

**‘The Finger of God’: Lukan Irony and Old Testament Allusion as Narrative
Strategy (Luke 11:20 and Exodus 8:19 (LXX 8:15))**

Studies of Luke’s use of irony as a narrative strategy have focused primarily upon the trial and passion of Jesus¹ or the parable of the unjust steward². Further, studies on Luke’s use of the specific phrase ‘the finger of God’ (11.20) have tended to evaluate its significance as a reference to the power of God, but not considered its potential as an ironic comment by the Lukan Jesus regarding Jewish response to him.³ Nor has there been much exploration of the possible connection of this reference to ‘the finger of God’

¹ Jerry Lynn Ray. Narrative Irony in Luke-Acts (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical Press, 1996).

² James M Dawsey. The Lukan Voice. Confusion and Irony in the Gospel of Luke (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986). Jerry Ray, Narrative Irony, p. 24 criticizes Dawsey’s thesis as ‘certainly intriguing, but in our judgment it fails to pass the test of plausibility. The mixture of viewpoints within the narrative is too confusing and the alleged irony is too subtle for all but the most ingenious of readers to grasp.’

³ G.A. Klingbeil, ‘The Finger of God in the Old Testament’, ZAW 112 (2000), pp. 409-15; Robert W. Wall, “‘The Finger of God’: Deuteronomy 9.10 and Luke 11.20’, NTS 33 (1987), pp. 144-50; E.J.Woods, The ‘Finger of God’ and Pneumatology in Luke-Acts. (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 205; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 2001); Pieter W.van der Horst, “‘The Finger of God’ Miscellaneous Notes on Luke 11:20 and its Umwelt’, in Sayings of Jesus: Canonical and non-Canonical Essays in Honour of Tjitze Baarda (eds. W. Peterson, J.S.Vos, and H.J. de Jonge; SNT LXXXIX, Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 89-103.

to Jesus' ironic use of other Old Testament examples of non-Jewish response to God's wisdom (i.e. people of Nineveh or the Queen of Sheba) revealed through the stories about Jonah and Solomon that occur later in this chapter (11.29-32).⁴

This essay will seek to demonstrate that when the Lukan Jesus used the phrase 'the finger of God', he was alluding to Ex. 8.19, rather than to Deut. 9.10. In the narrative context of Lk.11.20 Jesus, as he affirms the divine source of his power, was also making an ironic comment about the failure of the Jewish crowd to discern God's work, in contrast to the Egyptian enchanters (non-Jews)⁵ who recognized God's power (at least as

⁴ See for example Darrell L. Bock, Luke. Volume 2: 9:51-24:53. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), pp. 1079-1082; Craig A. Evans, Luke. New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), pp. 184-86; Luke Timothy Johnson, The Gospel of Luke. Sacra Pagina Series Volume 3 (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 181-83; I Howard Marshall, Commentary on Luke. New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 474-80; David Tiede, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament. Luke (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), pp. 217-20.

⁵ Susan Garrett, The Demise of the Devil. Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 45, places the discussion in Luke 11 within the larger context of the Lukan narrative's treatment of magic, magicians and the demonic. 'Jesus was saying that his power was not like the diabolical power of magicians, Egyptian or otherwise, but was rather a triumph of God, and thus by Luke's definition a defeat of magic'.

figured in the Exodus narrative). This ironic element sets the stage for the comments later in this narrative segment about Jonah and the Ninevites and Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and how Jesus, using the response of non-Jewish people to demonstrations of God's wisdom and/or power in the OT, ironically contrasted these Old Testament examples with his own dismissal as God's agent by his Jewish contemporaries. Jesus' cryptic comments in Lk. 11.33-36 about the 'light of the body' and the danger that accrues when the light a person thinks he possesses is in fact darkness preventing the person from discerning God's activities, probably summarize the situation of his critics. Jesus then gives a caustic critique of the religious leaders (11.37-54). I argue that the reference to 'the finger of God' is the first in a series of ironic OT allusions in Luke 11 that the Lukan Jesus used to warn his Jewish audience against misreading his significance.

Discussions about the narrative use of irony within Gospel narratives have focused particularly upon the Gospels of Mark and John⁶. For example, Rhoads, Dewey and Michie affirm that 'irony is a prominent feature of Mark's story'.⁷ They identify 'verbal irony', which 'occurs when a speaker intentionally says one thing but means the opposite'. They also identify dramatic irony as the 'discrepancy between what a character blindly thinks to be the case and what the real situation is or between what a character

⁶ For discussion of irony in John's Gospel see R. Alan Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 165-80. Paul D. Duke, Irony in the Fourth Gospel (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985).

