

# Demon-Possession and Exorcism in The New Testament

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Since the epochal work of D. F. Strauss on the mythical nature of the miracle stories in the Gospels<sup>1</sup>, Christian scholarship has been distinctly nervous about making too much of the miracles attributed to Jesus.<sup>2</sup> The healing miracles were generally less awkward to handle: few would dispute that individuals had experienced healing through Jesus' ministry. But the understanding of at least some of these healings as *exorcisms*—that is, as the expulsion of demons or unclean spirits—has continued to pose problems for those who want to hold a properly scientific view of the world and of illness. Rudolf Bultmann's comment is often quoted:

It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits.<sup>3</sup>

The open letter by Don Cupitt and Prof. G. W. H. Lampe to the archbishops, the bishops, and the members of the General Synod of the Church of England in May 1975, is in the same vein.<sup>4</sup>

In view of such disavowals, what should Christians, who want to be true both to the truth of the New Testament and to the truth of modern science, make of the exorcism narratives in the New Testament? Do they belong to a primitive, pre-scientific understanding of illness which can no longer be entertained without denying and disowning basic medical theory and practice? Or do they express a world-view which is still in essence valid, and an important corrective to a 'modern scientific world-view' simplistically conceived? Or what?

We will look first at the basic data in the New Testament and attempt to evaluate the historicity of the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus as an exorcist. Secondly, we will try to answer the question: How did Jesus and the first Christians understand 'demon-possession'? Thirdly, we will explore the question: What significance was attributed to exorcism by Jesus and the New Testament writers?

## 1 Jesus the exorcist

There can be no doubt that Jesus had the reputation of a successful exorcist. Of the thirteen healing stories in Mark's Gospel, the largest single category is that of exorcisms, of which there are four: Mark 1: 21-8, the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue at Capernaum; 5:1-20, the demoniac (Matthew says two men) with a legion of unclean spirits among the tombs in Gerasa; 7:24-30, the daughter of the Syrophenician woman possessed by an unclean spirit or demon; 9:14-29, the boy with the dumb spirit, often called the epileptic boy. Matthew and Luke use the same stories (Matthew omitting the first and Luke the third). They also mention Jesus casting a demon out of a dumb man (a dumb demon) in Matthew 12:22f and Luke 11:14. In addition, we may note the summary references to Jesus' exorcistic ministry in Mark 1:32-4, 39, 3:11; Luke 7:21 and 13:32. Jesus' reputation as an exorcist is therefore clear.

However, we must go on to ask whether this reputation was well founded. We should not avoid this question, because where a characteristic trait of Jesus' ministry can be paralleled in the wider milieu of his time, many modern scholars become less willing to recognize its historicity<sup>5</sup>—the reason being that ear-catching stories and popular sayings tend to gather round a famous figure. So, in a context where power over demons was regarded as a mark of spiritual authority, the argument would run, it would not be surprising that the early church should seek to portray Jesus as an exorcist, even if he never once attempted to 'cast out a demon'.

The fact is that belief in demon-possession and of relief through exorcism was widespread in the ancient world. For example, the popular tale of Tobit, which would have been familiar to Jesus and his contemporaries,<sup>6</sup> relates the expulsion of a demon from Tobias's bride (Tobit 6-8). In the Genesis Apocryphon, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Abraham exorcises Pharaoh through prayer and the laying on of hands (IQGA 20). Josephus, the Jewish historian of the second half of the first century AD, relates how he saw a Jew, Eleazar, casting out a demon before the Emperor Vespasian (*Antiquities* 8:45-9). Beyond these we need simply mention the magical papyri which contain traditional incantations, spells and potions for controlling demons and which no doubt reflect beliefs and practices current at the time of Jesus and the Evangelists. We are not surprised when this broader picture is specifically confirmed by the New Testament itself: Matthew 12:27/Luke 11:19 alludes to Jewish exorcists; Mark 9:38f tells of an exorcist who used Jesus' name (a practice to which Jesus apparently did not object); and Acts 19:13-19 relates the fascinating account of the itinerant Jewish exorcists, the seven sons of a Jewish high-priest named Sceva. For the first Christians to present Jesus as an exorcist, therefore, would have raised no eyebrows among his

hearers. The exorcist, not least the Jewish exorcist, was a familiar figure in the ancient world.

