what witchcraft is in broad terms, but how can we offer an explanation of the phenomenon of African witchcraft? While not exhaustive, I believe the following four points are significant and helpful; some points mentioned may overlap. (1) Witchcraft offers explanation; a scapegoat for misfortune, sickness, and untimely death. This may lead to false accusations of innocent people practising witchcraft,⁵ many of whom are children. (2) Witchcraft may be explained simply as deception and trickery. This is especially true of the counterpart of witchcraft, the work of witch doctors who are notorious for their trickery, sleight of hand, and high compensation. (3) The use of psychic powers also offers suitable explanation. Awolalu (1996:83–84) articulates his understanding of magic and witchcraft emphasising the ‘omnipotence of thought’. That is, as he explains, ‘a man wishes that certain things may happen, and they do happen as he wishes—the wishes may be good or evil’. Therefore, witchcraft is intangible, it ‘is projected from the mind – it is psychic’. He believes that man is created powerful, able to reconstruct and demolish. When he is destructive, he acts ‘contrary to the will of his Creator’. (4) Of course, the cradle of witchcraft may also be considerably more sinister. It is not unreasonable to consider the activity of malevolent spirits. After all, the gospels record how Jesus frequently dealt with such spirits.⁶

Whether we are willing to attribute the work of demons to witchcraft or not, I think it is clear that witchcraft, however we wish to explain it, is undergirded by a spirit of evil. Ultimately, whether we are considering the practice of witchcraft itself, or witchcraft accusations, the evil of social disharmony is forcefully promoted. The most prominent feature of

⁵ Despite the reality of witchcraft in the lives of Africa peoples, many are falsely accused of practising as witches. Khathide points out that because misfortune and death are credited to witchcraft, some societies attempt to eliminate all witches and witchcraft. No doubt many innocent people, including children who are thought to be witches, are eliminated (2007:349; cf. Falconer 2013:232).

⁶ cf. Matt 8:16–17; 8:28–34; 12:22; 15:21–28; 17:14–21; Mark 1:21–26; 1:29–33; 5:2–13; 7:24–30; 9:15–29; Luke 6:17–19; 11:14; 13:10–13; 13:31–32; Acts 10:38.

witchcraft is therefore its anti-social nature⁷ (Falconer 2013:228). As John Mbiti (1970:225) points out, witches are ‘the great enemies of society’.

My interest, however, is not in witchcraft itself, but rather in interpreting its part being played out in God’s theatre, his cosmic drama of which we are part. Nevertheless, the reality of witchcraft must be dealt with appropriately and immediately by the Christian community, it cannot be ignored.

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* talks about ‘this magnificent theatre of heaven and earth’ (2.6.1), ‘this most glorious theatre’ (1.6.2) and ‘this most beautiful theatre’ (1.14.20). Jonathan Edwards also starts off one of his sermons with the following statement, ‘God erected this visible world as a monument of his glory, a theatre for the display of his adorable perfections’ (1773:443).

If some of the great theologians of the past have used the *Theatrum Gloriae Dei* (the theatre of God’s glory) for understanding God’s relationship to their own cosmology, we can use it as a hermeneutic for African cosmology and related social issues as well. In any drama production, film, theatre or narration, the characters are comprised of protagonists and antagonists (and anything in between): without either, the story is dull, lacking in glory and wonder. The grand narrative of scripture is a case in point whereby the evil of sin and Satan is introduced early in Genesis 3, together with the consequences of man’s rebellion. The narrative unfolds throughout scripture and the *Theatrum Gloriae Dei* is magnificently displayed through Jesus’ redeeming work on the cross

⁷ Turaki (2006:103) mentions that witches not only harm their victims, but can sometimes even kill them. Apparently, the killing of a victim can be achieved by casting spells from a distance, or meddling with articles of clothing, nail clippings or hair. Otherwise they may also use poison to achieve their evil ends.

where God and man are reconciled, the earth and the heavens will be made new and where all evil will finally be banished.

3. Africa's Cosmic Drama

Africa has its own cosmic drama, and plays its own part in God's salvific narrative on African soil. In the greater scheme of things, I argue that witchcraft too has its role to play, in light of a superlative narrative among the Africa people. Witchcraft is experienced in many parts of Africa as the height of evil. However, could witchcraft be viewed from another angle, whereby, despite its abominable character, it offers a positive contribution, constructing a setting in which Jesus comes to Africa as Victor?

Brown (1984), early in his book, *Heresies*, comments on the positive contribution of heresies in the Christian church. Not that heresies are noble, but rather that they evoke a response from Christian theologians, polemicists, and apologists. In turn, detailed arguments and the development of theology in response to heretical teachings, demonstrate the credibility of the Christian faith. Over time heresies have helped define and develop Christian theology.