⁷ David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, Mark as Story. An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999, 2nd edition), p. 60.

expects to happen and what actually happens'.⁸ Ray also discusses 'situational irony', being 'the result of a certain set of circumstances that has come to be viewed in an ironic fashion'.⁹ In the case of Lk. 11.20 some Jewish people in the narrative only discern in Jesus' actions evidence that he is demonically possessed. Jesus, however, argues the opposite, that 'the finger of God' is revealed through his exorcisms. The discrepancy between what some in the Jewish crowd think and what the reality is, as well as the prior use of this specific phrase in the Exodus narrative by the Egyptian 'enchanters',¹⁰ generates the irony for the implied audience.¹¹

The Lukan literary irony argued to exist in 11.20 would then be a form of dramatic irony, operating at the narrative level. It would function in a rather sophisticated manner. First, the narrator intends the use of the phrase 'the finger of God' by the speaker

⁸ Rhoads, Mark As Story, p. 60.

⁹ Ray, Narrative Irony, p. 45.

¹⁰ The Septuagint term used in Exod. 8.19 (LXX 15) is οἱ ἐπαιδοί. The meaning given to this term by T. Muraoka, A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint. Chiefly of the Pentateuch and the Twelve Prophets (Louvain: Peeters, 2002), p. 204 is 'enchanter, charmer'. These are individuals who have the ability to cast spells. They used αἱ φαρμακῆαι , i.e. drugs, potions, as part of their craft (Exod. 8.14 (MT 18)).

¹¹ I am not sure we can argue that characters in the narrative are expected to discern the irony in Jesus' response.

to be primarily¹² a specific reference to the plague scene in Exod. 8.19(LXX 15). Second, it is assumed that people in the narrator's implied audience would understand this reference to Exod. 8.19(LXX 15) and the Egyptian enchanters' ability to discern the powerful work of God which outstrips their magical authority. Third, the implied audience would have to recognize the irony in Egyptian enchanters recognizing Yahweh's work, but Jesus' Jewish contemporaries failing to discern Yahweh's power at work in him to cast out demons and attributing his power to Satan. This ironic intent would be reinforced by the references to the Ninevites and Queen of Sheba later in the chapter. Fourth, the implied readers would know from material expressed earlier in the narrative that non-Jews ultimately would benefit from Jesus' words and actions (e.g. Simeon's statement in Lk. 2.32: 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles').

Several studies have demonstrated that the author of Luke's Gospel does employ irony of various kinds as a rhetorical strategy, particularly within the discourses of Jesus or in relation to evaluations of Jesus and his activities.¹³ Ray, for instance, argues for the presence of 'a paradoxical irony of events', as well as 'frequent use of what we have

¹² The phrase also occurs in Deut. 9.10 where Moses recounts Israel's idolatry with the Golden Calf while Yahweh was giving Moses the two tablets of law 'inscribed by the finger of God'.

¹³ Robert C. Tannehill, 'Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story', JBL 104 (1985), pp. 69-85. David P. Moessner, 'The Ironic Fulfillment of Israel's Glory', in Luke-Acts and the Jewish People, (ed. Joseph B. Tyson; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), pp. 35-50. Both of these authors focus upon the irony presented in the narrative 'by Israel's rejection of her promised Messiah' (Ray, Narrative Irony, p. 26).

termed dramatic and situational irony, while only occasionally employing verbal irony that is non-dramatic in form'.¹⁴ In the case of dramatic irony, Ray identifies the Emmaus Road incident (Lk. 24.13-5) as 'one of the clearest episodes of dramatic irony in the narrative'.¹⁵ Although these disciples give the appearance of knowing what has happened in Jerusalem, in fact it is their unrecognized companion who truly understands the significance of these events.

David Moessner has identified 'the texture of irony'¹⁶ in his reading of the Lukan birth narratives.¹⁷ The promises God made to Israel in the Old Testament are being fulfilled in Messiah Jesus, but only through the mechanism of Israel's rejection. The words of Simeon in Lk. 2.31-32 dramatically express this ironic reality. Only if Israel rejects its Messiah will the Gentiles receive 'the light of revelation'. The failure of the Jewish religious leaders to identify him appropriately, something the Lukan narrator describes in various ways in Luke 11, is part of the irony embedded in this encounter.

¹⁴ Ray, Narrative Irony, p. 53. An example of verbal irony would be Jesus' response to his parents in Lk. 2.49, 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' The writer notes that his parents did not grasp his meaning, presumably because they did not understand Jesus' use of the term 'father'. However, the narrator and readers know full well the intended meaning of Jesus' response. The verbal irony operates at the level of the characters.

¹⁵ Ray, Narrative Irony, p. 56.

¹⁶ Ray, Narrative Irony, p. 26.

¹⁷ David Moessner, 'The Ironic Fulfillment of Israel's Glory'.

This ironic ‘texture’ discerned within the narrative of Lk. 1–2 suggests that it will probably be found in other parts of the Lukan narrative.

In the Lukan narrative those who regard themselves as God’s elect define themselves in their response to Jesus as the non-obedient. Conversely, the non-elect, even in some of the Old Testament narratives, sometimes show themselves to be more aware of and responsive to Yahweh than those regarded as the elect. Jesus’ use of the examples of the widow of Zarephath (Lk. 4.26; 1 Kgs 17.9), a village in Sidon, and Naaman the Syrian (Lk. 4.27; 2 Kgs 5.1-14) demonstrates this same principle. These non-Jews ‘accepted’ the prophets (Elijah and Elisha), in contrast to how Jesus will be received, even in his own hometown. ‘Those ostensibly distant from God could become the blessed, while those hearing his message now risked an experience like Israel of old.’¹⁸ What is noteworthy is the way that the Lukan author uses Old Testament materials to ground this irony. This is the pattern that also exists in Luke 11.