Moreover, the actual exorcism stories themselves can be readily paralleled at several points in their form and content. Consider, for example, three points:

a) The unclean spirit addresses Jesus: Mark 1:24, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God'; 5:7, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.' That the demon speaks in such cases was well known, as Lucian of Samosata (second century AD) shows: 'The patient himself is silent, but the spirit answers in Greek or in a language of whatever foreign country he comes from.' (*Lover of Lies* 16; cf. Acts 19:15, 'Jesus I know and Paul I know; but who are you?'; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 3:38, 4:20)<sup>7</sup>

b) Jesus addresses the unclean spirit: Mark 1:25, 'Be silent, and come out of him'; 5:9, 'What is your name?'; 9:25, 'You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.' The command, 'Come out (of him)', is again common in other exorcism formulae (cf. Philostratus, *Life* 4:20; Lucian, *Lies* 11, 16; PGM IV:3013).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the phrase 'I command you' is familiar in magical incantations seeking to control demons and gods (e.g. PGM I:253,324; II:43-55; IV:3080; VII:331; XII:171), and the phrase 'Never enter him again' can be paralleled in Josephus, *Antiquities* 8:47 and Philostratus, *Life* 4:20. So, too, examples of an exorcist's request for the name of the demon as a way of gaining control over the demon can also be cited (PGM I:162; IV:3037).<sup>9</sup>

c) In Mark 5 we have the awkward episode in which the demons are given leave to go into a herd of pigs, who then rush down the slope into the lake and drown (5:10-13). This might have been understood as providing confirmation that the demons had left the man, a proof of cure effected—as in Josephus where the cure is proved by the demon disturbing a bowl of water (*Antiquities* 8:48), or in Philostratus when a statue is knocked over (*Life* 4:20).<sup>10</sup> But more likely it would be seen in the light of the ancient idea that in exorcism it was necessary to make the spirit pass from the person into some object (a pebble, a piece of wood) which could then be thrown away.<sup>11</sup>

At each of these points it would be possible to argue one of two ways. Either these elements appear in the Gospel exorcisms simply because that is the way a story of exorcism would be told; that is, they cannot be traced back to Jesus' own ministry with any confidence. Or, Jesus was recognized as an exorcist simply because such features occurred in his ministry: individuals reacted in the ways that demoniacs generally reacted before a superior power, and Jesus exercised authority as one conscious of being a bearer of such a superior power. In other words, Jesus encountered several people

who manifested the recognized symptoms of demon-possession and acted towards them accordingly.

All this means that if we use the normal techniques of historical and form-criticism, the evidence so far reviewed does not point to any clear conclusion as regards the historicity or otherwise of the exorcism stories in the Gospels. However, our review of the evidence so far has been only partial and when we complete it the picture becomes clearer. Consider the following points:

a) The evidence that Jesus was an exorcist is not confined to the New Testament. In particular, the memory of Jesus' success in this field seems to be preserved by the rabbis in a tradition which goes back to the earlier period during which such traditions were gathered and codified (AD 70-200):

Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve. Forty days previously the herald had cried, 'He is being led out for stoning, because *he has practised sorcery* and led Israel astray and enticed them into apostasy.' (*Sanhedrin* 43a, our italics.)

