

The Use of Anointing Oil in Mark 6:13 in the African Context

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ABSTRACT—*The use of oil and saliva was a common therapeutic technique in the ancient world. The ancient people believed that the anointing oil and the saliva of a holy man of God was therapeutic and had a healing effect on whomever the oil was placed upon or to whom the saliva was spit upon. African scholars have been passionately advocating for the use of mystical powers as an alternative therapy to improve the standard of living of the African people. These scholars have concluded that, mystical powers were made to assist human beings, and tapping its resources for the benefit of mankind is useful. Mystical practices that utilize materials in the form of oil, herbs, roots, animal parts and body wastes are around us. They are affordable and accessible; what do we do with them? The African Christian worldview attaches demonism to every mystical technique because it is incongruous to Christian faith and practice. They believe that mystical practices are occultic and can jeopardize the Christian faith. So, Christians should have nothing to do with them. But is this true? Thus, this paper discusses the use of anointing oil by Jesus’ disciples in Mark 6:13 from an African world view. Applying exegetical tools in an intercultural hermeneutics, this study demonstrates that the use of anointing oil as one of the healing techniques of Jesus’ disciples in Mark is mystical and is similar to mystical techniques of healing among traditional healers in Africa. The paper thus submits that the use of anointing oil for healing can be adopted as one of the methods for achieving wholeness in Africa.*

Keywords: *oil, anointing, Mark, Africa*

Manuscript received Dec. 21, 2016; revised Feb.6, 2017; accepted Feb. 20, 2017.

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I. Introduction

In Africa today, health matters have been of grave concern to both the government and the masses. Government and non-governmental organizations have made available funds to fight the scourge of sicknesses that are ravaging communities. It is not a surprise that, poverty, lack of good food and drinkable water-supply, inadequate health facilities, the high cost of drugs and increase in marketing of fake drugs have become serious social problems which contribute to shortening of human life. Because of the precarious health situation in which our people find themselves in Africa, the lure of the miraculous has become so engaging to the extent that many people seek solace in the supernatural (Okorie, 2004) The African people believe that without good health there is no life. And since illness or disease is an indication that the means of existence or life itself is being threatened, they must of a necessity find a means of combating it. The African people therefore, use every method within their reach to attain good health (Dopamu, 1985, p 66)

The issue of health was of grave concern to Jesus. Anywhere he went, he healed all manner of sicknesses and diseases among the people (Matt. 4:23-24). In the course of carrying out his healing activities, Jesus used different methods to perform miracles. For example in Mark 6: 13, Jesus' disciples used anointing oil to heal; while in 7: 31-37; 8: 22-26 and John 9:6ff, Jesus used two kinds of materials to heal the two sick persons (the man that was born deaf and dumb and the man that was born blind). He used clay and saliva to heal them.

The use of oil and saliva was a common therapeutic technique in the ancient world. "The ancient people believed that the anointing oil and the saliva of a holy man of God was therapeutic and had a healing effect on whomever the oil was placed or to whom the saliva was spitted upon"(Nabofa, 1996, pp. 11–35). African scholars ¹ have been passionately advocating the use of mystical powers as an alternative therapy to improve the standard of living of the African people.

These scholars have concluded that, mystical powers were made to assist human beings, and tapping its resources for the benefit of mankind is useful. Mystical practices that utilize materials in the form of oil, herbs,

¹For example, scholars like Idowu (1962); Mbiti (1969) Dopamu (1979); (1985); Awolalu (1977) and more recently Makinde (1998), and Abimbola (2005) are advocates of traditional medicine for the benefit of humanity.

roots, animal parts and body wastes are around us. They are affordable and accessible; what do we do with them? The African Christian worldview attaches demonism to every mystical technique because it is incongruous to Christian faith and practice. They believe that mystical practices are occultic and can jeopardize the Christian faith. So, Christians should have nothing to do with them. But is this true?

Illnesses and disease are perennial challenges that confront human beings. Church members do not take sickness for granted. They seek healing anywhere they can get it. Unfortunately, some members of the church pursue healing by all means, not minding whether the source, means and methods of achieving healing is biblical or not. All they want is healing. To them, it does not matter how the healing is achieved; once the healing is performed, they are satisfied. Because of the pluralistic setting of the society, mixed practices are not uncommon among Christians who pray in the church and at the same time run to herbal homes for healing at the time of crisis (Imasogie, p. 67). A Yoruba proverb has it that “heaven helps those who help themselves” and it is those who are sick that need a physician (Alana, p. 25). With this belief, many Christians are inquisitive; they want to know which of these therapeutic techniques are acceptable to God, and which will not jeopardize their faith in Christ. The therapeutic techniques used for healing is the focus of this paper. Hence, the paper engages in a comparative investigation of the use of oil as a therapeutic technique employed by Jesus and his disciples in the Synoptic gospels and that of the herbal specialist in Yoruba Traditional Medicine and sees the similarities of these techniques and recommend whether the church can adopt the use of oil as a therapeutic techniques without putting the faith of the church members in jeopardy.

