

LOVE, POWER, AND SUFFERING: SALVATION IN GHANAIAAN PENTECOSTALISM
AND ROMANS 8:35-39

Kirsten Jeffery, Graduate Nazarene Theological College, Manchester

Finding Favour

Neno Evangelism Centre in Nairobi, Kenya is one of the largest in the city. Its charismatic leader, James Ng'ang'a, preached to a packed building and a television audience on the day my husband and I visited for a Sunday service in October 2012. The high point of the service was the offering, which came after the pastor had given a short message assuring people that God wanted to bless them financially. But the blessing depended on faith, and faith could be demonstrated by giving money to God, even if it was all the money they had. During the offering, we watched hundreds of people throw money onto the stage, blanketing the carpet around the preacher.

I met one of the worshippers outside afterwards. She lived in a slum outside Nairobi and had two young children. She was unemployed and barely survived day to day. She said she came to the church because the pastor had an anointing of divine favour which brought blessing. She hoped that, by spending time near him, she would catch some of that favour to transform her own circumstances.

Christians claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ has changed the world. God has definitively shown his love for his creation and his intention to bring it from death to life. When, and how, will God do that for this woman? How does the love of God act in our world? These questions are raised by hardship of all kinds in all situations. As a South African, I am particularly interested in the responses of African theology to the ancient question of suffering. This article is a comparison of Ghanaian Pentecostal soteriology with the theology of Paul in Romans 8:35-39, in an attempt to identify similarities and differences between the two. The discussion will demonstrate that the issues raised are relevant to people far beyond the borders of Ghana – to the Kenyan woman in Nairobi and to Christians in the West. The biblical text has been chosen partly because it seems to face the question of suffering head-on, and partly because it makes specific reference to spiritual beings and their impact on human life. We will see below that this theme is prominent within Ghanaian Christianity.

Spirits in the Ghanaian Worldview

“Africa, a vast continent . . . presents an abundance and pluralism of cultures and peoples.”¹
However, this diverse collection of peoples has often been treated as a single undifferentiated

¹ John Pobee, “Aspects of African Traditional Religion” in *SA* 37.1 (1976): 1.

whole, usually under the vague term “African.”² This article specifically looks at the Ghanaian Pentecostal understanding of salvation and its roots in historic Ghanaian culture. While many of the conclusions drawn may be of use in other contexts besides Ghana, particularly within Africa, it should not be assumed that all African Christians think about or practice their faith in the way described below.

The Ghanaian Pentecostal movement is a valuable one to study, partly because it is the largest expression of Christianity in Ghana,³ and partly because its theology has a significant amount in common with the traditional Ghanaian worldview.⁴

Ghana consists of multiple ethnic groups. The largest is the Akan, who make up just under half the national population.⁵ The religious beliefs of the Akan are “equally applicable to the various ethnic groups in Ghana,”⁶ and information regarding Akan beliefs will be treated as such.

Briefly, Akan beliefs distinguish four groups of spirit: the supreme God, deities, ancestral spirits, and *asuman*.⁷ God is the greatest being in existence – all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-present;⁸ he gives a destiny to every human and is the final authority on all things.⁹ Yet he is also distant, and can only be approached through a mediator.¹⁰ God dispenses power to deities and ancestral spirits, who rule the created order and receive offerings on God’s behalf.¹¹

Deities are “local” spirits, which inhabit specific locations, nations, families, or industries.¹² They are considered capricious, and people “may treat the deities with contempt if they fail to perform.”¹³ One exception to this is the earth itself, *Asase Yaa*, which is viewed as a type of deity, though she has no priests and does not offer divination, as other deities do. A positive

² Patrick A. Kalilombe, “Spirituality in the African Perspective” in *Paths of African Theology* (ed. Rosino Gibellin; London: SCM Press Ltd, 1994), 116.

³ No author, *2010 Population and Housing Census: Summary Report of Final Results* (Accra: Ghana Statistical Service, 2012), 40.

⁴ Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, “The Nature of Continuity and Discontinuity of Ghanaian Pentecostal Concept of Salvation in African Cosmology” in *AJPS* 5:1 (2002): 87.