Luke indicates the growing contention between Jesus and the religious leaders in Lk. 6.1-11. Two separate, controversial Sabbath actions by Jesus make them furious with the result that ‘they began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus’ (6.11). In Lk. 7.29-30 as Jesus is responding to John the Baptist’s question regarding his status, Luke has inserted a parenthetical passage in which he describes the two different responses to John the Baptist. He notes that ‘the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves because they had not been baptized by John’. Jesus prepared the seventy-two disciples for their mission by warning them of probable

¹⁸ Darrell Bock, Luke, Volume 1: 1:1-9:50. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), p. 419.

rejection by some (Lk. 10.16). The indications of further conflict and opposition in Luke 11 do not catch the reader by surprise.

In Luke's narrative ch. 11 defines a critical shift in the plot, detailing in a concentrated fashion the conflict Jesus has with his Jewish contemporaries. What disturbs Jesus most, it seems, is not merely their refusal to enter the Kingdom, but their deliberate action to hinder others from entering (11.52). The material in Lk. 11.14-36 gains coherence by describing the growing controversy between Jesus and various Jewish religious leaders. Jesus has just finished teaching about prayer (11.1-13). He encourages all to ask God for the gift of the Holy Spirit. He demonstrates the presence and power of God's Spirit within him by exorcising a demon (11.14). Two segments of undefined observers respond in negative ways. Some claim that the source of his power is Beelzebub (11.15). Another group want to 'put him to the test' and were 'asking for a sign from heaven' (11.16). Jesus replies to the accusation in v. 15, using various 'parables' to demonstrate that his power comes from God (11.17-26). Jesus then responds to the demand for 'a sign from heaven' in 11.29-36.¹⁹ He utters several warnings, incorporating references to Jonah and the Queen of Sheba and the danger of 'bad eyes'. His response to the acclaim from the woman in the crowd (11.27-28) is a point of connection between Jesus' reactions.

¹⁹ I.Howard Marshall, Commentary on Luke, p. 473. 'Luke intends the verse [11:16] to prepare for this later saying [11:29-32], and he may have meant to suggest that the exorcisms performed by Jesus made a sign from heaven unnecessary.' Cf. additional comments on p. 482 with reference to 11.29-32.

The last section of the chapter (vv. 37-52) narrates an episode where Jesus accepts an invitation to a meal in a Pharisee's home. As the meal is about to begin the Pharisee observes that Jesus has not washed. Jesus discerns this criticism and delivers a scathing critique of Pharisaism and also the 'experts in the law', ending with this warning: 'I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all' (v. 51). After Jesus leaves, some from these two religious groups start to 'oppose him fiercely' (11.53-54).

Various scholars argue that Luke used the Deuteronomy narrative as the pattern for ordering the material in the central section of his Gospel (10–18).²⁰ However, this proposal has not garnered universal support. Plainly other segments of this Gospel, particularly the birth stories in Luke 1–2, show a deep awareness of and dependence upon various Old Testament materials. While the central portion of Luke's narrative may show some relationship to the pattern of themes and events found in Deuteronomy 1–26, this does not limit the Lukan narrator from referring to other Old Testament materials in this

²⁰ C.F.Evans, 'The Central Section of St. Luke's Gospel', in Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot, (ed. D.E.Nineham; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955), pp. 37-53. Craig A. Evans, Luke. New International Biblical Commentary, particularly pp. 167-69. Other commentators are not as convinced and hardly mention this proposed patterning. For example, Darrell Bock, Luke. Volume 2, does not seem to regard Deuteronomy as a significant interpretative framework for this middle section of Luke's Gospel. Craig Blomberg, 'Midrash, Chiasmus, and the Outline of Luke's Central Section', Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography, Volume III (eds. R.T. France and D. Wenham, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), pp. 217-59, also questions the validity of this hypothesis.

section. For example, Jesus quotes Ps. 118.26 at Lk. 13.35.²¹ At Lk. 10.27 Jesus references the two great commands in Deut. 6.5 and Lev. 19.18. So in this middle section of Luke's narrative Jesus does refer occasionally to Old Testament materials outside of Deuteronomy. This probably is the case, pace Wall, in Lk.11.20 with its reference to Exod. 8.15(MT 19).

Robert Wall²² has presented the case that Jesus in Lk. 11.20 is referring to the 'finger of God' language found in Deut. 9.10. God inscribes by his finger the commandments on two stone tablets.²³ Just as Moses warned Israel concerning arrogance and rebellion against God's covenant, so too Jesus warns his contemporaries. 'The Lucan δακτύλος θεοῦ interprets exorcism as a revelatory event comparable to God writing out on stone his covenantal promises.'²⁴ However, as attractive as the Deuteronomy context

²¹ Jesus references the Ten Commandments at Lk. 18.20. Whether he is referring to Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5 is debated, but the order of the first four commands is that found in Greek Deuteronomy, not that found in Greek Exodus.

