



Ukutwasa –the Call of a Healer: An analogical lens into Jesus of Nazareth in Mark’s Gospel

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Abstract

Jesus’ retreat into the wilderness soon after being baptized by John has been interpreted from three perspectives –as an echo of exodus narrative, an echo of Isaiah restoration narrative and as a baptismal liturgy. Because Mark presents Jesus as the best folk-healer and inaugurator of an alternative household within which healing, exorcism and teaching took place, I suggest that the analogue of *ukutwasa* (ritual whereby the healer retreats for the purpose of acquiring power) may provide illustrative insights into the importance of Jesus retreat; interpreted as rite of passage whereby the practitioner acquires healing powers. Using *ukutwasa* as an illustration and interpretive lense, Jesus’ retreat signifies three things –the role and power of the Spirit in initiation, the commitment of the practitioner staying on course during an initiative by avoiding things that could be prohibited and, lastly, being possessed by power which later became evident throughout his ministry.

Keywords: ukutwasa, temptation, healing, analogue, sangoma.

Introduction

The study is an attempt to finding local metaphors and analogues to explain the meaning of certain Biblical narratives. In a sense, the study seeks to show the potential and plausibility of such a task and yet also raise awareness of possible dangers in the process. Comparing or finding meaning in our context that explains dynamics within the biblical text is what several approaches such as contextual reading, reader-response criticism, and mirror reading do. In recent days, and heightened by need for new lenses in reading the biblical texts, there have been calls and discussions to reinterpret the biblical narratives and transformation of the curriculum to respond to particular continental questions. While this study does not directly align to any of the United Nation’s Development Goals (SDGs), it, however, an attempt to re-read Jesus’ retreat into the desert which later led to His temptation from the perspective of the rite of *ukutwasa* which is normally undergone by a *sangoma*. Having mentioned this, a devout Christian reader would be quick to raise the red flag and, perhaps, accuse my study as BEING heretic or ‘going-to-far’. However, my approach is not new, as I shall explain. It falls within the category of analogical interpretation –an approach that seeks to find an interpretive or illustrative lens to a less known phenomenon within the Bible. Concerning this, Jesus’ calling to ministry began with acquiring power and is a shared truth among the synoptic storytellers. However, a pertinent question is, how did that power impartation happen? Importantly, how do we make sense of such events?

In New Testament studies, two avenues are available. We can choose to go the route of the historical critical method (form and reduction) by looking at the form and reduction of passages where Jesus felt God’s calling upon himself and then interpret the meaning based on the the likely author’s intention and context where such stories were told. Such an approach would



necessarily demand using Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann's pioneering work in form criticism. The second option, which I take, would be to find models of similar holy persons who felt God's calling and use such as an analogue to interpret and make sense of Jesus' calling to ministry. In this study, I choose the route of analogue by picking up the analogue of *Ukutwasa* –the calling of *sangoma* as a model to understanding Jesus' consciousness that He embodied God's power to perform healing and exorcism miracles.

What is an Analogue?

An analogue is a comparative or illustrative scenario. Used in disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology where data could be missing to interpret given phenomena, analogical method uses information from approximating societies to plausibly reconstruct and explain dynamics where data is missing. Richard Gould and Patty Watson remark that models come in two forms –direct models and indirect models (Gould & Watson, 1982:359). In biblical studies models such as honour and shame, witchcraft, deviancy, subsistence/peasant are direct model's characteristic of Mediterranean cultures and such have been used to interpret narrative dynamics within various biblical texts. Because of perceived continuity with contemporary culture, most social scientist have faith in direct analogues. However this does not mean that contemporary cultures are a direct indubitable window into the past, instead through them, we may find traceable cultural practices present in the contemporary culture that help us infer about the previous generations.

Indirect models –these are derived from cultures that have no direct historical and cultural link with biblical culture. For example, cultures such as those existing in Africa have been shown to have close affinity to biblical culture. Practices such as polygamy, honouring genealogies, honour and shame –these, though are also found in cultures with no direct link to biblical culture, yet may be proved to shed light concerning practices narrated within the bible. However, the danger of taking indirect models is conflating data; assuming that A=B which may result in totally distortion of past realities.

