

The Devil is in the Details:

A Socio-Cultural Reading of the Gerasene Demoniac Narrative

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Abstract

The exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac is one of the most striking narratives in the New Testament and depicts an intense power struggle between Jesus and a horde of demons. Although the exorcism is recounted in all of the Synoptic Gospels, the Markan narrative is especially intriguing because it includes three significant details. First, the demons attempt to use “name magic” on Jesus; second, they adjure him by God; and third, Jesus himself resorts to name magic before he casts out the demons. For ancient readers, the presence of these three details would have been interpreted as limitations of Jesus’ power. However, this essay argues that the Markan author intentionally includes these “embarrassing” details in order to heighten the action and drama of the narrative. By describing Jesus’ violent struggle and subsequent victory over a multitude of demons, the narrator emphasizes his authority as an exorcist.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
I. Introduction.....	4
II. The Core Passage.....	5
i. Mark 5:1-20 (Greek).....	5
ii. Mark 5:1-20 (English).....	7
III. Towards A Method: Historical Criticism and the Texture of Texts.....	8
i. <i>Inner Texture</i>	9
ii. <i>Intertexture</i>	10
iii. <i>Social and Cultural Texture</i>	11
IV. Establishing the Pattern: Jesus' Exorcisms in the Gospel of Mark.....	13
V. A Failed Attempt at 'Name Magic: Jesus as "Son of the Most High God" 19	
VI. An Ironic Invocation: The Demons Adjure Jesus by God	25
VII. Act of Strength or Moment of Weakness? Jesus Resorts to Name Magic...33	
VIII. Final Remarks.....	41
Works Cited.....	43

Introduction

In Mark 5:1-20, Jesus exorcises

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Mark 5:1-20 (NRSV)

¹ They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.² And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³ He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; ⁴ for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷ and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." ⁸ For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" ⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." ¹⁰ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹ Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹² and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." ¹³ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.¹⁴ The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵ They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had

the legion; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷ Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood.¹⁸ As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹ But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Towards A Method: Historical Criticism and The Texture of Texts

In order to examine the narrative of the Gerasene demoniac, this essay will utilize a historical-critical framework. The fundamental assumption of the historical-critical method is that every text is a product of its time. As such, they are often influenced by a number of social, cultural, and religious factors that are unique to their particular, historical context. Unlike other approaches, historical-criticism cannot be reduced to a single method. Rather, it functions as an umbrella term that encompasses a cluster of related approaches including: form criticism, source criticism, redaction criticism, and literary criticism to name a few (Law 23). While this essay is rooted in the broad framework of historical criticism, it will narrow its focus by utilizing Vernon K. Robbins' theory of socio-rhetorical interpretation. According to this theory, every text is like a well-woven tapestry which contains multiple layers of meaning (Robbins 2). By analyzing a text from a variety of different angles, scholars can then bring these layers into view (Robbins 3). Although Robbins identifies five different approaches with which to analyze a text, this essay will only refer to three: inner texture, intertexture,

and socio-cultural texture.²

Inner Texture

Robbins' concept of *inner texture* analyzes the specific words of a text prior to its interpretation (Robbins 7). Those who examine the inner texture of a text, may choose to investigate certain features such as: the repetition of certain words, the order of events, or the presence of arguments within the text (Robbins 7). For instance, this essay will use inner texture to discuss the misplaced chronology of verses 7-9 of the narrative. In Mark 5:8, Jesus is said to have (already?) commanded the demon to leave its host. However, in verse 13, Jesus commands the demon to leave a second time. The placement of verse 8 before verse 13, has caused confusion amongst scholars and resulted in two, dominant positions. The first position holds that Jesus had commanded the demons to leave when he first arrived on shore

cultural intertexture, scholars are able to glean shades of meaning that would have otherwise only been apparent to the original readers.

Another example of socio-cultural texture is apparent when the restored demoniac goes into the Decapolis and proclaims what Jesus has done for him (Mark 5:20). To the contemporary reader, the term "Decapolis" holds little meaning. For the ancient reader however, the Decapolis was a well-known cluster of ten cities which lay east of the Jordan (Hooker 146). From this detail alone, the reader becomes aware of Jesus' profound effect on the demoniac. Although

foam at the mouth (Mark 9:20). After testing the man's faith, Jesus rebukes (ἐμίμνησεν) the demon and addresses it directly by saying: "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again" (Mark 9:25)! The spirit cries out with a loud voice, convulses the boy, throws him to the ground, and finally departs (Mark 9:26). Jesus' ability to cast out the demon with a simple command demonstrates his power as an exorcist. Moreover, the gospel writer doubly emphasizes Jesus' power by stating that Jesus both casts out the demon and commands it to never enter the boy again (Taylor 279).