²² Robert W. Wall, 'The Finger of God'. Wall sets his discussion in the context of the work by C.F. Evans, as well as the work by J.A Sanders, 'The Ethic of Election in Luke's Great Banquet Parable', in Essays in Old Testament Ethics (ed. J. Crenshaw and J. Willis; New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1974), pp. 245-71.

²³ The Exodus narrative has a similar reference at 31.18 related to the Golden Calf episode.

²⁴ Robert W.Wall, 'The Finger of God', p. 147.

might be to explain Jesus' intent in using this phrase, Exod. 8.15(MT 19) still deserves serious consideration as his primary point of reference.²⁵

First, the context in Lk. 11.14-26 reveals the debate regarding the source of Jesus' power. Does his power come from God or from Beelzebub/Satan? In Jesus' perspective his exorcisms point to God as the source. Others are reaching a different conclusion. In Exod. 8.15(MT 19) the key religious leaders in Pharaoh's court contest the power expressed through Moses and Aaron. If their power matches that evidenced by Moses and Aaron, why should Pharaoh pay any attention to the Israelite claims. These Egyptian 'enchanters' were successful in the first three contests. They turned wooden rods into snakes (Exod. 7.11-12), converted water into blood (7.20-22), and caused frogs to multiply in Egypt (8.7). But when it came to creation of gnats from dust, they failed (Exod. 8.16-18). Despite Pharaoh's demands, they could not replicate the miracle, claiming 'this (τοῦτο) is the finger of God' (Exod. 8.19).²⁶ The neuter singular demonstrative pronoun τοῦτο indicates that the Greek translator was referencing the

²⁵ Max Turner, Power From on High. The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts (Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 259. 'The form "the finger of God" is much more specific to Luke's concern to portray Jesus as the Mosaic prophet-messiah and serves to bring out yet more clearly Mark's own 'New Exodus' understanding of the passage: by referring to the Spirit on Jesus as "the finger of God".'

²⁶ The Greek term for Aaron's rod is a feminine noun, not a neuter noun.

plague event, and not Aaron's rod or Aaron himself, as 'God's finger'.²⁷ The pagan enchanters recognize correctly the divine origin of the power producing this plague. In this sense Moses and Aaron 'win' the contest, even though Pharaoh is not willing to accept the consequences.

The scene in Lk. 11.14-26 similarly includes elements of contest.²⁸ Jesus claims to be representing God and some in the crowd contest this, leading them to ignore him, even condemn him. He invites their 'followers' (i.e. οἱ ὑποτακτοὶ), who also exorcise, to act as judge and validate his claims (11.19). These followers will recognize that God's power is at work in him. A second level of contest is occurring between Jesus and Satan, to determine who is 'the stronger one'.

Secondly, in the context of Deuteronomy 9 Israel's hardness is demonstrated through their idolatry with the Golden Calf. But in that context the 'finger of God'

²⁷ In other sections of the Old Testament the 'Spirit of God' is said to produce these same kinds of effects. Consider Ps. 8.3 where creation is completed by God's fingers, but in Ps. 33.6 it is the 'breath [i.e. spirit/רוח] who creates the starry host of heaven'. Consider W.D.Davies and Dale C. Allison, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Volume II (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), p. 340.

²⁸ David Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, 'Luke', in Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (eds., G.K.Beale and D.A.Carson; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 323. 'Exod.8:15 LXX (8:19 ET), which recounts the contest between Moses and the Egyptian magicians, is particularly relevant, as Moses was able to prove that the power of the one true God was on his side. In Luke's text Jesus likewise affirms the presence of divine power when he is challenged by his competitors.'

reference is rather incidental to the action. Moses possessed the two tables of stone inscribed by God's finger, representing God's covenant which they were violating. However, God's intervention in this scene through Moses is not defined as the 'finger of God', i.e. the means by which God exercises his power. Conversely, in the Exodus plague stories God is directly involved, sending the plagues through Moses and Aaron to accomplish his specific purposes. The 'finger of God' instigates each plague. It is this aspect that parallels Jesus' activity in Lk. 11.14-28. His exorcism²⁹ of the mute demoniac stimulates the controversy and Jesus in v.20 attributes this exorcism directly to the δακτύλῳ θεοῦ.³⁰ While this activity has revelatory significance, the 'finger of God' reference seems primarily focused in Luke's account on exorcistic activity.

