

Name: Israel Kamudzandu

Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies, Lindsey Pherigo Chair

5123 E. Truman Road, Kansas City, Missouri 64127.

Phone: 816 245 4808

Topic: The Holy Spirit as the Decolonizing and Re – Negotiating Power in Luke – Acts: A Postcolonial World Reading of Acts 2: 1 – 47.

Introduction

Reading the Pentecost story solely as an event where people spoke in tongues overshadows the political role and function of the Holy Spirit in Luke – Acts. Luke is an intentional writer who probably was both a political activist and missionary in both Roman colonial period as well as postcolonial era. I am convinced that *Theophilus* in Luke 1: 3 and Acts 1:3 is a creative way that Luke sought to refer to himself as a defender of the Christian faith. Therefore, reading Luke – Acts under the shadow of the Roman Empire will open up new possibilities for a distinctively postcolonial reading of the Pentecost event.

Postcolonialism is not a theory, but rather a profusion of related concepts and perspectives that resists the metanarratives and cultures of empires that have impacted, often negatively, the world views and defining values of their colonies. The term, postcolonialism (simply meaning “after colonialism”), is not primarily a linear, historical understanding of the end of imperialism and the emergence of self-rule, but rather possesses a more comprehensive meaning that admits to significant differences between the empire and its colonies.¹

These differences not only affect the colonies, but also eventually reverberate on the empire itself. Indeed, even after the declaration and achievement of political independence by

¹ For an extensive definition of postcolonialism, see Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 57 – 69.

former colonies, now nation states, their former masters have continued to influence often negatively their post-liberationist social, political, and cultural realities. The Holy Spirit in Luke – Acts is an active power in the progress of establishing and empowering different linguistic groups to communicate with each other. These representative cultures, once under the Roman rule are able to narrate their own metanarratives in a new world.

Postcolonialism also may be comprehensively defined as “signifying a reactive resistance discourse of the colonized who critically interrogate dominant knowledge systems in order to recover the past from Western slander and misinformation of the colonial period, and who also continue to interrogate neo-colonializing tendencies after the declaration of independence.”² This modern definition need not be limited to the past five hundred years of European imperial domination. The slander of “barbarians” by Greeks and Romans as well as the derogative portrayals of those conquered by other early empires is well documented.

Thus postcolonials resist the forces of oppression and coercion that empires execute in the domination of their colonies and dependencies, regardless of the temporal periods of human history. Prior to liberation from imperial yokes, colonies had to deal with their effacement, self-alienation, and internal disgust brought about by the hubris of the imperial core. Pushed to the margins as the “Others,” the colonized first oppose and then undercut the arrogant metanarratives asserting the empires’ supremacy.

New Testament exegetes have not paid sufficient attention to the fact that the Pentecost event took place in the Roman capital from which the Julian – Claudian Empire held power and

² Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 13; Also see Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 171.

control over national and political boundaries.³ The catalogue of nations in Acts 2 was Roman colonies and their presence at Pentecost day signals a reactive resistance to the ideology of the Roman Empire. Therefore, Luke reconstructs the Holy Spirit to counter the ideology of the Roman Empire.⁴ Rome and Jerusalem are no longer the center; rather the Holy Spirit is now the command center – orchestrating Christian history and choreographing God’s redemptive salvation history in the universe. The Holy Spirit takes the place of the Emperor and constructs new common boundaries. My argument is, accordingly twofold: that the Holy Spirit interacts and subverts Roman imperial ideology. Secondly, the Holy Spirit functions as the negotiator of boundaries, making a postcolonial reading of Luke – Acts perceptible to the 21st century reader.⁵ I recognize that New Testament scholars have written much on the genre of Luke – Acts as *historiographical epic*, but this reading fails to illuminate the role and function of the Holy Spirit in Luke – Acts’ corpus.

Thus, the dramatic events around the Pentecost cannot be fully understood apart from the Imperial hegemony of Augustus. The interaction and negotiation function deconstructs Rome’s geopolitical ideology of expanding its influence to marginal nations. Secondly, the Holy Spirit dismantles Rome’s imperial metanarratives of assumed superiority of moral values, cultural norms, religious beliefs and ancestral pedigree.⁶ The Holy Spirit is poured out on an oppressed community as a gift of empowerment and salvation and sets believers free to be agents of God’s

³ See Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1. 60.3 Who has a tractate of these nations whom the Romans received into citizenship. Cicero, in his writings praises Pompey and Caesar for expanding Rome’s boundaries.