A description of Jesus exorcising through a single command is also found in the exorcism of the synagogue demoniac. As previously mentioned, Jesus is said to have commanded the demon to "Be quiet and come out of him" (Mark 1:25)! As usual, Jesus does not rely on the use of a magical formula, invocation, or adjuration to exorcise, thus affirming the power of his word (Taylor 81). If the verbal command is not enough to convince the reader of Jesus' power, the Markan author also includes a description of the audience's reaction. Mark 1:27 states: "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). By including the amazement of the audience into his narrative, the Markan author stresses Jesus' authority (Taylor 81).

A third feature of Markan exorcisms is the immediate expulsion of the demons. In the exorcisms of both the synagogue demoniac and the epileptic boy, the demons respond to Jesus' command without fighting back. The order of the text in Mark also

stresses the immediacy of Jesus' command. For instance, in Mark 1:25, the narrator states that Jesus commands the demon to be quiet and leave its host. In verse 26, the demon immediately obeys and is successfully expelled. Similarly, in the exorcism of the epileptic boy, verse 25 of the text relates Jesus' command to the deaf and mute spirit to come out of the boy. By verse 26, the spirit shrieks and leaves the boy. The placement of the demons' obedience in relation to the command, emphasizes Jesus' ability to successfully exorcise. It is also important to notice the lack of retaliation on the part of the demons. While the demons attempt to shout the identity of Jesus when they encounter him (Mark 1:24, 1:34) they do not put up a fight when he commands them to leave. The demons do not use adjurations, invocations, or any other means to ward off their exorcist. They also exit their host without any indication of *where* they have exited to. The physical manifestations of the demons are also fairly common. In both the synagogue exorcism and the exorcism of the epileptic boy, the demons are described as convulsing their victims, throwing them to the ground, causing them to foam at the mouth, and leaving with a loud voice.

The exorcism of the Syrophenician's daughter is found in Mark 7:24-30. It describes the plea of a Gentile woman who finds Jesus and begs him to heal her possessed daughter. 30.:f [(us) 0.595.02 7 0.2 ()] TJ ET 775.02 rreor 50 0 0 T6031 8.480 0 sc q 00.24 0 (

when the woman returns home, she finds her daughter sitting in bed and the demon gone (Mark 7:30). In the exorcism of the Syrophoenician's daughter, Jesus does not address the demon directly. Yet for the gospel writer, Jesus' ability to exorcise even from a great distance, stresses his power and heightens his authority (Taylor 235).

Thus far, this paper has identified three common features of Markan exorcisms. First, Jesus silences the demons who reveal his true identity. Second, Jesus expels the demons with a simple command. Third, the demons respond to Jesus' command without much resistance. Taken together, the Markan author portrays Jesus as a powerful exorcist, one who is markedly different than his contemporaries. The exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac however, presents many exceptions to the standard, Markan pattern. First, the demons identify Jesus as the Son of the Most High God. Yet

result, the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac seems to highlight Jesus' limitations as an exorcist, rather than his power. Although it is impossible to give a definitive answer as to *why* Jesus breaks from his usual pattern, it is possible to claim that for the Markan author, these changes do not detract from Jesus' power. Rather than viewing the Gerasene exorcism as proof of Jesus' limitations, the narrator sets up the story in such a way so that even Jesus' ostensible failures are transformed into acts of power. The following sections will examine these so-called failures in greater detail. Moreover, it will attempt to show the ways in which the author uses them to highlight Jesus' superiority over the demons.

A Failed Attempt at Name Magic: Jesus as "Son of the Most High God"

In Mark 5:7, the narrator describes the shocking encounter between Jesus and the demoniac. Upon seeing his exorcist, the demoniac exclaims: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God" (Mark 5:7a)? The epithet "Son of the Most High God"

them as having a special relationship with God (Twelftree 62). It is unclear then, whether the demons were truly aware of Jesus' divine origin or if they simply recognized him as chosen by God. The demons' later attempt to adjure Jesus by the name of God (v.7), also casts doubt on the belief that they were aware of his identity. A more sinister explanation of the demons' outcry was that it was not a Messianic confession, but an aggressive attempt to repel their exorcist through the use of name

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By using his ring to bind and coerce them, King Solomon effectively derives key information about the demons. However, it is only *after* he learns their names that he is able to influence their behaviour and put them to work in the Temple of God (Testament of Solomon 5:12).