⁵ No author, *2010 Population and Housing Census*, 34.

⁶ Larbi, “The Nature of Continuity”, 88.

⁷ Cephas N. Omenyo, “Charismatic Churches in Ghana and Contextualisation” in *Exchange* 31.3 (2002): 256.

⁸ Pobe, “African Traditional Religion,” 4-6.

⁹ Pobe, “African Traditional Religion,” 8.

¹⁰ Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience Among the Akan” in *JAAR* 76.1 (2008): 60.

¹¹ Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom,” 60.

¹² Pobe, “African Traditional Religion,” 10.

¹³ Omenyo, “Charismatic Churches,” 256.

relationship is maintained with her at all costs, through offerings and prayer at the planting and harvesting seasons.¹⁴

The most important mediators, in the Akan worldview, are the ancestors. They are always treated with respect, as guardians of the clan and rightful owners of the land. They give children, rain, and good harvests to the community, and punish their descendants with trouble or disaster if they are neglected.¹⁵ Immoral behaviour on the part of the living also invokes misfortune or illness as punishments.¹⁶ The ancestors receive regular sacrifices throughout the year to ensure their continued blessings.

Asuman commonly come in the form of talismans, and have limited spiritual power which protects the wearer from evil. They can also be used to harm other people. They are associated with powerful blessings and curses, which the Akan believed could be spoken by elderly people or those with strong *sunsum* (“life essence”). Any person may also invoke a deity’s curse against someone who has wronged them.¹⁷ *Asuman* and curses are indiscriminate in their effects. They work for the purpose of whoever purchases them, and may cause harm to innocent people who encounter them accidentally – by unknowingly receiving stolen goods, for example. Curses remain active and dangerous until they are nullified by revocation.¹⁸

Two Fundamental Principles

Two basic ideas underpinning these Akan beliefs are of particular interest to this article. The first is that of the entwined relationship between the spiritual and material worlds. Although they are distinguishable from one another, they are inseparable.¹⁹ For example, the ancestors are accessible to the living community because they were once human, but as spirit beings they are entrusted with overseeing the spiritual affairs of their descendants.²⁰ The activities of spirits are believed to frequently impact human life. This influences Ghanaian interpretations of causality. Omenyo writes that such interpretations “must necessarily feature such elements as preordained destiny, punishment by angered ancestors, or witchcraft and sorcery for it to be tenable.”²¹

¹⁴ Rose Mary Amenga-Etego, “Gender and Christian Spirituality in Africa: A Ghanaian Perspective” in *BT:AIJ* 10.1 (2012): 20.

¹⁵ Omenyo, “Charismatic Churches,” 256.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (rev. ed; London: Epworth Press, 1978), 115.

¹⁷ Helaine K. Minkus, “The Concept of Spirit in Akwapim Akan Philosophy” in *Africa* 50.2 (1980): 188-189.

¹⁸ Minkus, “Concept of Spirit,” 189.

¹⁹ Omenyo, “Charismatic Churches,” 255.

²⁰ Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom,” 54-55.

²¹ Omenyo, “Charismatic Churches,” 256.

The second idea regards the Akan view of God, to whom humans cannot appeal for intervention in their daily lives. The spiritual beings to whom God delegated his power are sometimes malignant towards humans. Even the ancestors sometimes fail to provide for their descendants.²² *Asuman* may be used for evil purposes. The abilities of sorcerers are ultimately given by God.²³ Power is therefore an essential and pervasive element affecting all aspects of life, but it may work for good or evil. God is not a reliable source of protection from malignant forces, since he has created both good and evil. He is characterised as just, but his ways are shrouded in mystery. Therefore, Akan people attempt to establish harmony with spiritual beings as a matter of survival. This is the aim of offerings and prayers.²⁴ “For one to be able to fulfil his or her aspirations in life requires the ‘balance of power’ in favour of the supplicant. This ‘tilting of cosmic power’ for one’s own benefit or for the benefit of his or her community is . . . referred to as ‘maintaining the cosmological balance.’”²⁵

Pentecostal Soteriology

The Akan word for salvation is *nkwagye*. *Nkwa* means “abundant life” and represents the major goal of life.²⁶ *Gye* has a complex meaning which may be translated variously as “to rescue, recapture, or ransom” and “to liberate, save, defend, or preserve.”²⁷ *Nkwagye* neatly encapsulates the Ghanaian concept of salvation which we will now explore in the Christian context.