However, a word of caution is necessary – all models or analogues are not as simple as we think. The complexity comes when deciding which one is the best fit/model. How do we decide on the suitability of model/fit? (Craffert, 2001:23). Pieter Craffert who has done much work on this topic suggests that, while direct models are safer choices, they are not the final solution. Caution is needed – direct and indirect function on a comparative basis and their usefulness depends on how much they plausibly approximate events and dynamics concerning the past. Thus, as point of clarity, the study is not comparing Jesus to a *sangoma*, rather it is illustrating the calling of Jesus; making sense of such event from the perspective of *ukutwasa* as ritual of acquiring power.

Is Ukutwasa a Plausible Model?

Having paved foundation regarding the functions of models, the next question is how does *ukutwasa* function as a model in revealing or explaining the period between the baptism and first ministry of Jesus in the synagogue. Similarly, how can *ukutwasa* assists in explaining Jesus' disappearance and his time in the wilderness and later appearance as powerful preacher, healer and exorcist (Mark 1:12-13, Matt 4:1, Luke 4:1). To understand the plausibility of *ukutwasa* as a fit/model, we need to explain what *ukutwasa* means. The term *ukutwasa* refers to divine calling to be sacred practitioner, normally herbalist, diviner or lot caster. Within most African cultures, a calling to be *sangoma* – which is a generic term used for herbalist,



diviner or lot caster, is not a vocation that one decides by one's own wish, instead, such choice is a decision ultimately reserved for one's ancestors.

Many stories are told regarding how one ends up being a *sangoma*. The common narrative is that the candidate falls sick and is taken to hospital and upon being diagnosed, no clear symptoms are found. While most Africans believe that modern medicines cure illness, they believe that illness has a spiritual cause. Africans do not ask what bacteria or virus made one ill but why am I ill. Though most people are now exposed to modern medicine, still the question remains – why did the ancestors allow sickness to happen? Paul Gifford calls such a worldview an enchanted worldview (Gifford, 2015). Hence healing should take two routes – curing the illness associated with sickness and attending to the spiritual dimension that causes sickness. The spiritual cause takes primacy over the physical illness; hence, rituals that allow the family direct contact with the ancestral world would give a roadmap regarding what the family should do to remedy the problem. In the case of a candidate whom the ancestors have chosen to be *sangoma*, modern medicine would not cure the illness and the patient remains in serious condition (Shoko, 2012:55, Gelfand, 1964, Chavunduka, 1978, Bourdillon, 1993). Upon consulting the ancestral spirits through a *sangoma*, the family would be told that the patient should accept the calling to be healer.

I focus my analogue to the healing power of the mermaid spirit. In African cosmology, especially among the Shona and Ndebele which I am familiar with, several spirits can give healing power. For example the mermaid spirit (*njuzu*) is the most powerful healing spirit (Dube, 2018, Gunda and Obvious, 2018). A person possessed by a mermaid spirit has deep knowledge of herbs and can foresee events. Such an individual can function as a herbalist in prescribing useful herbs and or function as a diviner in foretelling or explaining intricate issues. People possessed by the mermaid spirit do not usually tell where they obtained their healing powers because the spirit demands them to take a vow of secrecy (Perman, 2011:59). Stories are told that the candidate of a mermaid spirit would disappear from the family and is taken by the spirit under the dam, sea or lake where he/she is imparted healing powers for months (Machoko, 2013:290, Cox, 2000:237). In most African cultures, dams or wells that do not dry-up even after several month of drought are considered sacred places where a maimed spirit lives. Such wells or dams must be avoided. Stories are told that during early hours of the morning, drums and traditional music can be heard coming from the well or dam (Machoko, 2013:290). Sometimes, white clothes could be seen and or mermaids can be seen sitting on rocks outside the well or dam. Two important instructions are given to the candidate and the remaining family. The family of the candidate must not mourn or follow to the sea or lake where the candidate disappears (Machoko, 2013:290). If they do, their family member would not return, instead they will find him/or her dead by the banks of the lake or dam. To the candidate upon being taken, he/she should not refuse or show signs of unwillingness. If he/she does, either death or no return is the punishment.