Names were especially important for exorcists and miracle workers, as they were believed to have secret identities which were revealed to them by a divine patron (Ascough 25). If an evil spirit gained knowledge of this name, it would almost certainly grant them control over the exorcist. Conversely, if the exorcist was powerful enough, they too could force a demon to reveal its name, thus giving them complete control over the spirit (Remus 24).

When one considers the power of a name in the ancient world, it seems unlikely that the Gerasene demons were simply making a Messianic confession. Instead, their exclamation suggests an aggressive attempt to use name magic on their exorcist. Thus, by proclaiming Jesus' true identity, the demons "might be seen as warding off his power, countering it with the power inherent in knowing his name" (Remus 25). The inclusion of this detail in the narrative would have been both shocking and embarrassing for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that the demons have knowledge of Jesus' true identity, thus giving them a clear advantage. Moreover, Jesus does not even try to silence them. As previously stated, Jesus' typical pattern has been to rebuke and silence the demons who attempt to reveal his identity. The immediate question therefore, becomes: is Jesus simply unwilling or *unable* to defend himself?

Taken at face value, verse 7 of the narrative suggests that Jesus is the weaker force. Not only has he fallen prey to the demons' magic, but he seems unable (or unwilling) to do anything about it. A closer examination of the text however, reveals the way in which the Markan author uses this detail to highlight rather than diminish, Jesus' authority. In verse 6 of the text, the author states that the demons see Jesus from a

distance and run towards him. When they are in close proximity, they immediately fall at his feet. The Greek word used in this verse is *προσκύπτω* and “denotes prostrating oneself before a person to whom reverence or worship is due, even kissing his feet or the hem of his garment” (Edwards 156). By including such a blatant act of submission in verse 6, the Markan author seems to lessen the impact of the demons’ name magic in verse 7. In including this detail in the narrative, Jesus’ authority is established right at the outset (Pesch 357).

If describing the demons’ prostration were not enough, the narrator also includes the phrase, “*τί με ἐπιζητεῖτε*”. In English, this phrase can be translated in one of two ways, either as: “What have you to do with me...” or “Why do you interfere with me” (Lane 183)? As previously mentioned, the epithet is reminiscent of 1 Kings and was used to hold someone off at a distance (Pesch 357). The demons’ exclamations are “entirely defensive; sensing the identity of a dangerous opponent, the unclean raises its voice to defend itself against him” (Lane 182-183). By including this detail alongside the demons’ identification of Jesus, the author ensures that Jesus is still depicted as being in control. Finally, the absence of Jesus’ reaction also seems to highlight his authority. After the demons attempt to use name magic, there is no indication that it has worked. There is no description of Jesus being bound or rebuking the demons for their actions. In fact, the lack of a reaction from Jesus only seems to emphasize just how unaffected and unfazed he is. By verse 9, it is completely apparent that the name magic has failed. Ultimately, it is the demons, and not the “Son of the Most High God” who succumbs to name magic (Pesch 357).

An Ironic Invocation: The Demons Adjure Jesus by God

After identifying Jesus' true identity, the demons follow up their name magic with an adjuration: "I adjure you by God, do not torment me" (Mark 5:7)! In the ancient world, exorcists used adjurations in order to "frighten and coax and entice the demons from their victims" (Wright 97). By invoking the name of a more powerful being or deity, the individual could vicariously gain power over someone else. In other words, to adjure someone was to bind or curse them, and subsequently control their behaviour (Twelftree 61).

Adjurations and invocations were a common feature of Jewish religious life. They often took the form of solemn oaths and can be found in various places in the Old Testament. For example, in 1Kings 22:16 (LXX 3 Kings 22:16), King Ahab adjures the prophet Micaiah to tell the truth regarding a prophecy he received from God. Jesus himself is subject to an adjuration when the religious leaders command him to reveal his identity: "And the high priest said to him, 'I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God'" (Matthew 26:63). Although this verse is from the New Testament, the high priest's adjuration is a reference to Leviticus 5:1 which commands that a witness must testify to the truth when they are publicly adjured.