The roots of Pentecostal theology in Ghana lie in the first wave of AICs (African Independent Churches) which arose in the early-to-mid twentieth century as a reaction against Western theology and culture in mainline churches.²⁸ The rationalism of Western missionaries led them to deny the existence of spiritual forces. However, this did not cause belief in them to die out among Ghanaian converts. Many continued to consult traditional mediums for protection against evil. The founders of AICs wished to express the Christian message of salvation in terms which were wholly relevant to the Ghanaian worldview.²⁹

²² Pobee, “African Traditional Religion,” 9.

²³ Amenga-Etego, “Ghanaian Perspective,” 19.

²⁴ Omenyo, “Charismatic Churches,” 257.

²⁵ Larbi, “The Nature of Continuity,” 91

²⁶ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xiii.

²⁷ Larbi, “The Nature of Continuity,” 94.

²⁸ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Studies of Religion in Africa 27. ed. Paul Gifford and Mark R. Spindler; Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), 19-20.

²⁹ Abraham Akrong, “The ‘Born Again’ Concept in the Charismatic Movement in Ghana” in *ERT* 35.1 (2011): 32.

They focused on Jesus' power to deliver people from demons and curses, and to heal sickness. The proclamation of Christ's absolute lordship over all spiritual powers makes Ghanaian Christians "assured in the faith that Jesus alone is Lord, Protector, Provider and Enabler . . . leading his people in triumph."³⁰

Clifton Clarke's survey of Christians in Ghanaian AICs in the early 2000s found that 74.6% of respondents viewed Jesus primarily as *osagyefo* (Saviour), and defined the title as follows: "The one who saves from the enemies of life, which include: sickness, witchcraft, sorcery, magic, barrenness, failure, troublesome spirits, danger, misfortune, calamity, and death as far as the individual is concerned. As *Osagyefo* he saves from drought, war, oppression, foreign domination, slavery, locust invasion, epidemics, floods, and so on, as far as the wider community is concerned."³²

This extensive list focuses on the immediate benefits of salvation in Christ. All of the responsibilities of ancestral spirits and deities are subsumed into Christ. Different churches take this to varying lengths. While many of the early Pentecostal churches taught that the primary purpose of the gospel was to restore humans to full relationship with God,³³ Akrong notes that newer charismatic churches tend to take it further:

The message . . . is very simple and attractive: The power of the Holy Spirit is available to deal with . . . protection from witchcraft, deliverance from ancestral curses, deliverance from demons and witches that prevent women from getting husbands and spirits that make married women barren, demons that may hamper the prosperity of traders and prevent workers from getting promotion or students from passing examinations or couples from stable marriages, and demons that may block opportunities to travel abroad to improve one's lot.³⁴

Both descriptions characterise salvation as victory in a spiritual battle with demons. However, Akrong's quote suggests that, for some charismatic ministries, salvation is entirely about material benefit. He further notes that such ministries, which form an increasingly large

³⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Oxford: Regnum Africa, 2000), 9.

³¹ Ghanaian charismatic churches were later influenced by Western Pentecostalism. However, Akrong notes that it is significant that this understanding of salvation came from traditional Ghanaian thought rather than being imported.

³² Clifton R. Clarke, "Towards a Functional Christology Among AICs in Ghana" in *MS 22.2* (2005): 290-291.

³³ Larbi, "The Nature of Continuity," 106.