Third, Wall attempts³¹ to define Israel as 'the strong one' in 11.21 and Beelzebul as 'the stronger one' (11.22), thereby using the catchword ἰσχυρός as a specific link with the occurrence of this term in Deut. 9.1,14 (and ἰσχύς in Deut. 9.26,28). However, this

²⁹ Adolf Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978(repr.)), p. 306 includes an 'ostrakon of the later Empire from Achmunēn in Egypt in which pagan and Jewish elements are mixed'. Although the text was 'was not yet fully established', he reports that part of it read '...]ορκίζω κατὰ τοῦ δακτύλου τοῦ θεοῦ I adjure...by the finger of God that...'. The text is a spell to prevent one person from speaking to another person. The connection with the speech facility is an interesting parallel to the exorcism of the mute person in Lk. 11.14. In the Exodus narrative it is the Egyptian 'enchanters' who use their spells to mimic the first three plagues.

³⁰ The preposition ἐν probably indicates means or instrumentality in this context.

³¹ Robert W. Wall, 'The Finger of God', pp. 147-148.

interpretation seems to overlook Luke's setting of the short parable about the strong man between Jesus' statement about the 'finger of God' (11.20) and his warning about 'the one who is not with me is against me,...'(11.23). In both cases Jesus is the primary character and he is the touchstone. If exorcisms demonstrate the Kingdom's aggression against Satan and the activity of 'God's finger', then the metaphor of a stronger warrior successfully attacking a strongly armed warrior and dividing the spoils fits well within this frame. In the Synoptic parallels (Mt. 12.29; Mk. 3.27) Jesus is to be identified as the stronger man. While Luke enhances and somewhat alters details in the parable, the referents remain the same. If this is the case, then the comparative ἰσχυρότερος in Lk. 11.22 refers to Jesus. This comparative in Deut. 9.1 describes the nations in Canaan that are 'mightier and stronger than [Israel]' and Israel itself in 9.14. While the comparative form is the same in Luke and Deut., Luke applies it to Jesus and not to Israel or opposing pagan nations, or inimical spiritual forces.³²

Fourth, the request for a sign in Lk. 11.16 also links this text equally well with the Exodus and the Deuteronomy narrative. The Lukan narrator says that 'others tested him by asking for a sign³³ from heaven³⁴'. This question is unique to Luke in this context.

³² A case could be made, perhaps, to link the references to God's power and might (Deut. 9.26,28) by which he delivered Israel, to Jesus' power by which he is liberating Jewish people demonized by Satan.

³³ It is not clear why the New International Version rendered σημεῖον as 'sign' in v. 16 and 'miraculous sign' in v. 29a. There seems no warrant for this alternation in the text. Cf. 2.12, 34; 11.29b, 29c, 30; 21.7,11,25. At 23.8 Herod hopes that Jesus would perform a σημεῖον and it is rendered as 'miracle'. Were Jewish people at 11.16 asking for a

This motif is repeated in 11.29 where Jesus says: ‘This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.’ Within the Exodus narrative Yahweh announces to Moses that he will ‘multiply [his] signs and wonders (σημεῖά μου καὶ τὰ τέρατα) in the land, Egypt’ (NETS³⁵ Exod. 7.3; cf. 7.9; 8.23 (MT 19)). The ensuing sequence of plagues constitutes these divine activities designed to compel Pharaoh to release Israel. In fact God indicates that Pharaoh will ask directly (7.9) ‘Give us a sign or wonder!’ In the Exodus 7–8 narrative, Israel is just beginning its journey with God and has not yet experienced many signs and wonders. Similarly, Pharaoh, although he has witnessed three plague signs, is not convinced that Yahweh’s power is sufficient for him to attend to his demands regarding Israel. The plagues function as God’s means to motivate Pharaoh to repent and to teach all the Egyptians ‘that I am the Lord, when I stretch out the hand against Egypt’ (Exod.7.5). However, since the Egyptian enchanters are able to match the initial signs, Pharaoh is not disposed to accede to Moses’ demand. He is unwilling to accept the plagues as divine

miracle or for a divine, apocalyptic demonstration of God’s intent, vindicating Jesus as Messiah? For whatever reason the kinds of things Jesus was doing did not fit the category of σημεῖα in their view.

³⁴ The phrase ‘a sign from heaven’ also occurs at 21.11 (cf. 21.25). In this context the reference is to apocalyptic wonders that signal God’s imminent action.

³⁵ Larry Perkins, ‘Exodus’, in A New English Translation of the Septuagint, (eds. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin Wright; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

signs and wonders. The Exodus narrative indicates that ‘the finger of God’ is responsible for these ‘signs and wonders’.

God also intended Israel to learn some significant lessons through this process, as stated in Exod. 14.31: ‘When the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.’ The signs and wonders in the Exodus plague narratives serve to reveal God’s power both to the Egyptians and to Israel, but for different reasons.

Signs and wonders in Deuteronomy 9–12, the segment of Deuteronomy proposed to parallel Luke 11, have reference primarily to Israel.³⁶ These miraculous events serve to encourage Israel’s faithfulness to God’s covenant (11.1,6). Moses reminds Israel of ‘the signs [God] performed and the things he did in the heart of Egypt,...’ (11.3).³⁷ The Exodus occurred forty years ago; they have the additional experience of God’s provision during the Wilderness period. Moses gives a retrospective, urging Israel’s faithfulness because the journey is not yet complete, as well as validating their confidence in God. Israel at this point in Deuteronomy is not asking for more signs. In the case of Deuteronomy, the attention is all on Israel and its response to God given the great wonders he has performed for them in the past.