This is probably an echo of the charge laid against Jesus by the Pharisees preserved in Mark 3:22, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul and by the prince of demons he casts out demons.' These two very different sources provide mutual confirmation that the Pharisees and their heirs were not able to dispute the success of Jesus' power where demons or evil spirits were concerned. All they could do was to cast doubt on the source of that power.<sup>12</sup> The tradition of Jesus' exorcistic prowess must therefore have been securely grounded in historical reminiscence and be of unquestionable authenticity.

b) The use of Jesus' name in exorcisms by others testifies to the fact that Jesus was famous as a very successful exorcist. Not only his own disciples used his name with great effect both before and after Easter (Luke 10:17; Acts 16:18), but others evidently sought to harness the same power by evoking Jesus' name in the same way (Mark 9:38; Acts 19:13). The lasting fame of Jesus as a powerful exorcist is attested by the occurrences of his name in the incantations preserved in the magical papyri (PGM IV:1233, 3020).<sup>13</sup> We will not be misled if we conclude that the power attributed to Jesus' name in exorcism reflects the considerable success of Jesus' own ministry of exorcism.

c) We have not only exorcism stories but exorcism *sayings* in the Gospels: that is, sayings of Jesus where he evidently refers to his own exorcisms. Several of these have been gathered together by Mark and Q (the other source of Matthew and Luke).

i) Mark 3:22-6, Jesus' reply to the Beelzebul charge (parallel in Q, Matthew 12:24-6/Luke 11:15-18), 'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. . . . And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.'

ii) Matthew 12:27f/Luke 11:19f, the Spirit or finger of God saying: 'If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.'

iii) Mark 3:27, the strong man saying (Matthew 12:29 follows Mark; Luke 11:21f probably preserves the Q version): 'No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house.'

iv) Mark 3:28f, the blasphemy saying (Luke 12:10 preserves the Q parallel in a different context, while Matthew 12:31-2 has joined both versions into a composite saying): 'Truly I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.'

Few today would deny that all these sayings go back to Jesus. Moreover, all seem to derive from one or more situations where Jesus' exorcisms had stirred up controversy. As Jesus' response to accusations made against him, they provide an invaluable insight into Jesus' own understanding of his ministry and of the significance of his exorcisms—as we shall see below (3). For the moment we need simply note that since such sayings can be traced back to Jesus himself, they provide strong confirmation that, whatever else he was, Jesus was a successful exorcist.

d) Had the picture of Jesus as exorcist been entirely the creation of the early church, we would have expected the form of the exorcism stories to confirm even more closely than they do to contemporary parallels. For example, there is no report of Jesus using physical aids, as in Tobit (burning the heart and liver of a fish), or Josephus (the smell of a root), or the magical papyri (use of amulets). He does not even pray, as does Hanina ben Dosa (*Berakhoth* 34b),<sup>14</sup> or lay his hands on the demoniac, as in the Genesis Apocryphon. Perhaps most striking of all, he does not invoke any authority or power source. The use of a powerful name was very typical in exorcism,<sup>15</sup> and the formula, 'I adjure you by . . .', is very common in the later magical papyri (e.g. PGM IV). Had the early church been illustrating a saying like Matthew 12:28, quoted above (cii), we might have expected them to depict Jesus as saying something like, 'I adjure or command you by the Spirit of God . . .' And where Jesus' prayer habit was so important, as in Luke, we might have expected Jesus to be depicted as praying before tackling the demon. What we do find is Jesus saying 'I command you' (Mark 9:25), without any invocation of some other source of power and authority. This is wholly in accord with Jesus' distinctive style of teaching elsewhere ('But I say to you'; 'Amen, I say to you').<sup>16</sup> It is difficult, therefore, to avoid the conclusion that the manner of exorcism attributed to Jesus in the Gospel narratives is at the very least a clear echo of Jesus' own style, and that the stories in large part embody well-remembered recollections

of Jesus' own highly successful ministry as an exorcist.

To sum up. It would be flying in the face of the evidence and a grave abuse of the historical critical method to dispute the essential historicity of the Gospel narratives which depict Jesus as a successful exorcist. Jesus was remembered as one who cast out demons with authority during his ministry—a memory preserved both within and without Christian tradition. Indeed, his reputation was such that his name was frequently evoked by would-be exorcists both after and even during his ministry. With this conclusion sufficiently firmly grounded, we can move on to our next question.