I propose that African realities, such as witchcraft, could be interpreted similarly. As provocative as it might appear, there is a hermeneutic, I believe, in which we can interpret witchcraft, with place and relevance in God's cosmic drama. Without such African realities, the grand narrative or cosmic drama in African cosmology dwindles. Could Jesus Christ be a victor in African cosmology if there is nothing to conquer? Is there a Gospel to preach to the traditional African without African realities?

Such a hermeneutic is found in C. S. Lewis' (1950) children's novel, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In the story, four children passed

through an old magic wardrobe and into a magical land, Narnia. At the time of the children's arrival in Narnia, the antagonist in the narrative, the illegitimate White Witch, ruled the land with tyranny and a perpetual winter. The legitimate king of Narnia, Aslan, the great lion, after a long period of absence returned to Narnia. Edmund, one of the four children, committed treason and betrayed his siblings and all the creatures of Narnia to the White Witch. Later, after having recognised his folly and having remorse, Edmund was reunited with his siblings and meets Aslan and the noble creatures of Narnia. When the White Witch heard of this, she, with her minions, approached the lion and demanded the life of Edmund, a legitimate decree of Narnia for such a traitor. However, the lion agreed to save Edmund's life by having himself sacrificed on the stone table at the hands of the White Witch. After all was done, the substitutionary sacrifice made, and the witch and her creatures had left the stone table, Aslan is raised in resurrected glory and in the end, together with the four children, they defeated the White Witch and her creatures. Giving commentary on the lion's substitutionary death and resurrection, in Aslan's words, Lewis wrote:

‘It means’, said Aslan, ‘that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards’.

Certainly, without the witch, Lewis does not have a narrative. The cosmic drama being played out in Africa is not too dissimilar. The magical land of Africa has malevolent witches who work their craft as well, and here

too one can find the very same lion of Narnia, who roams Africa as the legitimate Lord, only that he goes by a different name.⁸

Africa needs witches for its own narrative, but it also needs the ultimate demise of witchcraft for the climax of God's cosmic drama and the socio-renewal of Africa. And the Christian community have a significant part to play as we demonstrate the reign and kingdom of God.

4. The Atonement as Centre Stage

We may conceivably interpret this African cosmic drama as dramaturgy. Kevin Vanhoozer explains that “‘Dramaturgy’ is the working of drama’ and that it is the dramaturge who is ‘responsible for helping the director to make sense of the script both for the players and for the audience’ (Vanhoozer 2005:244). Dramaturgy in the African cosmic drama then, considers the dramatic composition on Africa’s ‘social stage’, articulating the large themes and finer details, providing the whole narrative with structure, plot, and climax.

One might say that I am acting as a theological dramaturge at the moment, helping to articulate the sense of African cosmic drama by way of offering a socio-hermeneutic. I am seeking to answer the questions as to why there is an African cosmic drama at all, and why there is witchcraft in ‘this most glorious theatre’ (cf. Vanhoozer 2005:246).

Let us not forget that witchcraft in ‘this most glorious theatre’ shares the African ‘social stage’ with the Royal Lion. Davies said it well when he wrote that ‘Christianity, as a religion of death and resurrection and eternal life, is implicitly metaphysical, and has throughout its history had an intimate alliance with the languages of ontology’. The Christian

⁸ This illustration from C. S. Lewis’ (1950) children’s novel, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is a further development from Falconer (2013:233–234).

affirmation, he continues, is ‘that God has taken flesh and that he still lives among us’ (2001:3, 9). To be sure, the Royal Lion, Jesus Christ, *does* live among us, and the understanding of which, as well as its implications are melodramatic and powerful.

In C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Aslan’s death and resurrection is the focal point in the story, so it is that Jesus’ atonement is the glorious centre of Africa’s cosmic drama. As Vanhoozer (2005:380) puts it, the doctrine of the atonement firstly narrates ‘the climax of the theo-drama, attempting as it does to state what it was that God was doing in Christ. Second, it helps to articulate the eschatological superobjective that drives the theo-drama. Third, it equips disciples to play their parts by revealing to them who they really are’.