While underground in the mermaid world, stories are told that the candidate would go through several tests to prove one's willingness to be trained as a healer (Machoko, 2013:290). Three tests are worth mentioning.

- For example, the mermaid can give the candidate raw fish, mud and other uncooked foods. If the candidate refuses, he/she dies but if he/she eat, then the candidates passes the first test (Machoko, 2013:290). After getting through the first hurdle, proper food would be now provided to the candidate.
- The second test would be being provoked to anger. The candidate would be provoked to be angry or to reveal his or her temperament. If the candidate reveals his or he



temperament, then he or she fails the test and is either returned back to the land of the living where upon arrival must not reveal where he/she was. If he or she reveals that he/she was taken by the underground spirits, then the candidate might suddenly fall sick and die (Machoko, 2013:290).

- The last temptation is being lured to indulge in sex with mermaids. Mermaids are known for being too beautiful and the temptation for the mortal to be tempted into sexual relations may prove irresistible. Beautiful mermaids would intentionally lure the candidate into having sex and the candidate should show fortitude by resisting or declining such a temptation.

These three tests that assesses the candidate's fortitude and commitment are crucial and, in today's language they appear like school examination modules that must be passed before one is awarded a certificate of completion. However, in the mermaid world, the tests are merely the beginning and preparatory work towards real training. After going through the hurdles, the candidate would now be certified as ready to start being initiated into sacred medicine by being given powers of being a diviner, knowledge of herbs and foreknowledge. The training may last up to one year. If a candidate comes out of the well or dam too early, the villagers would know that he/she failed one of the tests. In such a situation and having taken a vow to secrecy, the candidate may have certain powers but not all the expected powers. Healer's that complete the healing training are feared because of their powers and annually, such healers disappear back to the well or dam for further harnessing of power (Chavunduka, 1978). Furthermore, before taking an annual sabbatical or after return, the candidate should organize festivals where beer is brewed to thank the spirits. What questions or new insights may the *ukutwasa* ritual done to mermaid spirits provide as a comparative analogue to Jesus' disappearance and later appearance and His role as the best exorcist and healer?

Several studies have been conducted that reveal parallels between the calling and healing practices of African Pentecostal preachers and the calling of mermaid spirits (Shoko and Chiwara, 2013:217). For example, Tabona Shoko and Egnas Chiwara see parallels between testimonies by African Pentecostal healers and the healer who comes from the mermaid world. Like traditional healers that comes from mermaid world, African Pentecostal healers tell stories of when God called them and several life tests they faced that include long illness or other adversities which were faced. At some point in the testimony, there is claim that God took a prophet to a solitary place (mostly a mountain) where one would be instructed regarding ministry. Such parallels reminds us of the common truth that healers experience some form of divine revelation or intense experience that kick-start their careers.

Mark's Presentation of Jesus of Jesus Ministry Training

That Jesus was driven by the spirit into the wilderness is tradition found in all three synoptic narratives – Mark 1:12-13, Matthew 4:1, Luke 4:1. Mark's narrative regarding the event is very brief. Mark simply says, 'And straightway the Spirit drives Him forth into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days tempted of Satan; and He was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him' vv12-13. However, Matthew and Luke give us a detailed narrative of events while Jesus was in the wilderness. Matthew says:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, *command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" But he answered, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took Him to



the holy city and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to Him, “*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down*, for it is written, “‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and “‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, “*All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.*” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to Him.

Luke agrees with Matthew regarding the first temptation but switches Matthew’s order concerning the second and third temptation. For Luke the temptation to worship the devil become the second temptation while in the one relating to falling from the pinnacle, Luke mentions that Jesus was requested to fall from the top of the mountain.