## **2 The ancient understanding of demon-possession**

What did the Evangelists mean when they described someone as 'having an unclean spirit'? What or whom did Jesus and the first Christians believe they were encountering when they exorcised? What did they understand by demon-possession?

Were we to answer these questions in terms of popular Greek belief of the time, we might respond that the demon

is a being, often thought of as a spirit of the dead, endowed with supernatural powers, capricious and incalculable, present in unusual places at particular times and at work in terrifying events in nature and human life, but placated, controlled or at least held off by magical means.<sup>17</sup>

Such a concept reflects the established Greek use of 'demon' (*daimōn*) in the broader sense of 'divine power' or 'divine being',<sup>18</sup> and the typical Greek understanding of the divine and of life after death.

However, the equivalent Jewish thought spoke of 'angels' and 'spirits' rather than of 'demons'—angels being understood as messengers of God,<sup>19</sup> who when they appeared on earth appeared in human form (e.g. Genesis 18-19; Daniel 10:18), and 'spirits' serving as an overlapping concept (cf. Hebrews 1:14) denoting particularly the mysterious power of inspiration (particularly 1 Kings 22:19-23). More important, Jewish faith was wholly controlled by its monotheism, the conviction that Yahweh, the one God, was supreme over and also determined all other spiritual powers. Thus the gods of the heathen were probably assimilated to Jewish monotheism as 'sons of God', 'holy ones', 'the host of heaven', and depicted simply as the courtly retinue that enhances the unique majesty of Yahweh (e.g. Deuteronomy 33:2; Nehemiah 9:6; Job 38:7; Psalms 89:5-8, 148:2). The Satan was simply one of these, who by divine permission could tempt Job (Job 1-2). Even spirits designated as 'evil spirits' were simply emissaries of Yahweh (Judges 9:23; 1 Samuel 16:14-16). The point is that both angels and spirits were not in any real sense independent of Yahweh. It might even be said that they were simply ways of speaking of and conceptualizing the purpose and power of God in particular instances.<sup>20</sup>

In the intertestamental period, Jewish angelology and pneumatology blossomed. We read of angels as messengers, or spirits that control the movements of nature (wind, seasons, stars), or guardian angels of the nations, and so on (e.g. Jubilees 2:2f; 1 Enoch 82:10-20; IQH 1:10f; 2 Enoch 4:1f). Angels are conceived of as an army which will take part in the final war against the wicked (e.g. Testament of Levi 3:3; IQM 15:14). Their leader is presumably one of the archangels: Michael or the Prince of Light (cf. 1 Enoch 10:11; IQS 3:20). Opposed to them are the hostile (fallen) angels or evil spirits (e.g. 1 Enoch 15:8-12, 16:1; Jubilees 12:20; IQM 13:10-12), under the leadership of one variously called Satan, Mastema or Beliar (e.g. Jubilees 1:20, 11:4f; 1 Enoch 54:6; IQS 1:23f).

In all this there are clearly parallels to the Greek concept of 'demon', but the actual overlap is limited. 'Demon' is used primarily as a contemptuous name for the heathen gods of idol worship (Greek translation of Psalm 96:5 and Isaiah 65:3,11; Baruch 4:7; Jubilees 1:11; 1 Enoch 19:1, 99:7). Tobit's story of possession by a named demon (Asmodeus, Tobit 3:8,17) is unique in pre-Christian Jewish literature. And the understanding of possession by demons who are the spirits of the dead is clearly envisaged in our Jewish sources of this period only in Josephus (*Jewish War* VII:185 defines demons as 'the spirits of wicked men which enter the living and kill them unless aid is forthcoming').<sup>21</sup> But overall the more characteristic emphases of Jewish faith are dominant. The hostile angels and evil spirits were created by God (Jubilees 2:2; 2 Enoch 29), are under the control of God (Jubilees 10:7-11; IQS 3:18f), and will finally be destroyed by God (Jubilees 5:1-16; 1 Enoch 6-16).<sup>22</sup>