³⁶ With reference to God’s actions, see 6.22; 7.19 (linked with the expressions ‘mighty hand’ and ‘uplifted arm’); 11.3; 26.8; 28.46; 29.3; 34.11. At 13.1,2 Moses warns Israel about false prophets who come and do signs, but mislead the people.

³⁷ There is also a reference to God’s ‘great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes’ (10.21).

In the controversy erupting in Luke 11, Jesus' activities are not regarded as divine signs by some in the Jewish community. So they push him to do a 'real' sign, 'a sign from heaven', 'testing him' (11.16). However, in 11.29 Jesus says that no sign will be given to that generation, except 'the sign of Jonah'.³⁸ The situation of Israel in Luke 11 seems to parallel the situation outlined in the Exodus narrative rather than the Deuteronomy narrative. Jesus is only partway through his ministry. His mission only gradually is being revealed and some miracles, i.e. signs, have occurred. However, just as Moses in Exodus 4–5 had to demonstrate his prophetic calling and competence before Israel, so too does Jesus. Just as Israel had doubts about the validity of Moses' call and his call to action, so too do many in Israel with respect to Jesus' claims. God does signs and wonders in Egypt and at the Red Sea crossing to convince them that his covenant promises can be trusted and so the people would "put their trust...in Moses, his servant" (Exod. 14.31). Jesus' miracles have a similar function in support of his mission. That some in Israel do not accept Jesus' activities as divine signs and thus challenge his claims

³⁸ Identifying what event Jesus might be referring to by this phrase has generated considerable debate. Some regard it as Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom and miracles, and others argue that it points forward to the resurrection. If we compare Luke's account of Jesus' response to John the Baptist's question (7.18-23), it would seem that the sign of the Son of Man is in fact Jesus' preaching and miracles: 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor' (7.22). For a fuller discussion see Daniel Bock, Luke, Volume II, pp.1095-98.

mirrors Moses' experience with Israel in Egypt and subsequently during the wilderness journey.³⁹

Luke 11 also indicates that Jesus is engaged in spiritual conflict with Satan, 'the strong warrior'. Through his miracles and exorcisms he is plundering Satan's domain and releasing Israelites (and some non-Jews) from Satan's bondage. The immediacy of this campaign seems to connect the reference to 'the finger of God' in Lk. 11.20 with the dramatic confrontation that Moses and Aaron have with Pharaoh in the Exodus 5–14.

For these reasons⁴⁰ Jesus' reference to 'the finger of God' in Lk. 11.20 probably finds its primary reference in Exod. 8.15(MT 19).⁴¹

Was this Exodus incident commonly known when the Lukan narrative was composed, c. 70-80 A.D.? The earliest reference we have to 'Jannes and his brother'

³⁹ The *πεῖράζω* terminology in Lk. 11.16 may be another connecting point with Israel's response to Moses as God's agent (cf. Exod. 17.1-7).

⁴⁰ These reasons do not necessarily exhaust the possible arguments for locating Jesus' reference in the Exodus narrative, but space does not allow for more attention to this aspect of the question.

⁴¹ Philo, *De Vita Mosis* 112 references this story and argues that 'the finger of God' only represents the smallest part of God's power, since it is related to the plague of gnats. 'For what is slighter than a gnat? Yet so great was its power that all Egypt lost heart and was forced to cry aloud: 'This is the finger of God':...' In another discussion about this passage (*De Migratione Abrahami* 85) Philo links Exod. 8.19MT with Exod. 32.16, where God's finger is said to have inscribed the commandments on the two stone tablets.

occurs in the Damascus Document V .18-19.⁴² While Philo and Josephus recount the plague narrative, neither name the Egyptian magicians nor indicate that they were able to replicate the initial series of plagues (other than the transformation of the rod into a serpent). The author of 2 Timothy (3:8) does refer to them: ‘For just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth...’. The Roman writer Pliny⁴³ in his Natural History 30.2.11 discussed magic that originated ‘from Moses and

⁴² F.G. Martínez, The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated. The Qumran Texts in English, translated by Wilfred G.E. Watson (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1994), p. 36. ‘For in ancient times there arose 18 Moses and Aaron, by the hand of the prince of lights and Belial, with his cunning, raised up Jannes and 19 his brother during the first deliverance of Israel.’ This is a Cairo Genizah manuscript. This passage however also has been identified in 6QD 15.3 among the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating it to the pre-Christian era. A.Pietersma (‘Jannes and Jambres’, Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume 3, (ed. David N. Freedman; Toronto, Ont: Doubleday, 1992), p. 638) suggests that such an interpretation should be questioned because ‘in CD, as opponents of Moses and Aaron, they are portrayed as Israelite leaders of apostate Israel in Egypt...’.