³⁴ Akrong, "Born Again," 34.

proportion of Ghanaian Pentecostalism,³⁵ often preach that it is a Christian's "right" to succeed in life; that God is obliged to give them prosperity and success; and that "failures in their lives mean that they have allowed Satan to rob them of their rights."³⁶ It is not surprising that Ghanaian Pentecostals emphasise deliverance from the challenges listed above, given their cultural concern regarding spirits' capacity to harm humans, and the gospels which record Jesus' miracles on behalf of the sick and demoniac. This symmetry between the gospel and the Ghanaian worldview is what makes Pentecostalism so attractive, and has doubtless contributed to its exponential growth.³⁷

These concerns are not uniquely Ghanaian or African. Communities the world over have grappled for millennia with the question of suffering and God's role in alleviating or perpetuating it. In a world where over 700 million people lack access to safe drinking water,³⁸ around 46 million people are enslaved,³⁹ and 65.3 million have been forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict or persecution,⁴⁰ the issue of material salvation from these evils seems as urgent as ever. An effective answer is desperately needed.

The extreme theology described by Akrong is not limited to Ghana. American prosperity preachers make their careers teaching people that God wants them to be wealthy and successful, and that they should expect such "favour" as a matter of course.⁴¹ Kate Bowler notes that the assumption that God's favoured people will be wealthy and comfortable has been rooted in Western Christendom for a long time.⁴²

What should a Christian response to these issues be?

³⁵ Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*, 4.

³⁶ Akrong, "Born Again," 38.

³⁷ Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*, 8.

³⁸ WHO and UNICEF, *Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: 2014 Update* (Geneva: WHO Press, 2014), iv.

³⁹ No author, "46 Million People Living as Slaves, Latest Global Index Reveals," Guardian website, 1 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jun/01/46-million-people-living-as-slaves-latest-global-index-reveals-russell-crowe>

⁴⁰ UNHCR, "Figures at a Glance," UNHCR website, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

⁴¹ E.g. Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* (New York: Time Warner Book Group, 2004), 5.

⁴² Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 226-227

The Roman Community

The original church communities which received Paul's letter to the Romans were made up of diverse ethnicities and economic statuses. The congregations contained both Jews and Gentiles.⁴³ Based on the known locations of early Roman churches, it is likely that the churches had a high percentage of immigrants or their descendants, who were 'non-elite'.⁴⁴ Immigrant communities were concentrated in the poorer sections of Rome, which is not surprising given that the status of being a 'Roman citizen' was expected to confer heightened economic and social advantage.⁴⁵ Being a *peregrini* ('resident alien') tended to confer the opposite.

However, the churches probably did not consist exclusively of poor foreigners. Evidence within Paul's letter suggests that they contained a mixture of social strata. For example, believers are urged to help the needy (12:13) and be humble in their dealings with 'the lowly'.⁴⁶

The main purpose of Paul's letter seems difficult to determine. Paul had not founded any of the Roman churches, so it is not immediately clear why he established a formal connection with them through this letter.

It is clear that Paul intended to visit Rome, possibly on his way to Jerusalem with an offering for the church there,⁴⁷ possibly in order to establish a base for a mission to Spain. It is also possible that news of Paul's conflicts with "Judaizers" and the Gentiles in Corinth had preceded him.⁴⁸ This would explain Paul's extensive exposition of the gospel and Old Testament Scripture, which forms the bulk of the letter. Within it, he delivers his understanding of the grand narrative of God's saving action in the world.⁴⁹

Romans 8

Romans 5-8 is often treated as a single coherent unit of discourse. N.T. Wright notes that the chapters expand a single theme: the people chosen and loved by God live a new kind of life in

⁴³ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia, ed. Eldon Jay Epp; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 59.

⁴⁴ Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 84.

⁴⁵ Peter Lampe, *Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries: From Paul to Valentinus*. (trans. Michael Steinhauser., ed. Marshall D. Johnson; London: Continuum, 2003), 53, 55.

⁴⁶ Lampe, *Christians at Rome*, 80-81.

⁴⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*. (The Anchor Bible 33. ed. William Albright and David Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 36.

⁴⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 17, 20.