There are also extra-biblical documents which affirm the power of adjurations. Documents found in Qumran contain lists of apotropaic hymns, prayers, and incantations. They often include a "direct address to demons asking for their identity, formulae of adjurations, invocations in the name of God (including frequent use of the

Interestingly, Eleazar does not use an adjuration to directly exorcise. He does not use it to

His narrative demonstrates how adjurations were used to control a demon's behaviour and more importantly, the limitations of their power. He writes:

...everyone knows about the Syrian from Palestine, the adept in it, how many he takes in hand who fall down in the light of the moon and roll their eyes and fill their mouths with foam; nevertheless, he restores them to health and sends them away normal in mind...When he stands beside them as they lie there and asks: 'Whence came you into his body?' the patient himself is silent, but the spirit answers...telling how and whence he entered into the man; whereupon, by adjuring the spirit and if it does not obey, threatening him, he drives him out (Twelftree 46).

The Syrian exorcist's adjuration is consistent with the techniques found in the Qumranic scrolls and Greek Magical Papyri. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in the text, it is likely that the adjuration appealed to the name of a higher power, as this was usually the standard practice. The text also implies that the adjuration is used to control the demon's behaviour, as the spirit has the option to either obey or disobey. If they obey, the exorcism is successful; if they do not, the exorcist must resort to alternative methods such as the use of threats. Yet the very fact that the spirit may resist an adjuration suggests that this technique is not always successful. Ironically, in the Gerasene exorcism, it is the demons (and not the exorcist) who discover the limits of this otherwise powerful technique.

Thus far, this essay has established that adjurations were used to bind, control, or influence other beings. They were often used in conjunction with the invocation of a

are they aware of Jesus' identity (v.7a), but they are audacious enough to try and bind him with a powerful exorcism technique.

If the adjuration were not strange enough, the demons attempt to bolster its power by invoking the name of God (ὁ). There is an obvious sense of irony in the demons' words, as they attempt to bind the very person that they have just identified as the "Son of the Most High God". However, their invocation also highlights their strength and resilience, as they employ the most potent name available to them (Gundry 250). Jewish readers would have immediately grasped the significance of this plea as,

the name of God was (and to this day still is) deemed to be so unutterably holy that pious scribes omitted the necessary vowel markings...as a reminder not to pronounce the word as it was written (Knowles 33).

That being said, one could argue that even the Jewish people did not have access to the true name of God. In Exodus 3:13, Moses asks God to reveal his name. Yet the answer he receives is not necessarily a full admission of the divine name, nor does it mean that Moses has gained any advantage or power. Rather,

the name that God pronounces gives nothing away until God chooses to define it further. It is its own guarantee: 'I am'. Each of God's answers to Moses makes clear that the nature, the identity, and the 'name' of God are self-authenticating, not subject to limitation or control by those who call upon it, despite Moses' fervent wish to do just that

In other words, even if God did reveal his true name to Moses and by extension, to the Jewish people, it is still "beyond human manipulation or control" (Knowles 34).

Knowing this, it is unclear whether the demons use the *actual* name of God in their invocation or if they are simply using a well-known formula. Their adjuration is also similar to the

them. The Greek word that is used here is also found in Revelation 20:10, which speaks of the final judgment and torment of the devil. The demons' plea therefore, may have eschatological connections. D.E. Nineham supports this position and argues that: "The demon realizes that with the coming of Jesus the eschatological event has begun, and begs Jesus to spare him the corresponding punishment" (Nineham 153). This stance is also supported by the Matthean pericope, in which the demons exclaim: "Have you come here to torment us before the time" (Matthew 8:29)? Their proclamation alludes to an appointed period of judgment, and their attempt to avoid torment until it comes to pass (Donahue and Harington, 165).

detail in the Markan narrative, as it would put Jesus on the same level as other, weaker exorcists.

