"THE FINGER OF GOD"
MISCELLANEOUS NOTES ON LUKE 11:20
AND ITS UMWELT

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In the Q version of the Beelzebul controversy we find the following logion:

Lk. 11:20: εἰ δὲ ἐν δακτύλῳ θεοῦ [ἐγὼ] ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμόνια, ἀρα ἐφθασεν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ.

Mt. 12:28: εἰ δὲ ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ ἐγὼ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμόνια, ἀρα ἐφθασεν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ.

Apart from the disputed ἐγὼ in Luke, the only difference between these two versions of the logion is Luke’s “finger” against Matthew’s “spirit.” There has been much debate about what may have been the original reading in Q, each possibility having quite a number of advocates, as a glance in the standard commentaries will show.¹ It is not the purpose of this article to go into that debate (although I am convinced that Luke’s “finger” has a much greater chance of being original than Matthew’s “spirit”²). As a


² For arguments see Meier, Marginal Jew, Vol. II, pp. 410–411; for a different position (without arguments) see recently G. H. Twelftree, Jesus the Exorcist. A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus (Tübingen 1993), p. 108. Twelftree, however, rightly concludes: “Jesus believed that while he was operating out of
matter of fact, for the meaning of the logion it does not make much difference whether "finger" or "spirit" is read since both mean God's power here (as does the much more common "hand of God"). What I wish to investigate here is what kind of associations the metaphor of the finger(s) of (the) god(s) evoked in the ancient world, among pagan Greeks and Romans as well as among Jews and Christians. As will be seen, this imagery was not a widespread one (in the NT this anthropomorphism never recurs), the idea of a god's hand(s) being much more current, but the "finger of God" did have some particular associations.

Let us begin with the material from the Jewish tradition, since this is likely to form the primary background of the Jesus logion. In the Hebrew Bible, the anthropomorphic expression "finger of God" occurs only in Ex. 8:15 (19), 31:18, Deut. 9:10, and in Ps. 8:4 (but here implicitly and in the plural). In Ex. 8:12-15 (16-19) we find a description of the third plague that the Lord sends upon Egypt, the one of the gnats produced by Aaron's stretching out his hand with his staff and striking the dust of the earth. When the Pharaoh's magicians tried to ape the miracle—which they had successfully done in the two previous cases—and produce gnats as well, they failed and said: "This is the finger of God!" (or: the finger of a god, ἀνθρώπως θεοῦ ἐστὶν τοῦτο). This is probably no more than a case of synecdoche (or pars

his own resources, at the same time he believed that it was God who was to be seen as operative in his activity" (p. 165).

3 As Davies & Allison, Matthew, p. 340, n. 35, point out, in 2 Kings 3:15 Targum Jonathan renders yad YHWH by the words "a spirit of prophecy from before the Lord" (see D. J. Harrington & A. J. Saldarini, Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets, The Aramaic Bible 10, [Edinburgh 1987], p. 269 with n. 25); and Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis VI 16,133,1 (ed. Stählin-Früchtel, p. 499), says that God's finger is to be understood as his power (dynamis). In Ps. 8:4 the heavens are the work of God's fingers, whereas in Ps. 33:6 they are the work of his ruah. I. H. Marshall, The Gospel of Luke (Exeter 1978), p. 475 rightly remarks: "The meaning is the same in both versions." Meier, Marginal Jew, Vol. II, p. 463, n. 48: "Both 'finger of God' and 'spirit of God' designate the power of God in action." For alternation of "hand" and "fingers" (plur.) see e.g. Psalm 144:1 and Is. 17:8.

4 The verse numbering in MT and LXX (8:15) is different from that in the Vulgate and many modern versions (8:19).

5 On this LXX rendering see J. W. Wevers, Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus (Atlanta [Georgia] 1990), p. 115.