⁴³ Jerome Quinn and William Wacker, The First and Second Letters to Timothy (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.Co., 2000), p. 727 date this reference in Pliny’s writings to 77 C.E. They provide an excellent summary of the references to Jannes and Jambres in ancient literature. A similar summary is provided Martin Dibelius, The Pastoral Epistles. Hermeneia (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 117 and in Robert Mounce, Pastoral Epistles. Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), pp. 549-550. These commentators along with I.H.Marshall, The

Jannes (a Mose et Janne) and Lotapes and the Jews'.⁴⁴ Jannes and Jambres also occur in the Targum of Jonathan on the Pentateuch (Exod. 7.11; 1.15).⁴⁵ These various allusions to the Egyptian enchanters, although one predates the Christian era, for the most part, converge in the last third of the first century A.D. and shortly thereafter, the same context in which the Lukan narrative was composed.⁴⁶ These references show a level of awareness within first century Judaism and Christianity about the actions of the Egyptian enchanters, such that the Lukan narrator might expect his implied audience to connect the phrase 'finger of God' with gentile magicians, being aware of the Jannes and Jambres tradition.

Based on these various connections with the Exodus narrative, how are we to understand Jesus' reference to 'the finger of God' at 11.20 in the Lukan narrative?⁴⁷ The

Pastoral Epistles. The International Critical Commentary (London: T & T Clark, 1999), pp. 778-779, consider Jannes and his brother in CD V.18-19 to be the Egyptian enchanters.

⁴⁴ Jerome Quin and William Wacker, The First and Second Letters to Timothy, p. 728.

⁴⁵ Martin McNamara, Targum and Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B.Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 89, 179.

⁴⁶ Origen refers to the 'Book of Jannes and Jambres'. Cf. G.Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Volume III, (transl. by Geoffrey Bromiley; Grand Rapids, MI: W.B.Eerdmans, 1965), p. 193.

⁴⁷ Matthew's Gospel reads 'the Spirit of God' in the parallel passage (12.28). While this article is focused on the Lukan narrative and not the question of what the historical Jesus actually said, I do think the arguments that Luke's narrative reflects what Jesus said have

inclusion of the ‘signs’ testing in 11.16, unique to Luke’s Gospel at this point, and Jesus’ pronouncements about a ‘wicked generation’ that ‘asks for a sign’ (11.29) suggest that the narrator considers this entire passage to be a literary unit, i.e. 11.14-36. It seems that Jesus addresses the first accusation about his use of Beelzebub’s power in vv.17-26, defining the source of his power, the implications that people should draw from it, and the proper response to it. The conclusion to this literary segment is marked in v. 37 by the words ‘When Jesus had finished speaking,...’. The initial crowd in v. 14 grows in number in v. 29 (‘As the crowds increased,...’). The second section, vv. 29-36, prophetically describes the spiritual struggle that Israel is experiencing in its response to Jesus.

The references to Jesus as ‘the stronger one’⁴⁸ (v. 21), ‘one greater than Solomon’ (v. 31), and ‘one greater than Jonah’ (v. 32) also link these literary segments. Coupled with this might be the use of terms dealing with judging (κρίσις 11.31,32; κριτήσ 11.19; κατακρίνω 11.31,32).

The conflict theme, however, provides the strongest integrating element throughout this literary section. We have already noted how the Lukan narrative details the emerging conflict between Jesus and various segments of the Jewish community (Pharisees, Teachers of the Law, inhabitants of Korazin and Bethsaida) in chs 6, 7, and 10. Luke characterizes the opposition in 11.14-16 rather broadly, indicating that it is

weight. Consider the comments by I.H.Marshall, Commentary on Luke, pp. 475-476 and his outline of the debate.

⁴⁸ If in this parable Satan is to be identified as the ‘strong man’ and Jesus as the ‘stronger man’, then Jesus is claiming to be ‘one stronger than Satan’, as argued earlier.

‘some of the crowd’ (vv. 15-16) that make the accusation regarding Beelzebub and ask for a sign from heaven. Jesus in addressing the crowd calls them ‘a wicked generation’ (v. 29). These narrative linkages within Lk. 11.14-36 encourage the implied audience also to discern a connection between Jesus’ reference to the Exodus story through the phrase ‘the finger of God’ and the subsequent mention of Jonah and the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba and Solomon. In Lk. 11.37-54 Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law directly.⁴⁹

To this point we have assumed that Jesus in this segment of the Lukan narrative used the Old Testament references in 11.29-32 ironically. But some may disagree. In 11.28 Jesus has emphasized the importance of ‘hearing the word of God and keeping it’. This is the human response to God’s initiative in Jesus that will bring God’s blessing. This motif of hearing is reiterated in 11.29-32. The Queen of the South ‘came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon’; the people of Nineveh ‘repented at the proclamation of Jonah’. Neither Solomon nor Jonah produced any ‘sign from heaven’, at least as reported in the respective narratives, yet these non-Jewish people recognized in their wisdom and prophetic proclamations the word of God. Jesus claims to be greater than Solomon or Jonah.⁵⁰ He not only makes proclamation, but does many miracles

⁴⁹ The narrator continues this theme in the first section of Luke 12 where Jesus warns his disciples about ‘the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy’.