Three main positions have been advanced in reading the story – as echo of wilderness exodus, as echo of Isaiah’s restoration meant to portray Jesus as the inaugurator of a new dawn of the household and, lastly, as baptism liturgy. The baptism liturgy view, in my view, is less convincing and I shall not put much focus on it. However, that the story echoes wilderness exodus is plausible and a strong possibility. Mary Anne Beavis comments that the text echoes Old Testament motifs whereby the adversary (Satan) obstructs God’s plan and mission and by outwitting the devil, Jesus proved that He can accomplish God’s task. For Eugene Boring the term is loaned from the Hebrew Bible and Mark used it in three forms –as advisory, as Satan and as Beelzebub. Mark is making it clear that from the beginning Jesus faces cosmic battles against fulfilling His salvific mission (Boring, 2006:46). The 40 days echoes stories of Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), Noah (Gen 7:17) and Moses (Ex 24:18) and may symbolize the beginning of new epoch in salvation (Beavis, 2011:40). The term *peirazo*, (to tempt) signifies evaluation of strength from the adversary. Contrary to Matthew, where the angels came to minister to Jesus after a successful encounter, for Mark Jesus was sustained throughout the trial which may allude to the Jesus’ household that should realize that they are sustained by God’s power during their current times of persecution and to defeat the adversary, Jesus is their model (Act 23:8)(Boring, 2006:48).

The second possible reading is that the story echoes Isaiah’s eschatological restoration – Jesus is the new Adam who restores creation to men (Isaiah 11:6). This perspective is based on two arguments; first, that Mark is fond of using Isaiah as his interpretative base –thus revealing the restorative task of Jesus’ ministry. Second, that Mark is interested in Jesus’ defeat of the Satan and the establishment of alternative community which is evident in the devil being dismissed – a claim that anticipates the passion narratives. Robert Guelich contents that, though in the wilderness as in Luke and Matthew, yet in Mark Jesus is in the wilderness to transform it (Guelich, 1989:37). The wild animals echoes Psalm 91 whereby the wild animals are metaphors of danger and threat to the faithful. Boring further suggests that during the time of Nero, Christians had been thrown to wild animals both as a way of punishment and as entertainment (Boring, 2006:49). I agree with this assertion because it dovetails with the historical context during which Mark was written and the general narrative aims of Mark whereby Jesus establishes new household vis-à-vis the temple and household led by the father – *patera*.

Mark’s narrative regarding Jesus’ temptation is interesting in that it raises two important facts – the role of the Spirit and sustenance during the testing period. Jesus was led by the Spirit



into the wilderness and, unlike Matthew and Luke who put focus on the fasting and challenges within the wilderness, Mark focuses on the nourishment. I agree with Mark that the wilderness scene signifies beginning and Jesus as leader of the alternative household. Guelich comments saying, 'thus Jesus' peaceful coexistence with the wild animals boldly declares the presence of the age of salvation when God's deliverance would come in the wilderness and harmony would be established within creation according to the promise, especially Isaiah 11:6-9 and 65:17-25' (Guelich, 1989:39). He further asserts, saying, 'his sustenance by the angels form an impressive counterpoint to Adam and bear witness to the coming of the second and new creation' (Guelich, 1989:39). In my view the passive role of Jesus during this formative stage of His ministry, His awareness of His calling by defeating the devil and the crucial role of angels in nourishing Jesus, are important comparative and interpretive discussion points when juxtaposed with the analogue of *ukutwasa*.

Ukutwasa –Embodying Power

From interpretation of Mark's text (interalia Matthew and Luke) and analogue of *ukutwasa*, both rituals signify a process of acquiring power whereby the candidate subjects himself or herself under the will of the spiritual world for acquiring of power. As noted, the three temptations stages are not visible in Mark, yet Mark gives some important discussion points regarding the importance of Jesus' ministry formative period. Therefore, I shall use Mark's narrative to draw analogue and comparative illustrative points regarding reading Jesus from the perspective of *ukutwasa*. A word of caution is needed at this stage –the task is not making Jesus equivalent to a *sangoma* but rather strives to compare the process of acquiring divine healing power between Jesus and during *ukutwasa*. The two processes are not the same, yet they can illuminate the reader regarding the central themes during the performance of such crucial rite of passage.