⁴ See Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 83 - 99

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 220 – 222.

⁶ Negotiation and deconstruction are used in this paper to refer to the work of the Holy Spirit in its intentional orchestration and choreographing of events within the Christian movement from Jerusalem to the entire Roman empire and consequently to the whole world.

redemptive plan. What the Caesars could not do to all people, the Holy Spirit can now do, enabling and directing the Church to enter every Roman colony. There is no common language in this event but the Holy Spirit gives the guarantee that everything is rightly understood.⁷ In other words, the Holy Spirit is an incarnation of God Himself, whose role is to reverse the superiority of Rome and expanding the boundaries, consequently giving access to all nations to hear each other.

Critical historiography, with its quest for facts has reduced the Pentecost episode into an ecclesiastical event of the Church's beginnings and thus fails to see the Holy Spirit's engagement with imperial claims. The language of Luke suggests that his audience were Roman Citizens who were familiar with the ideological claims of the Julian – Claudian rulers. *Theophilus* (Acts 1: 1), is not an individual figure, rather it's a metaphor signifying all who were Christians living within the tensions of imperial metanarratives and struggling to assert their new found faith. To anticipate the direction of this essay, I will briefly define the major terms used in this paper.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Postcolonialism – In the last six year postcolonialism has been misunderstood to be a theory of biblical interpretation. I am using postcolonialism to mean the culture created after nations are freed from imperial domination. Postcolonialism is not just a theory, but rather a profusion of related concepts and perspectives that resists the metanarratives and cultures of empires that have impacted, often negatively, the world views and defining values of their marginalized tribes within colonies. The term, postcolonialism (simply meaning “after colonialism”), is not primarily a linear, historical understanding of the end of imperialism and the emergence of self-rule, but

⁷ M. Eugene Boring, Klaus Berger and Carsten Colpe, eds., *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 310 – 311.

rather possesses a more comprehensive meaning that admits to significant differences between the empire and its colonies. These differences not only affect the colonies, but also eventually reverberate on the empire itself. Indeed, even after the declaration and achievement of political independence by former colonies, now nation states, their former masters have continued to influence often negatively their post-liberationist social, political, and cultural realities.

Metanarratives: Empires sustain their domination of those on the margins by imposing the foundations of their ideologies through education, music and at times indoctrination and Rome's ideology of superiority was inscribed on walls, coins and temples. The imperial metanarrative consists of the expressed assumptions of superior moral values, a legitimate religion in which the deity authenticates an empire's divine right to rule others even by means of force, and a "more advanced" culture (language, art, and architecture), all of which shape a civilization considered by the metropole to be exceptional and more accomplished than the colonies. Members of the metropolitan core saw the empire's twin tasks to be both the civilization and conversion of colonials to the culture, values, and religious beliefs of the empire. Priests and missionaries often accompanied the conquering armies to spread the Christian teachings of the western empires. The two-fold missionary impulse was to bring the remainder of the world into the Christian churches by embracing their teachings and to subject the non-Christian peoples to western civilization which they believe manifests the ideal form of the Kingdom of God on earth. Empires convey their civilization religiously through their pantheon of gods, festivals, calendars, writings, and monumental architecture. Religion assists in shaping a common culture for the peoples ruled by the empire by helping to form a normative identity, controlling nature and human reproduction, legitimating violence, and sanctioning the imperial hierarchy and its

divinely chosen rulers. Religion also contributes to the fashioning of a normative identity for people, not only with metropolitan core but also within the outer reaches of the empire.⁸

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND ITS PRAXIS IN LUKE – ACTS

Unlike all New Testament document, Luke – Acts is a political document. Politically, the Holy Spirit sets the agenda of the entire writing because of its role and function at the beginning of both volumes (Luke 1: 26 and Acts 2: 1 – 4). The Holy Spirit invites Gentile Christians to enter into a unique redemptive story under the patronage of Jesus Christ, rather than the emperor. In contradistinction with the ideology of the Roman Empire, the Holy Spirit fortifies the Gentile Christian community assisting it to comprehend its new found faith identity and where it stands in God’s economy as well as to fulfill its role of incarnating Jesus to peoples and nations.