In the first century, exorcists were considered especially powerful if they could cast out demons through “their own personal force which was thought to be respected and feared by the demons” (Twelftree 50). There are several accounts of Jewish exorcists who employ their “personal force” to successfully drive out demons. In the pseudepigraphal book of Jubilees, Noah pleads with God to take action against the demons who lead his sons astray. He asks for protection from the evil spirits by praying:

...And as for these spirits which are now alive, imprison them and hold them

The prominent rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, is another example of an exorcist who drove away demons solely through the use of prayer and his own personal force (Twelftree 50). He lived in Galilee during the first century and was a pupil of the famous Rabbi, Johanan ben Zakkai (Twelftree 50). Hanina ben Dosa was known for his wisdom, piety, and miracle working. His prayers were so powerful that they were believed to heal the sick and even produce rainfall. On one occasion, his prayer is even used as an apotropaic device against an evil spirit. According to the narrative, Hanina ben Dosa is walking outside when he suddenly encounters Agrath, the Queen of Demons. Agrath threatens the miracle worker and tells him: "Had they not made an announcement concerning you in heaven, 'Take heed of Hanina and his learning', I would have put you in danger" (Twelftree 50). Unfazed by the demon's

Considering that Jesus was supposed to be more powerful than the average exorcist, it is difficult to understand why the narrator would include a detail that would threaten his authority as an exorcist. R.T. France suggests that Jesus' identification of Legion was never meant as an exorcism formula (France 229).

that the demoniac was possessed by a great number of spirits, who were perhaps controlled by one main host (Derrett 288).

The sheer strength of the demonic army is highlighted when one examines the pronouns in the text. In the beginning of the narrative (v.1-8), the author refers to the unclean spirit in the singular and uses pronouns such as "I" (v. 7), "he" (v.7), and "him"

unlikely that Jesus would turn his attention to the possessed man rather than the opponent who is actively trying to harm him. Furthermore, verse 7 makes it abundantly clear that it is the demon, and not the demoniac, who addresses Jesus. It would be odd therefore, if Jesus responded to the possessed man rather than the demons who are presently speaking to him.

A second interpretation suggests that the demons do not actually give up their name, but are actively trying to evade Jesus' question. Rather than give up the source of their power, the demons offer Jesus their title rather than their true name (Lane 185). The title may have functioned as a threat and a blatant attempt to ward off their exorcist (Derrett 288). By revealing that they are many, the demons seem to boast about their numbers and strength, perhaps as a way to warn Jesus that he may not be able to cast them out (Derrett 288). The demons' statement that "we are many", supports the idea that "Legion" is at least a partial threat. Up till now, the demons have consistently tried to repel Jesus through any means possible, whether through name magic, an adjuration, or an invocation of God. Therefore, it is conceivable that they would use their numbers as a last-ditch effort to prevent expulsion. Yet to say that the demons do not reveal *anything* about their name would be unconvincing, as they follow up their statement by pleading not to be sent out of the country. Regardless of whether or not they have revealed their true name, the demons' groveling insinuates that they have indeed offered up crucial information.

While it is impossible to know for sure, this essay favours both the "threat" and "truth" interpretations.

serves no other purpose other than to perhaps showcase their strength and ward off the exorcist. However, by verse 10, the demons beg Jesus to not be sent out of the area. Indeed, “the adverbial *%## , ‘much urgently’, exalts the figure of Jesus by portraying the demoniac as reduced from bold adjuration to groveling supplication (Gundry 251). The demons’ desperate supplication insinuates that the name magic of verse 9 is effective. Jesus has successfully forced the demons to reveal their name (albeit, with a threat) and is now ready to expel them.

At first glance, Jesus’ use of name magic is both puzzling and embarrassing. Since ancient exorcists were deemed powerful if they did not resort to mechanical formulas, Jesus’ use of a common exorcistic technique would have been interpreted as a sign of weakness. However, the Markan author attempts to reconcile this uncomfortable detail by simultaneously describing the demons’ subservience to Jesus. Up until this point, Jesus has successfully resisted the demons’ name magic, adjuration, and an invocation of God. Now, he is able to turn the tables on his opponents by demanding that they reveal their name. Indeed, “the demons have to submit to him, even to the extent of giving him the information which will lead to their expulsion” (Hooker 143). By begging Jesus not to send them out of the area, the demons resign themselves to their defeat and turn their attention to negotiating the terms of their expulsion (Gundry 251). Even though the author includes Jesus’ use of name magic, “he immediately lets it be followed by the plea for lenience, which naturally is placed on the lips of the inferior power, i.e. the demon” (Pesch 363). Jesus’ use of name magic can also be overlooked when one considers the sheer number of demons he has to exorcise, “and therefore why

the sake of making it more exciting. In fact, this essay has shown that in most cases, Markan exorcisms occur relatively quickly and without much fuss. In the Gerasene exorcism however, the narrator seems to challenge the validity of Jesus's authority, only to reaffirm it by the end of the narrative. By

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