⁴⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 21-22.

light of the coming parousia.⁵⁰ Jae Hyun Lee identifies the chapters as a framework within which Paul espouses his understanding of two realms: an ‘old realm’ of sin and death and a ‘new realm’ of grace. Within this framework, chapter 8 forms a climax in Paul’s main argument about “the role of Jesus and its result in salvation.”⁵¹

Chapter 8 begins with Paul’s claim that God in Christ has set us free from condemnation to “walk according to the Spirit” (8:4). Although Christians continue to live out the struggle between the old realm of sin and the new realm of grace, their efforts to live according to God’s law are empowered by the Spirit. God, not sin, has the greatest power in the life of the believer.⁵²

This journey of God’s people from bondage to sin into freedom in Christ, and the life lived as firstfruits of eschatological glory, may be seen as a new Exodus story.⁵³ Christians’ present experience of the sustenance of the Spirit through the struggles of life can be compared to the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness, accompanied by the pillar of smoke and fire, which was the presence of God with them.⁵⁴ The indwelling of the Spirit is as real as the struggles, and both are means to the end of final, full union with and conformity to Christ.⁵⁵ Paul points forward to the eschatological glory which is the destiny of God’s children (8:18, 21, 30), but also insists on the real and effective presence in this age of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is able to understand our most inarticulate groans and longings, and draws them into the conversation within the Godhead. This relationship is underpinned by God’s love, which is poured into and demonstrated to believers by their salvation, evoking a response of love from them.⁵⁶

God’s Victory: 8:35-39

Chapter 8:35-39 is the logical conclusion to Paul’s understanding of the role of the Spirit in the lives of believers, and of the generosity of God’s salvation (8:32).⁵⁷ Paul connects it to his

⁵⁰ N.T. Wright, “New Exodus, New Inheritance: The Narrative Substructure of Romans 3-8” in *Romans and the People of God* (ed. Sven K. Soderlund and N.T. Wright; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 33-34.

⁵¹ Jae Hyun Lee, *Paul’s Gospel in Romans: A Discourse Analysis of Romans 1:16-8:39* (Linguistic Biblical Studies 3. ed. Stanley E. Porter; Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), 308, 431, 441.

⁵² Greathouse, *Romans*, 137-138.

⁵³ N.T. Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*. (London: SPCK, 2005), 31.

⁵⁴ Wright, “New Exodus,” 28.

⁵⁵ Bruce, F.F. *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. ed. Leon Morris; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 159-160.

⁵⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 526.

⁵⁷ Lee, *Paul’s Gospel*, 422.

previous arguments, stretching back to chapter 5,⁵⁸ by asking, “What then are we to say about these things?” (v31) ‘These things’ thus encompasses the fall of Adam, slavery to sin and law, and redemption through Christ’s death and resurrection. It includes both the victory of God over sin and death, and the Christian’s ongoing experience of them.

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul further asks, rhetorically, touching on the core issue of the stability of the relationship between believers and God (v35).⁵⁹ He elaborates with a list of seven types of suffering: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. “Hardship” (θλιψις) and “distress” (στενοχωρία) both have connotations of pressure – “compression” and “narrowness of place,” respectively.⁶⁰ Together with the rest of the list, they paint a picture of someone in ultimate distress: forced into a narrow place, pursued (a connotation of διωγμός, or “persecution”), without food or clothing, exposed to danger and eventually killed.⁶¹

The list appears to be based on Paul’s own experience as a Christian. The entire list, bar “the sword,” appears in 2 Corinthians 11:25-28 and 12:10 as Paul’s description of his own experiences as an apostle. He would, eventually, lose his life to execution. This suggests that Paul is not merely making a theological statement about the extent and power of God’s love. He is speaking of the actual, lived experience of that love during ultimate suffering.

Verse 36 underlines this by quoting Psalm 44 regarding the suffering of the righteous. Paul is not surprised that Christians experience hardship – he considers it a natural part of life with Christ⁶² (cf. Rom. 8:17). The context of his description of suffering in 2 Corinthians is an argument over the validity of his apostleship. Traditionally, Jews, Greeks, and Romans considered the hardships listed by Paul to be divine punishment for wrongdoing. Paul’s ‘super-apostle’ opponents “claimed exemption from hardships while arguing that no one whose career was as troubled as Paul’s could possibly embody the power of Christ.”⁶³ However, Paul declares that the sufferings he has endured are proof that he is a better minister of Christ than his opponents (11:23).