II. Mystical Practices in Africa

Many writers on African religions have dismissed belief in magic and the supernatural forces and referred to them as myth or superstition. They have considered the concept of mysterious powers as superstition which comes from a puerile and primitive mentality (Jacob, 1962, p. 197). But the belief in mystical power filling the universe is common throughout Africa. It is experienced daily in every village and city. John Mbiti observes that, “the whole psychic atmosphere of African village life is filled with belief in this mystical power. African people know that the universe has a power, or force or whatever else one may call it, in

addition...” to the living dead, spirits and the Supreme Being. It is not an illusion; it is what they see happening every day. The African people believe that the unseen world is real and that as people in the physical world engage in different activities so also the spiritual and supersensible world are the real world of reality (Abimbola, 2006, p.67). The African people have a mindset that the unseen world can be contacted for help and favor in time of need, and this is done either through prayer or through mystical practices. Oso, Jacob, Awolalu and Idowu noted that prayer in the concept of the Yoruba is to submit to the will of God (*Olodumare*), and they have a motto which says “Thy will be done” (Frazer, p. 950). But for magic, it is usually the will of the users that come to pass; that is why scholars says, “magic has the connotation of my will be done” (Idowu 1971, p. 200). The magicians believed that the divine has a power which man can acquire for his use. Gehman noted that, “magic is a divine potency, through which man may obtain all those things which could not be obtained by ordinary means.” (Geham, 1987, p.77)

Magic in the African milieu is an attempt to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for the benefit of humankind. Magic is relatively regarded as a means of manipulating the forces of nature to obey man’s command and do his will by safeguarding his welfare and shaping his destiny (Dopamu, p. 73–74) Magic and medicine are real phenomena in Africa. Two types of magic have been identified by Idowu and Jacob. They are homeopathic and contagious. Homeopathic magic is based on the principle of similarity while contagious magic is based on the principle of contact. The principle of similarity works on the basis of like begets like, while the things which had been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance even after the contact has been severed (Idowu 1971, p. 196; Jacobs 1962, p. 198). Homeopathic magic can be used for well-being or good purposes and it can be for negative or bad purposes. Magic at first sight seems incredible and wonderful and it works depending on the motive of the users.

Magic can be used for healing, rainmaking, protection, love, good luck, memory alertness and for attacking one’s neighbor. For example, a cloth can be cut and be used to harm the owner, likewise menstruation cloth and other property can be used to cause havoc. For example, the leg can be charmed; the woman can be charmed for evil in sexual matters. Even a footprint may be used with medicines in order to bring harm to the man who once had contact with that piece of soil. Women have

refused going to the hospital for child birth because of fear that the after-birth may be used against them. Some hospitals therefore return the placenta and umbilical cord of the baby so that the mother can bury them.

Mystical power is impersonal power which permeates the universe and can be used for good or ill. Within the African milieu there is a delicate balance maintained. Specialists with extra-ordinary powers inherited from ancestral spirits or purchased from local medicine men are mediums through whom the numinous powers may be tapped either for good or ill (Geham, 1987, p.78) Access to these mystical powers is by joining the cult and by being fortified through the knowledge of the medicine men who serve either the interests of the community or the individuals.

III. Exegesis of Mark 6:13

A. Presuppositions

Presupposition is common to all theological studies and positions. The most plausible assumptions are those shared by the majority of Markan scholars which are described below;

i. That Mark used sources in a manner analogous to Matthew and Luke is no longer seriously contested by literary-historical critics.

ii. Mark' s account showed an abundance of characteristics which were absent from Matthew' s account. Undoubtedly, the basic one is that Matthew' s interest lies in the meaning of the miracle rather than the miracle itself.

iii. The procedure used to exegete these passages were verse by verse exegesis. This was adopted because of the nature of the passage. The miracle narrative in Mark 7:31-37; 8:22-26 follows the following steps: location; the encounter with Jesus; the miracle drama; the effect or the result of the miracle; the response of the miracle worker and the crowd' s response.

It is clear that Mark' s miracle stories were not fictionalized accounts created by its author, but rather inherited miracle stories "from many different streams of first-generation Christian tradition (Meier, 1991, p. 618). This was seen in part, by the diversity of the miracle narratives and sayings in Mark. Of 666 total verses in Mark, 209 dealt with Jesus' miracles. These verses were varied in form and content. There were blocks of miracles stories (4:35-5:43), individual, distinct miracle stories

(9:14-29), miracle stories intertwined with broader narratives (6:7-8:21); and individual miracles embedded in the pre-Markan passion narrative (10:46-52). Furthermore, Mark's miracle stories were varied (Meier 1987, p. 619). They were long and circumstantial, as well as short and pithy (1:30-31). They were detailed, including names of places and people, and they were unremarkable, giving neither names nor places. They were physical healings, nature miracles, exorcisms, and miraculous knowledge. Jesus was portrayed both as performing miracles and as speaking about his miracles (3:20-30). In short, Meier concluded that:

when one looks at this vast array of disparate streams of miracle traditions in the first Christian generation, some already grouped in collections, some still stray bits of material, Mark alone writing as he does at the end of the first Christian generation constituted a fair refutation of the idea that the miracle traditions were totally the creation of the early church after Jesus' death (Meier, p .620).