⁵⁰ Precisely how Jesus is greater than either of these historic Jewish figures is not expressed. In the case of Jonah some draw a parallel between his death and life experience in the fish’s belly and the Son of Man’s resurrection. Jonah did not die in his incident, but the Son of Man will die and be resurrected. The relationship with Solomon

besides, including exorcisms. Despite this enriched ministry of word and deed, many of his Jewish contemporaries when they hear his words fail to accept them as having divine authority.

In the Lukan narrative the references to lamps and lights (11.33-36) seem intended to function as a conclusion this segment. If this is a correct interpretation, then Jesus, comparing himself to a lamp, argues that he brings enough illumination. The problem is not with him, but rather with the light, i.e. the seeing ability of his contemporaries. Their eye is 'dark' and so they have no ability to discern the divine work Jesus is doing. They remain in darkness. The assumption seems to be that unless they deal with this internal darkness not even a sign from heaven will bring repentance and generate a proper response.

The irony seems to work in this way. Despite the limited wisdom of Solomon and the reluctant proclamation by Jonah, non-Jewish people recognized God's directives and they responded with repentance. Jesus is now among Jewish people, the very people of God. He is 'greater than Solomon' and 'greater than Jonah', adding miraculous signs and exorcisms to support his proclamation, but many of his Jewish contemporaries refuse to see the light. This ironic situation parallels the irony expressed in 11.20 where Jesus references 'the finger of God'.

As we noted earlier, David Moessner identified a 'texture of irony' in the Lukan birth narratives, summarized in Simeon's statements (Lk. 2.31-32). It is within this

perhaps is a comparison between his traditional powers of exorcism and those powers as exercised by Jesus. Jesus has no need of the herbal remedies or incantations attributed to Solomon in order to deal with demons.

‘texture of irony’ that we should understand Jesus’ warnings to his Jewish contemporaries in 11.14-36. There were precedents within Israel’s story in which Gentiles recognized and responded to God’s revelation. The Ninevites, hearing Jonah’s prophecy about the imminent destruction of their city, repented and sought God’s mercy, which he granted. The city was spared judgment. The Queen of Sheba perceived that Solomon’s wisdom⁵¹ was God’s gift and traveled a great distance to hear firsthand this divine word. Even the enchanter of Egypt, those who were most loyal to Pharaoh and committed to enhancing his cause, had to recognize that the power exercised by Moses and Aaron had its source in God. These are indisputable elements embedded in Israel’s own sacred traditions. If Israel fails to recognize that God is at work in Jesus and rejects his message, then he warns them that God will call these Gentiles from previous generations to give witness to their lack of responsiveness to God, and condemn Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries for their spiritual failure to discern Jesus’ divine bona fides.

In the case of the Egyptian enchanter the irony works in a slightly different way. Even though they did not switch allegiance to Yahweh, nevertheless they acknowledged to Pharaoh, probably with considerable personal peril, that Israel’s God was instigating these signs. In the political-religious realities of the Ancient Near East, this demonstrated that Israel’s God was ‘the stronger one’. When Jesus claims to cast out demons ἐν δακτύλῳ θεοῦ, he ironically notes how Egyptian enchanter recognized God’s handiwork, but his own Jewish contemporaries do not. Instead of discerning God’s finger

⁵¹ In the context of Matthew 12 I have argued that ‘Solomon’s wisdom’ refers primarily to the powers he gave to the Jews to practice exorcism. Larry Perkins, “‘Greater Than Solomon’ (MT. 12:42)”, *Trinity Journal* 19 (1998), pp. 207-217.

at work, some claim Jesus' miracles reveal Beelzebub's finger and others wonder what its source might be, asking for some clarifying sign. The irony is that whereas the Egyptian enchanters discern God's hand, even though it took several iterations for them to reach this conclusion, Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, after multiple miracles and exorcisms for the most part fail to perceive God at work through him. In acting in this fashion they reveal a rebellious heart, reject the very Messiah that many of them were anticipating and fail to participate in God's Kingdom agenda.⁵²

We have sought to demonstrate that the Lukan Jesus in 11.20 was referring primarily to the words of the Egyptian enchanters Exod. 8.15(MT19), when he used the expression ἐν δακτύλῳ θεοῦ. Within the Lukan narrative Jesus used this phrase ironically to criticize the failure of his Jewish contemporaries to recognize God's work, whereas these Egyptian enchanters came to a correct conclusion in Moses' day. This ironic reference is consistent with the references to the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba later in this literary segment, other Gentiles in Israel's history who discerned and responded to God's work. This use of irony is part of a more complex 'texture of irony' that the Lukan narrator incorporates into his narrative, employing Old Testament examples of Gentile response to Yahweh, to critique Israel's failure by and large to identify Jesus as God's messiah and to anticipate the way Gentiles, conversely, will embrace Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

⁵² I would suggest that Jesus' stories about the returning unclean spirit (11:24-26) and the light of the body (11:33-36) both add warning in this literary segment to Israel's failure to discern God's Kingdom.

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June 8, 2009

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