It is possible that Jewish believers who had recently returned to Rome from exile (having experienced many of the hardships on this list) faced similar attitudes from Gentile Christians

⁵⁸ Moo, *Romans*, 539.

⁵⁹ Lee, *Paul’s Gospel*, 423.

⁶⁰ Wesley J. Perschbacher, *New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1990), 203, 378.

⁶¹ The number of sufferings listed further underlines their “fullness” – seven signifies completeness within the Hebraic worldview.

⁶² Moo, *Romans*, 543-544.

⁶³ Jewett, *Romans*, 545.

who believed that their suffering indicated that God did not favour them. This passage would thus express Paul's opposition to that view.⁶⁴

Paul is adamant that hardship does not hinder the victory of God over death. Believers share this victory, which is greater than any other, as they are "more than conquerors". Bruce translates "in all these things" as "despite these things."⁶⁵ While this carries some weight, Dunn's suggestion that it means "in the midst of these things" seems to fit better with Paul's understanding of fellowship with Christ through suffering, and with the Exodus theme.⁶⁶ It implies that God's good work happens in the midst of hardship, just as God was with the Israelites in the wilderness.

Verses 38-39 contain another list of ten things which might separate believers from God's love.⁶⁷ This list is "a mixture of earthly and cosmic forces that are currently thought to be capable of impinging on the elect."⁶⁸ Some seem to be paired – death and life, things present and things to come, and height and depth. Θάνατος and ζωή refer to human death and human life. Θάνατος is particularly important because it harks back to Paul's discussion of sin and the law, where death is an ever-present threat, as well as to verse 36.⁶⁹ "The present" and "the future," taken together with "height" and "depth" indicate the all-encompassing reach of God's love, "not only from present to future temporally, but . . . the whole universe spatially."⁷⁰ It is possible that ὕψωμα (height) and βάθος (depth) are a reference to cosmic or astronomical powers, but this is not certain.⁷¹

The other items on the list do not fall into obvious pairs. Ἀρχαὶ often refers to human rulers, but is sometimes used to describe spiritual beings. Human rulers and spiritual power were intertwined within the Greco-Roman worldview, since spiritual beings gave authority to human leaders.⁷² It may also refer to broad institutions of power, such as governments or realms. The word seems to include all types of governing authority in the world, whether human or spiritual. Ἄγγελοι referred to 'good' or 'evil' angels, and occasionally to spirits who ruled over nations.

⁶⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 546.

⁶⁵ Bruce, *Romans*, 171.

⁶⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Word Biblical Commentary 38A, ed. Ralph P. Martin; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 506.

⁶⁷ Ten was another important round number in Jewish regulations.

⁶⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 550.

⁶⁹ Dunn, *Romans*, 499.

⁷⁰ Lee, *Paul's Gospel*, 424.

⁷¹ Kabiro wa Gatumu, *The Pauline Concepts of Supernatural Powers: A Reading from the African Worldview* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008) 134.

⁷² Gatumu, *Supernatural Powers*, 129-130.

Δυνάμεις (powers) also had multiple meanings. It referred to military, political, or economic forces,⁷³ but could also mean strength, ability, or miraculous power.⁷⁴ The fluid boundary between material and spiritual is evident again here, and the meanings of δυνάμεις, ἄγγελοι, and ἀρχαὶ overlap. Ancient Greek had a plethora of terms for the many spiritual beings which Greco-Romans believed in. However, because all of those terms are partially interchangeable with each other, a few can represent them all. “The demands of rhetoric, not the requirements of precision”⁷⁵ underpin the structure of Paul’s list.

The list paints a picture of the comprehensive penetration of God’s love into every aspect of existence. The three pairs of forces form a frame around the created order, outside which nothing but God exists. This is underlined by the final thing which Paul says cannot separate believers from God: “any other creature.”⁷⁶ These terms are so all-encompassing that they may seem somewhat abstract. However, other words are woven into them which describe the daily reality of power and authority, both human and spiritual, which impacts human life. Paul has not just structured a rhetorical piece to express God’s omnipotence. He has also affirmed that God’s love reaches into believers’ tangible daily experiences, in which they often face opposition from both humans and spirits. His final words in this passage reiterate his earlier argument (chapters 6-8) that God’s covenant in Christ is with all who believe in him. Neither the direst experience nor the strongest force can nullify that covenantal love.