Like the *Aeneid* 1: 1 – 7, Acts 1: 1 signals a divine foundation similar to that of Rome’s. The coming of the Holy Spirit is accompanied by a resounding noise and this is similar to scriptural traditions in Exodus 19: 16 – 19, 20: 18; Deuteronomy 4:12 and 1 Kings 18: 26, 29, 41, all of which are theophany episodes. Here we encounter the Holy Spirit playing the role of inaugurating a new community and the voice of the benefactor of this group is heard by all peoples, outsiders and insiders (Acts 2: 5). Gathered together as God’s community, Luke tells readers that, “mighty winds fills the house where they had assembled and tongues of fire rest on each one and filled by the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other tongues (verse 1 – 4). With regards to its role as negotiator of boundaries, the Holy Spirit empowers different linguistic nations to communicate with each other. While translations are not easy and that language

⁸ See P.A. Brunt and J.M. Moore, eds., *The RES GESTAE DIVI AUGUSTI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

cannot erase differences, the Holy Spirit created sacred spaces in the mouths of those present, enabling them to hear each other in a new fashion.

Like the rippling effects of a stone dropped into a sea, “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to the Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians,” were able to be heard telling their own metanarratives in their own language, demonstrating God’s ability to transcend boundaries of culture and political domination (Acts 2: 9 – 11).⁹ By allusion and analogy, Jesus becomes the new Hercules, who, through his divine valor, has come to save the world from the monstrous evil of imperialism. Virgil depicts Augustus reviewing the parade of conquered nations who lay down their arms before the divine Augustus (*Aeneid* 8: 716). The catalogue of nations, once under the Roman Empire is now depicted by Luke as being proselytized by the early Christian movement (Acts 2: 9 – 11). Roman historians under Alexander had claimed authority on these twelve kingdoms and Luke counters their imperial ideology by claiming that the nations were under the new master, who is Jesus Christ.¹⁰

With Hans Conzelman and many other New Testament interpreters who have presented this as a miracle, I argue that the event is both political and religious, and it reacts to the ideological presumption of the Augustan imperial period. This manner of interpreting the role and function of the Holy Spirit signals the next step in our political reading of Acts, that Luke as the Christian activist, in Hellenistic era viewed Christianity as a Hellenistic religion. The success of Christianity was in its ability to embrace diversity just as Romans had embraced Greek

⁹ Here the reader may note Philo’s tractate on the elaboration and interpretation of the Sinai Theophany of Exodus 19 in *The Decalogue*. Vol. VII. 33 – 35.

¹⁰ See Hans Conzelman, *Acts of the Apostles: Hermeneian – Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 14.

education, language, architecture, philosophy and literature.¹¹ In other words both Jewish and Gentile Christians, under the patronage of the Holy Spirit were transformed into one kinship family. Symbolically, the Holy Spirit performs a scandalous role first to the Jewish Christians and then to the nations, peoples and races of the world. First, the Holy Spirit expands the environment of the Gospel; the good news is no longer confined to one privileged nation of the Hebrew people. The role of the Gospel is simple, namely it spans cultural, political, economic, linguistic and religious precincts. Secondly, the Pentecost foreshadows the mission of the Global Church, in its mission, testimony and witness (Acts 2: 17). The Holy Spirit becomes an active incarnational power, intervening in the spread of the Gospel.

While New Testament Scholars and exegetes have probably failed to characterize the people who were present on the Pentecost day as ‘marginal,’ this essay seeks to expand its argument by stating that the people who were part of the Pentecost were in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a “Subaltern,” group whose self – identity was overshadowed by imperial ideologies and on this day founded a new identity. A variety of terms are used to describe and define the colonials/barbarians in the imperial system of domination, although they are not derived from the metanarratives of the empires. Subaltern is perhaps the most common and useful term, meaning essentially “of inferior or subordinated rank.” This term, which equates with the “Other,” points to those who are unfamiliar and unknown by the subjective knowledge of the conqueror.¹² In the modern world the west understood itself as the center of power and genuine knowledge, and thus superior, while the subalterns of colonies, former colonies, and the

¹¹ For a clear understanding of Hellenism and its effects on Christianity, readers can read Helmut Koester, *Introduction to New Testament, Vol. One: History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, 2nd (New York: Walter DE Gruyter, 1995 (2 – 45).

¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can The Subaltern Speak,” *Socialist Review* (20) 85 – 97.

desperate countries of the Global South were construed to lack power, a critical and analytic self-consciousness, and the ability to reason and rule themselves.

The term is not simply a sociological classification, but also a psychological definition of the self. This understanding of self-identity, drawn from Freud and his disciples, derives from the view that it is constructed by the mind or the unconscious. Yet is appropriated from the imperial, pretentious description used to depict those outside the metropolitan core. However, while their own experiences and understandings are generally ignored by imperialists, subalterns, who achieve self-realization from their own comprehension, continue to make themselves felt even in the consciousness and self-understanding of the metropole. Indeed subalterns or “Others” have the ability to disturb, distort, and deconstruct the dominant representations of empire, due to their radical differences from what the empire considers normative identity.

Thus, the function of the Holy Spirit both in the early Christian Church was and continues to be of mediation, allowing cultures to be addressed in the cultural particularity of their ‘Otherness.’ In Acts 7: 2 – 45, Stephen is empowered by the Holy Spirit to retell the story of the faith founders and re – defines the meaning of Christianity. The story of Stephen is compelling and inviting in that it focuses both Gentiles and Jewish Christians on the journeys of the patriarchs and wilderness wonderings, where people encountered God in a mobile tabernacle/Church. Through the Spirit’s power of negotiating and interacting with the ideologies of the powerful, Stephen the Hellenists establishes the spiritual and theological soil for the gospel’s Global witness. An intriguing part of Luke’s portrayal of the Holy Spirit is in Acts 8: 26 – 39 where we encounter Philip having a theological and spiritual rendezvous with an Ethiopian eunuch. Culturally and politically, the Holy Spirit allows this castrated male African of high status to travel across a desert, proving to both Jews and Roman rulers the power of the Jesus in

overcoming geographical bound aeries. The Ethiopian's reception of the Gospel is indeed a fulfillment of the promise made in Acts 1: 8. In this case, Philip, the Hellenistic disciple is charged with the message of Jesus and he goes out of the comfort zone and has the word for an outsider.

Paradoxically, the Ethiopian is already a reader of scripture and he engages the text of Isaiah 53. New Testament scholars have failed to interpret the meaning of this episode, but it is clearly from a 'Subaltern's view that God is always present to those under the grip of colonial powers and they need space so as to have a revelation of God. Therefore, the identification of Jesus with the colonized and suffering servant is relevant for a postcolonial reading of Luke – Acts.¹³ Two points are in order at this point. First, Christians in postcolonial situations need to have a cultural and spiritual awakening. This is possible when cultures view their social locations as centers of struggle, creativity, divine revelation and discernment. Second, those in privileged positions such as Philip need to intentionally enter into and live with those on the margins for the sole purpose of understanding that these social and cultural spaces are centers of hard thinking about values and a new paradigm for existence takes place. Indeed, living with those on the margins stimulates spiritual and creative imagination for a new world order that rejects oppression in all its forms.

The encounter of Philip and the Eunuch can hardly be overstated. It is a story of theological, political, ideological, economical and spiritual transformation. Both, Hellenistic Christians like Peter and Gentile believers were converted to a new vision of what constitutes the people of God. In other words, the Holy Spirit encounters and destroys ethnocentric superiority and overcomes the barriers of exclusion. In its interaction with the Roman imperial ideology, the

¹³ See also the Magnificat in Luke 1: 39 – 79.

Holy Spirit reconfigures the new “Israel of God,” and connects events to Israel’s salvation history through prophetic voice of the Spirit in Scripture. It is the dramatic presentation of this theme of the reconstitution of the people as the eschatological fulfillment of the divine plan that affords the most significant agreement among classical writers of Luke’s time; namely Virgil, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Plutarch.¹⁴ The connection is stereological in scope because both Jewish Christian leaders like Peter needed to be decolonized from their ethnic perspective to a new realization that God accepts nations in their concrete and cultural homes. This is a foundational theological insight for all postcolonial readers of Luke – Acts.