First, the passive role of Jesus during this formative stage of His ministry is comparable and illustrative of the crucial step in *ukutwasa*. Associated with any calling rite is the role of the Spirit and the passive participation of the one called. The statement that opens verse 12 is crucial - Καὶ εὐθὺς τὸ Πνεῦμα αὐτὸν ἐκβάλλει εἰς τὴν ἔρημον. Its intention is to highlight that the spirit was in control and that Jesus did not initiate the process. In the Hebrew Bible several text or stories, especially by Hebrew prophets, tells us about the manner in which the Spirit led the candidate to do extraordinary things. Two points are crucial – such extraordinary narratives are meant to explain that the ministry that the candidate is about to take is not the candidate's own desire or plan. Secondly, the active role of the spirit is meant to function as a prelude to the extra-ordinary deeds associated with the candidate. As a comparative lens, the *ukutwasa* has a similar motif of being driven or under a spirit influence. As indicated, the chosen candidate may fall ill or experience unfortunate events until he or she succumbs to the will of the spiritual world. Equally, concerning Jesus, even His first teaching and announcement in the synagogue in which he proclaimed that the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him, emphasises Jesus' awareness that the passive character whose mandate is directed by the Spirit (Luke 4:18).

Secondly and importantly, similar to *ukutwasa*, throughout His wilderness stay, Jesus is aware of His calling by defeating the devil. Matthew and Luke tell us of Jesus' alertness by citing scripture. Similarly, within African cultures, a person who is initiated into healing needs awareness of his calling. Being able to overcome the tests shows one's seriousness in accepting the calling. As noted, mermaid healers go through several dos-and-don'ts – prohibitions that are meant to test their fortitude and character. Unlike Luke and Matthew, Mark does not tell us the tests that Jesus went through during his preparation stages. However



for Matthew and Luke, Jesus was tested to ascertain whether He had pride (all these I shall give you), love for wealth (command these stones to become loaves of bread) and attention seeking (throw yourself down the pinnacle). Similar temptations faced by African healers that go through tests, such as – a test of being humble, a test of sexual promiscuity, a test of character – all reveal that healers pass through hurdles to acquire power for their trade. In my view, tests, in addition to ascertaining one's preparedness, prelude the task ahead. Healers that are called for small tasks do not go through a rigorous test. By going through such difficult tests, the healer or practitioner is prepared for the difficulties ahead and to pass the test, shows that the practitioner is prepared for the challenges lying ahead. As noted, within African culture, practitioners that fall into sexual sin or greed during their rite of passage abort their crucial training. Equally, the fact that Jesus went through a difficult test – prepared Him for the challenges ahead.

The last comparative lens is that Jesus was nourished by angels during the wilderness which compares to *ukutwasa* as a process of being possessed by divine power. We can therefore say that Jesus was a possessed healer. Within African culture, healers are divided into three categories – the herbalist (one with knowledge of herbs), the lot-caster (one who can read the direct or pattern of lots) and the diviner (one who is possessed by spiritual power to carryout healing task). Within the New Testament, except for narratives where He used spit or mud, Jesus never used herbs neither did he use lots. Instead, lots were only used after his death to replace the backsliding Judas Iscariot. The dominant theme is that Jesus casted out demons and healed the sick using powers within Him. In casting out a demon possessed man in the synagogue, Jesus rebuked the demon which succumbed to His superior power (Mark 1:21ff). In addition to healing Simon's mother in law, He touched and took the sick mother by His hand. The gesture shows that Jesus was possessed by divine power that went out from Him to restore the ill mother to full health (Mark 1:29ff). Equally the healing of the man with leprosy (Mark 1:40) and the healing of the woman with haemorrhage is clear testimony that Jesus was a possessed healer – one who uses possessed powers to heal. The debate regarding Beelzebul in Mark (3:21ff) cements the argument that Jesus used spiritual power to overcome demonic spirits that causes illness.