A Meeting of Worldviews

It can be hazardous to suggest close resemblance between worldviews from different times and places. The worldviews of the ancient Jews and Greco-Romans are different from that of Ghanaian Christians, as are the narratives which shaped them. However, they have some similarities which help us to find the common themes by which the biblical text may speak into the current context.

An obvious commonality is the belief that spiritual powers are an integral part of creation and that they impact human life. For both Ghanaians and Romans, political authority had a spiritual aspect, and everyday events had spiritual causes. We could draw a loose parallel between *asunam* and δυνάμεις, compare the ancestors and deities with ἄγγελοι, and note that the ἀρχαὶ of ancient Rome are similar to the governing authorities of modern-day Ghana. Perhaps we should expect to find such common points of reference: if the gospel is universal, then the contrast

⁷³ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 10, 17, 27-28.

⁷⁴ Perschbacher, *Greek Lexicon*, 108.

⁷⁵ Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 10-11.

⁷⁶ Dunn, *Romans*, 508.

between the ‘old realm’ of sin and death (where these powers reign) and the ‘new realm’ of grace and Spirit will be evident throughout creation. Δυνάμεις does not mean exactly the same as *asunam*, and the narrative which shaped the concept of ἄγγελοι is different to that which shaped concepts of ancestors and deities. But the Pauline rhetoric which influenced his choice of terms in verses 38-39 – that no created thing hinders us – may lead us to say: “Neither ancestors, nor deities, nor *asunam*, nor governments, can separate us from the love of God.”

This is the approach taken by Ghanaian Pentecostals. They affirm Christ’s supremacy over all evil forces which threaten life, and express this by casting hostile spirits out of homes and lives, and praying for release from curses. Traditional beliefs in spiritual beings thus became *preparatio evangelium*. “The AICs have gone far in translating the Christian message into culturally relevant and appropriate forms by synthesizing the Gospel and African culture with an end product of an authentic African Christianity.”⁷⁷

So far, so good. But does Romans 8:35-39 also offer a challenge to the Ghanaian concept of salvation?

Through Suffering to Victory

Suffering and adversity hold prominent places within the passage. Paul clearly expected that believers would suffer hardship. This idea is found in other Pauline letters, including 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1 Thessalonians. Because Jesus redeemed humanity through his death, salvation and suffering cannot be separated. “In Paul’s view, Christians cannot truly experience the resurrection-life of Christ unless they share also in his crucifixion.”⁷⁸

Therefore, while Jesus does deliver people from demons and sickness and poverty, there is more to Christian discipleship than accruing material benefits. According to Paul, discipleship means sharing in Christ’s suffering – it is part of our fellowship with him.⁷⁹ Our relationship with God means that our priorities and ethical choices must be modelled on Christ.⁸⁰ We must not only appropriate his power, but also imitate his life. Therefore, Paul was able to claim that the proof of his relationship with and calling from God was not prosperity and worldly success, but humility, love, and suffering. (2 Cor. 11:7, 11, 30)

⁷⁷ Omenyo, “Charismatic Churches,” 263.

⁷⁸ Morna D. Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ* (Didsbury Lectures. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), 15.

⁷⁹ Hooker, *Not Ashamed*, 19.

⁸⁰ Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 102.

Lust for wealth is a global problem, as I stated above. In a globalised economy, it manifests in an unequal system which affects every human, largely based on where they are born. It is difficult for the Western church to speak prophetically about wealth when many of its members are economically privileged at the expense of our sisters and brothers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Many Ghanaians were attracted to Pentecostalism because it offered refuge from national political and economic crises.⁸¹ Many people are attracted to the idea that God will make them rich, because they know the instability and lack of opportunity which come with being poor. While it may be easy to condemn obscene flaunting of wealth, what about the mother who wants God to give her enough food to feed her children this week? Or the girl who prays that she will be able to finish school, rather than being forced into an early marriage? If we cannot confidently say “God will fix all your problems in life”, what good is the gospel for these – the least, the broken, the despised, the ones for whom Jesus said he had come?