Thus, the implications of the Joel prophecy are brought to the forefront of all readers in the 21st century Church; the Holy Spirit is always the harbinger of a new era. Peter’s sermon confirms the comprehensive empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will fall on all flesh and blood (Acts 2: 38 – 39). Racial segregation can be traced to the ancient times and continues to be present even in the 21st century Church. Racism directed against the conquered, who often have a different skin color, has been intrinsic to imperialism especially since the 19th century. In the age of the western empires continuing into the present, racism leads those whose belief of the superiority of their worth, abilities, and knowledge to regard the conquered as inferior and subhuman. This racist domination, based on widespread prejudice among the former conquerors, has continued to affect adversely the former colonies who have emerged since the Second World War to form their own independent states. Many in the populations of former colonies continue to suffer psychologically from the effects of racism perpetuated among their former masters and the difficulty of subverting its powers of definition. While racism may be prohibited by law codes of western nations, its insidious powers of discrimination and

¹⁴ Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke – Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 110 – 111.

violence continue to effectuate their toll. Peter's sermon is a clarion call of our time. The sermon is clearly crafted to alert those living on the margins of society to embrace the call of faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, faith in Acts has a new meaning; it is faith of Jesus Christ who gave his life itself as a gift. This is a powerful step in political theology. The Jesus of Luke gives outsiders what the Romans demanded for themselves.

Thus, Jesus' faith is the harbinger of God's imperium; it is the dawning revelation of the righteousness which Isaiah promised as light and salvation for the Gentiles and all nations of the world (Isaiah 11: 6 – 9). Jesus becomes the new benefactor whose role and function is not limited to geographical space, time and human power. Luke at various points in Acts is keen to demonstrate throughout that the new Christian empire is guided by the Holy Spirit (Acts 11: 12; 15: 28, and 16:6). More than once, Luke recruits the language of benefaction when he describes Jesus as the one who went about doing good things throughout the world. Thus, the issue for readers of Acts is not centered on Pentecost as a miracle. Rather, the issue is on the divine power behind the Pentecost that is the humanity and divinity of Jesus.¹⁵ Jesus, the new emperor expands the horizons of the mission from Jerusalem to the end of the earth. Here the end of the earth does not signify a geographical expansion, but a movement out of the center of the Roman Empire, allowing other cultures to participate in the fellowship of a new community.

In a fascinating example of negotiating cultural and political boundaries, the Holy Spirit opens a door of intercultural partnership which exudes a spirit of warmth and reciprocated respect. In these intercultural dialogues, people were freed to share their cultural metanarratives; rather than the metanarratives of Rome's foundations. These intercultural metanarratives were faith filled and helped to transform lives across the once colonized Roman states.

¹⁵ For a deeper understanding of the language of benefactors, see James R. Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace in its Greco – Roman Context* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

Conclusion

In this essay I have demonstrated with ample evidence that Luke – Acts must be read within the context of the Roman Empire. Postcolonial biblical criticism has two goals. The first is to question the interpretations of the Bible which represent and legitimize colonial interests, and the second is to engage in a liberationist reading of biblical texts that address postcolonial concerns. The Bible for centuries has been the book of the colonizer, as documented in missionary history and often evidenced in the biblical interpretation of western scholars. Readers and interpreters of Luke – Acts must begin to see ways through which the Holy Spirit negotiated with the Roman Empire in such areas as socio – cultural, political and liberation. Luke – Acts was written in the context of the Roman influence and its audience was familiar with the language of the governing powers. The approach I have used to interpret Luke – Acts gives voice to the concerns and interests of marginalized peoples, allowing them to speak and giving them the opportunity to be heard.

The Bible must also be understood as a political text written, collected, and redacted by male elites in their attempts to provide themselves a place of privilege in history, to claim the positions of the leadership of their peoples, and to reconceptualize both individual and collective identities under the shadow of the empires. This same type of privileging occurs when white male scholars interpret the text through biblical criticism. Their assumption that their human experience, discovered in their interpretations, becomes the norm for all people is heavily influenced by view of the inferiority of the “Others.”

Thus a hermeneutics of suspicion and deconstruction are essential features of dialogical imagination and biblical interpretation. A postcolonial reading of Luke – Acts challenges both

the once colonized and the colonizer to seek ways of negotiating life in this global world. The fundamental principle that friends share all things in common was not a novel one; rather it was part of Greco – Roman culture. Luke portrays the Church as a community where everything is accessible to all citizens.