The African may not have a problem with the miracles of Jesus in Mark's narratives because the priests and the native doctors perform similar feats in Africa. The African worldview involves belief in superstitions and miracles and would be more at home with Jesus' healing techniques and miracles.

B. Mark

6:13 και δαιμονια πολλα εξεβαλλον και ηλειφον ελαιω πολλους αρρωστους και εθεραπευον

And they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them.

This passage starts from verse 7 and ends in verse 13. The summary of this verse is that:

Jesus called the disciples (the twelve) and sent them forth two by two and gave them authority over demons; He commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only; no script, no bread, no money in their purse: Not only this, he also instructed them to place judgment on any city that would not receive them. The disciples went out and preached that men should repent, and cast out many demons and anointed with oil those who were sick, and healed them.

C. Exegesis of Mark 6:13

This verse depends on the preceding verse 12, where the disciples preached on repentance. The conjunction *καί* introduces the next clause where the action that followed the preaching of the disciples was stated *καί. δαιμονία πολλά. ἐξεβαλλόν*. The word *ἐξεβαλλόν* is a verb imperfect active indicative third person plural which depicts a presentation of what was going on in the past time (Summer, 1995, p.45). The apostles were casting out demons, an exercise which they carried out successfully.

καί. ἠλείφον ἐλαῶ Apart from casting out demons they also anointed many who were sick with oil, and healed them- an exercise which the later churches adopted in James 5:13-16. The verb used in this context is imperfect active indicative which gives a vivid presentation of what was going on in the past time. The indicative mood shows the reality of the action in past time. The disciples actually healed with oil. Oil was believed to be a therapeutic agent in the ancient world. It is widely used as a soothing medicament and balm to heal wounds. (Gundry, 2000, p. 310). Also oil was a staple of life in antiquity; serving as food, anointing, sacrifice, lamp fuel and medicine. Some rabbinic sources frequently cite the medicinal value of olive oil for curing illnesses as well as for exorcising demons (Schlier, p. 1.229-32) In Africa the use of oil for healing is common among the people. Oil is believed to have therapeutic power against itching and stings. It is believed to regulate high temperature on little children and also acts as lubricants and lamp fuel. Oil is used in sacrifices and rituals; it is believed that some deities and divinities are fond of it. Idowu and Awolalu noted that a deity such as *Esu* loves palm oil (*epo*) but abhors oil extracted from palm kernel; to offer the former is to curry his favour and the latter to incur his displeasure. Hence, daily palm oil is poured over the ‘pillar’ representing him

The use of oil is foreign to the disciples but not to the Africans. Every traditional African person understands the effectiveness of oil in healing process.

IV. The Meaning of the Passages in African Context

The passage that has been discussed in Mark 6:13 is not strange to the Africans. Africans would easily embrace the practices of Jesus and his disciples because they are used to it. The use of oil is peculiar to the Mystics in Africa. . The use of oil for therapeutic purposes is not new to Africans; the African people understands the effectiveness of oil in the healing process. Oil generally, whether palm oil, olive oil, palm kernel oil, cashew oil or vegetable oil is used for therapeutic purposes in Africa. Also, laying on of hands is another techniques used for healing in the ancient world and in Africa. When a pregnant woman finds it difficult in delivery, the services of the traditional healers are sought. The traditional healer would lay his hands on the pregnancy and spoke incantation over the woman and commanded the baby to come out. So with incantation and other material means like oil or saliva, therapeutic feat are achieved by the traditional healer., the type of which was achieved by Jesus in Markan healing narratives.

V. Conclusion

The point that has been made is that the disciples used anointing oil to heal the sick in Mark 6:13 and Jesus used saliva to perfect the healing of the man deaf and dumb and the blind man in Mark 7:32-37; 8:22-25. All these are mystical practices. If Jesus did not see anything wrong in mystical practices, then African Christians can adopt similar practices to assist humanity in their quest for healing and wholeness. This writer is of the opinion that if mystical practices are performed to assist humanity there is nothing wrong for Christians to engage in it. The action of the traditional healers and those that use mystical means to help humanity should not be seen as evils but should be encouraged. There is nothing wrong in using material means such as oil, saliva or herbs or anything that God has created for the betterment of humanity. What is wrong is,using mystical means to harm or destroy other people. If mystical practices can be utilized to lift up the economy and the health of the people it should be embraced by all.

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