The paradox that, having been given all things, we are called to persevere in weakness and humility, is central to the gospel. It is fundamental to Paul’s theology in Romans 8, but it puzzles and challenges us. Where is the new creation, the new life in Christ, which defeats sin and death, if we still suffer the effects of both? As a middle-class Westerner, I am wary of proposing concrete ways in which Ghanaian Christians should deal with this paradox, since my life experience is very different to theirs. However, I will briefly look at another aspect of Paul’s theology which may shed light on how the church could respond faithfully.

Community in Christ: Paul’s Ecclesiology

The story of God’s interaction with humanity is always based in community. He chose the nation of Israel to be his holy people, and Paul understood the gospel as a continuation of God’s work with a faithful community, now comprised of all who accept Jesus as Lord and saviour, responding to God’s love with love.⁸² “The church is the community that shares the destiny of Christ.”⁸³

It is likely that the Roman churches were facing ethnic and socio-economic divisions. Paul argues that Christians’ new identity in Christ supersedes other sources of identity.⁸⁴ It is a communal identity, forged in relationship with other believers (from varying backgrounds). The church is part of God’s new creation and believers are to be formed into the likeness of Christ in

⁸¹ Akrong, “Born Again,” 40.

⁸² James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 76 & 109.

⁸³ Thompson, *The Church*, 77.

⁸⁴ Esler, *Conflict*, 154.

love and obedience. The church is thus “the place where the power of God has invaded the world.”⁸⁵

Paul is still concerned with individual needs. He asks Roman Christians to serve one another, provide for the needy, and behave in ways which edify others (Rom. 12:10-20). But we cannot stop at individual needs. The gospel is about the redemption of the entire creation, and believers are called to take part in it.⁸⁶

The community of believers is thus a new reality. Having been united with Christ in the sharing of his suffering and resurrection, believers are similarly united with one another in the Christ-life. We are called to share each others’ joys and struggles with a self-sacrificial love that considers others better than ourselves. (Phil. 2:3) We do not always rise unscathed above the struggles of life, but we are called to be a living expression of God’s love, helping to deliver one another from sin and death by our presence and action. This has implications both for how Ghanaian churches define the ‘good news,’ and for how Western churches respond to the fact that millions in our family in Christ suffer extreme poverty.

Ghanaian Pentecostalism rightly proclaims Jesus’ absolute victory over all forces of sin and brokenness in the world. It recognises that it is God’s purpose to create a new world in which there is no suffering or deprivation. There is a tendency – partially inherited from pre-Christian beliefs – to assume that salvation is instant deliverance into wealth and success. This idea clashes with Paul’s description of the new life of believers. He assumes suffering to be a natural part of Christian life and a marker of faithfulness to God. For Paul, sharing in the life of Christ also means sharing in his death. Christian salvation is therefore a paradox in which ultimate power to redeem displays itself in human weakness.

This is not an accident. It is the means by which God is transforming the world. Believers are called to share a new life together in which they love one another and bear each others’ burdens. This new life will not instantly deliver us from suffering. Perhaps self-sacrifice seems like an unnecessary burden – a slow and foolish way of attaining victory. But it is possible that it will be far more effective in transforming the powers and structures of our world than a drive for individual prosperity will.

The Incarnation reminds us that salvation works primarily through human beings; the Holy Spirit continues to incarnate Godself in the ordinary lives of believers (Rom. 8:9, 23). Romans 8:35-39 demonstrates true defiance of hostile powers, both human and spiritual: to live faithfully in spite

⁸⁵ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 27.

⁸⁶ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 26-27.

of them. True defeat of these powers is to transform their works into good. When we are patient in suffering, and when we love and help one another in our struggles, we defeat evil and the kingdom of God manifests in that space, because the power of God's love is greater than the power of evil. To access his power, we have only to live out love with endurance.