Jesus provides atonement by offering himself up as a penal substitutionary sacrifice so that the ‘victims’ of witchcraft may be re-leased.⁹ If Jesus died for our sins and all the curses of the law were laid upon him on the cross (Gal 3:13), could this not be extended for the African believer, that all curses and magic conjured by witchcraft are also absorbed by Jesus as well during his vicarious death? The victim who comes to faith in Christ is freed from witchcraft, receiving redemption and adoption (Eph 1:3–7). Of course, Jesus’ atoning work was not only to offer a penal substitution, as important as that is, but also to conquer and to disarm the rulers and authorities (1 John 3:8).¹⁰ We see this when

⁹ Awolalu (1996:86) says, ‘A substitute sacrifice may be prescribed by a knowledgeable priest, to be offered to the witches; and once the witches are satisfied with the offerings, they will “release” the prospective victim’.

¹⁰ N.T. Wright (1996) offers an exhaustive contribution to the notion of Jesus being the Victorious Son of God in his *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 2.

Paul addresses the Ephesian church.¹¹ Ephesians 1:20–30¹² place all the spirits of the spirit world in proper relation to Christ and to the Christian believer. These verses seem to be Paul’s interpretation of Psalm 110, where he describes the spiritual forces which are now made subject to Jesus Christ.¹³ Paul tells us that when God raised Christ up from the dead and seated him at his right hand in heavenly places, this position is far above all rule, power and authority of the spirit world, and above all dominion (Falconer 2015:26).

Turaki (2006:46) offers some helpful commentary on Ephesians 1:20–23; he proclaims that the fallen world has now been handed to Christ by God the Father because of his victory and triumph at the cross. The cross has become the symbol of his kingdom, his power and rulership over all the earth. It was through the cross that Christ dethroned Satan, and thereby subjected all principalities and powers to himself.¹⁴

In Colossians 2:12–14,¹⁵ we were once spiritually dead in sin, but that now our sin has been forgiven, on account of Christ’s atoning work on the cross having satisfied the legal demands by cancelling the record of debt. Paul’s atonement theology is interesting here because verses 12–14 discuss the legal aspects of the atonement and then, in verse 15, Paul emphasises a *Christus Victor* theme, saying, ‘He (God) disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him’ (Falconer 2015:27). Again, the African Bible Commentary’s historical background for the rulers and authorities mentioned in these verses is helpful, for it explains that they are the defeated enemies of God, and they are the ones being dragged along in

¹¹ For a discussion on Ephesians and magic and its historical settings, cf. Arnold (1989).

¹² For detailed exegesis cf. Falconer (2013:151–150).

¹³ Cf. Matt 26:64, Mark 12:36 and Luke 20:41–44.

¹⁴ Cf. Falconer (2015:27).

¹⁵ For detailed exegesis cf. Falconer (2013:151–153).

Christ's procession. In the Roman world, 'when a city surrendered to a victorious general, the conquerors would stage a victory parade at which they would display their conquered enemies and all the goods they had plundered' (Adeyemo 2006:1453; cf. Falconer 2015:27). The atonement is then the hermeneutical means by which we understand the theo-drama.

Christ's atonement in Africa's cosmic drama directs Christians towards what Vanhoozer calls, a 'fitting participation in the drama of redemption'. Not that it offers detailed descriptions of behaviour, but rather that 'new situations and new problems require improvising' (2005:363). Our participation in the drama of redemption is carried through into the larger picture, the African cosmic drama, in which the atonement takes centre stage. Here, we find ourselves in unique situations having to 'improvise' as the problem of witchcraft and other African realities are dealt with through Christ's atoning work. Vanhoozer explains that we are directed 'to perform the atonement by appropriating our identity in Christ and by engaging in practices that participate fittingly in Jesus' saving work. Jesus' death and its aftermath are the high point of the theo-drama' (2005:362). Of interest then are the performers in the African cosmic drama and the parts they play.

5. Performing in Africa's Cosmic Drama

All of us play a part in Africa's cosmic drama. Talking about the cosmos as a theatre of energies, Davies writes how 'our thinking may be problem-solving and essentially short-term, so that we are destined as a species to play a brief "walk-on" part in the cosmic drama of life. Being uncertain as to who we are, we are equally disorientated as to our destiny' (2001:xvi). Drawing on Kevin Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine*, I hope to provide identity, orientation, and purpose in this 'most glorious theatre'. If we want to play a positive part in Africa's cosmic drama, we

are required to learn what is entailed in our role in Christ (Vanhoozer 2005:362).

According to Vanhoozer, ‘The church is a celebratory theatre, through its liturgy and its life, inserts its members into the drama of redemption. This drama is *really* present in the life of the church, and the liturgy helps us to see, taste, imagine, and *live* it’ (2005:410). That is all very well and good, but in our case, the social evils of witchcraft are not *usually* played out in church, but rather in day-to-day traditional African life, wherever it might take place. Our theatre is not confined to church, or any other institution in Africa. But perhaps we could agree with Vanhoozer when he says that ‘The church is the theatre of the gospel, its members the company of performers. It is only as a company that the people of God can function as a “hermeneutic of the gospel”’ (2005:413). Nevertheless, I am arguing for an African socio-hermeneutic, but there is no doubt that an interplay between these two hermeneutics exist. Both are essential.