Comparative healing under the power of a superior power is found in a practitioner that is possessed by a mermaid spirit. The mermaid spirit allows the practitioner to cast away any form of spirit. Among the Shona and Ndebele people of Zimbabwe, such a spirit is the most feared spirit. There are several animals whose spirits allows one to be healer. For example, people can acquire the snake or baboon spirit. A baboon by virtue of staying in the forest and having vast knowledge of herbs which it uses as food, is believed to have the power to heal (Shoko & Chiwara, 2013:217, Linden, 1972:11). Equally, venomous snakes can cure venom from another snake by eating herbs in the forest. Anyone possessed by any of the spirits is believed to be good healer. However, the fame of the snake or baboon spirit is less when compared to one possessed by the mermaid spirit (Dube, 2018). Though rare and sometimes found in distance places, healers possessed by the mermaid spirit receive visitors from far-away regions and even countries.

That healers have hierarchy from less powerful to the most powerful is clear from the manner Mark presents Jesus as the most powerful healer. Like a healer with mermaid spirit, Mark's Jesus is able to heal any form of illness – the dreaded leprosy, haemorrhage, and even pronouncing and commanding healing from distance. Jesus' fame as healer, according to Mark, spread throughout Galilee and the surrounding regions (Mark 1:28). People who travelled distances to be healed by Jesus were the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24ff), the



Centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5-13) and the Centurion official's dying son. In all these testimonies, the sick travelled from afar to seek healing from Jesus.

Possibilities and Dangers

Any analogue has the potential of revealing benefits and yet also dangers. In this case, the *ukutwasa* analogue reveals interesting insights regarding how certain persons throughout history have been vehicles of the divine. To an extent, the *ukutwasa* analogue helps illustrate the challenges and hurdles that such special practitioners go through to function as channels of divine healing. Noticeable in the comparison is the theme of food and morality is at the heart of the identity of the candidate. The reception of these ideas are ubiquitous in examples such as monasteries where notable people exclude themselves from the pleasures of this world and adopt strict dietary and moral lifestyles to cleanse themselves and be open to divine constant visitation. On the other hand, we should not be blind to the reality that some analogues may be viewed as unfit to particular people. For example, most people from protestant and spirit-led churches may regard the *ukutwasa* model as an unfit model because, for a while, contexts associated with traditional healing have been labelled as 'unholy'. My response to such accusations and hesitancy would be to say, a model functions as an illustrations, it does not make A=B. The purpose of analogy is to provide insight to a situation where sufficient concrete explanation is missing. In this case, the story of Jesus leaving for the desert for a while is indeed a puzzling event that could be illuminated by an *ukutwasa* experience.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that several passages and narratives about Jesus are difficult to contextualize or understand and one such being the retreat of Jesus into the wilderness that led to Him to being tempted and ministered to by angels. In such situations where information is missing, indirect analogues such as *ukutwasa* may reveal the central function of such narrative as a rite of passage whereby the candidate is selected by the spirit, undergoes certain prohibitions and is ultimately possessed by powerful healing spirit. As pointed out at the beginning of this study, the task was to provide a comparative interpretive material and not to compare cultures. Given this, an analogue should be judged based on its efficiency or usefulness in providing new insights or questions. With regards to *ukutwasa*, its usefulness is in three areas – ability to explain the passive role of Jesus' ritual process, the obedience of Jesus during the ritual and, lastly, the healing divine power exhibited throughout His ministry. However, an analogue should not be a panacea but merely a comparative interpretative tool.

The *ukutwasa* analogue, being an illustration far and distant from the context from which the biblical text refers, should be however, be taken with caution. For example the cultural context from which the analogue is taken should be highlighted as a point of concern. However, despite the points to be worried about, the *ukutwasa* gives some illustrative material regarding the stages that healers undergo before publicly announcing their trade and the wilderness retreat by Jesus could thus be understood from the perspective of *ukutwasa*. Jesus' retreat which later made Him to be the most powerful healer makes sense if compared to the ritual of *ukutwasa*, in both contexts, the practitioner is called and is possessed by divine power which later becomes evident in their ministries.

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