A Trinitarian participation in this African cosmic drama is decisive, because without it there is no drama, no ‘most glorious theatre’. Once again Vanhoozer offers us insight here. The Father’s role is as playwright and producer, while the Son provides us with the dramatic climax, through his incarnation and ultimately through his redemptive act, the crucifixion and resurrection. The Holy Spirit, though, is the dresser, dressing us in the righteousness of Christ and uniting us to him (2005:448). The Spirit also leads and guides us in playing our part in the drama.

The pastor or minister, and might I include missionaries, who are actors as well, oversee the local performances, and yet their role might include ‘assistant director’, mediating between the script (scripture) and the performers. The director communicates to the actors, the believers, the meaning of the script in order that the meaning of the drama may be

understood (Vanhoozer 2005:448). Sadly, the actors in the theo-drama have not always performed very well in terms of dealing with the issues of witchcraft appropriately. Kunhiyop correctly points out that, ‘missionaries, early African church leaders and some contemporary leaders have dismissed belief in witchcraft as mere superstition’ (2008:383). The theologian, on the other hand, is the dramaturge. His role as the dramaturge is to work on the text and assist the production members, especially the director, to gain a better understanding of the drama in order for it to remain true to the intent of the playwright (Vanhoozer 2005:245, 448).

Along with the script (scripture) we have doctrine, helping the performers understand their identity as new creations in Christ and their union with him (Vanhoozer 2005:399). The doctrine of atonement, as I have already shown, is the climax of Africa’s cosmic drama, offering a socio-hermeneutic for witchcraft.

In Africa, evil finds its social expression in witchcraft. The South African Missiologist, David Bosch, reminds us that ‘the mission of the church includes both the proclamation of the Gospel and its demonstration. We must therefore evangelise, response [respond] to immediate human needs, and press for social transformation’ (1991:407; quoting the *Wheaton ’83 Statement*, paragraph 26). This is our responsibility, the part we play in Africa’s cosmic drama, to proclaim the Gospel and to demonstrate its power,¹⁶ by responding to the needs of countless Africans who suffer from witchcraft and witchcraft accusations. This also means that we are

¹⁶ Healey and Sybertz also state that one of the greatest needs of the African people is relief from the bondage of witchcraft. They urge that Christianity needs to demonstrate its relevance to the people of Africa by addressing witchcraft. A person, they say, ‘who has gone through the experience of being bewitched and healed is able to appreciate in a deeper way what God has done for human beings in Jesus Christ’ (Healey and Sybertz 2004:218–219; cf. Falconer 2013:227).

to proclaim and demonstrate that the power of Christ's atoning work on the cross is all powerful, rendering the power of witchcraft for the believer as powerless.

Considering the atonement and our roles as performers, perhaps Bosch says it best when he proclaims, 'In Christ's death and resurrection the new age has irreversibly begun and the future is guaranteed; living in the force-field of the assurance of salvation already received and the final victory already secured, the believer gets involved in the urgency of the task at hand' (1991:509). As I have said elsewhere, the atonement offers a powerful theology for African Christians who find themselves enslaved to the fear of witchcraft and the socio-disharmony it creates and seeks to promote. Christ alone has offered himself up as a substitutionary sacrifice and in turn has overcome witchcraft and has subjected it to himself through his atoning death¹⁷ (Falconer 2013:234). We too have our performing roles to play in this theo-drama.

6. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to argue that, even though witchcraft forcibly promotes evil and socio-disharmony, it may offer a contribution, constructing a setting in which Jesus comes to Africa as Victor. It plays an important, though negative part in God's glorious theatre, his cosmic drama here in Africa. Without witchcraft, the grand narrative of African cosmology diminishes, because it provides the setting in which the Gospel of Christ finds expression and his victory is demonstrated. The atonement of Christ takes centre stage in the theatrical drama, being the hermeneutical means by which we understand the African cosmic drama. It calls us to participate in the drama as performers with very real parts to play, demonstrating the reign of God and proclaiming the Gospel to

¹⁷ 1 Cor 15:24–28; Eph 1:20–22; Col 1:12–16.

those in Africa, so that they may be freed from the curse and the fear of witchcraft and find salvation and victory in Jesus Christ.

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