It is against this background of Jewish thought that the teaching and exorcisms of Jesus and the first Christians is best understood. *Daimonion* is used frequently in the synoptic Gospels, but only occasionally elsewhere. Mark clearly regards it as a translation equivalent for 'unclean spirit' (Mark 6:7,13, 7:25f), and Luke seems deliberately to avoid the word 'demon' in describing the exorcisms of the early church (Acts 5:16, 8:7, 16:16, 19:11-16, cf. 17:18). The idea of demons or unclean spirits as the spirits of the dead is nowhere to be found. Demons are simply servants of Satan, particular manifestations of the evil in the world that is hostile to God (see particularly Revelation 16:13-14). We may note also that the idea of opposing armies of angels is taken up by New Testament writers, most clearly outlined in Revelation 12:7-9 (cf. Matthew 25:41).

Against this broader background several points can be made by way of clarification.

a) We should not assume that these concepts of demons and demon-possession were simplistically naive. For example, there was no particular conceptualization of a demon, as having say an animal or human-like form. On the contrary, the unclean spirits were in-

visible—hence the need of some physical sign to prove the exorcism (above 1c).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, by no means all illnesses were attributed to demons and demon-possession. There were well-known maladies like fever, leprosy and paralysis which it was not thought necessary to attribute directly either to Satan or to demons (Mark 1:29-31,<sup>24</sup> 40-4, 2:1-12; cf. Mark 4:19). There were conditions which could be attributed to Satan, either because the cause was inexplicable or as a particular manifestation of Satan's rule over this age (Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38; cf. Mark 4:15; Matthew 13:39). But the idea of demon-possession was reserved for conditions where the individual seemed to be totally in the grip of an evil power (using his vocal chords, Mark 1:24, 5:7,9; Acts 16:16; convulsing him, Mark 1:26, 9:20-2,26; super-human strength, Mark 5:3-4; Acts 19:16).

b) The absence of any fixed designation indicates that the New Testament writers had no clear conceptualization of particular entities. As we noted above, 'spirit' and 'demon' are more or less interchangeable in the synoptic Gospels, and Paul does not hesitate to use the word 'angel/messenger' when describing the equivalent enterprise of Satan (2 Corinthians 11:14, 12:7). Moreover, it seems to be immaterial whether the evil power possessing an individual is conceived as a single demon or as many demons (Mark 1:23-7, 'an unclean spirit', 'us', 'unclean spirits'; 5:2,8-13, 'an unclean spirit', 'my name . . . we are many', 'he', 'they').<sup>25</sup>

c) The unclean spirits or demons are not thought of as entities independent of Satan. Here Jesus' own words are of particular relevance. To the charge that he cast out demons by the prince of demons, he replied, 'How can Satan cast out Satan?' (Mark 3:22-3; cf. Luke 13:11,16; John 8:44). Evidently, so far as Jesus was concerned, particular instances of possession were simply manifestations of the one power hostile to God (Luke 10:19).<sup>26</sup> Just as Jewish talk of the Wisdom of God or the Word of God or the Spirit of God was simply different ways of speaking of the one God's interaction in and with his creation,<sup>27</sup> so New Testament talk of unclean spirits and demons can readily be understood as ways of speaking of that power of evil in the world hostile to God in its particular manifestations ('the evil one', Matthew 5:37, 6:13, 13:19,38).

A clear conceptuality of demons, therefore, does not emerge from the Gospel evidence, and evidently there was no real concern with 'demons as such'; or to answer the question, 'What are demons?'. The word 'demon' was one of the contemporary ways of describing particular manifestations of evil power which the New Testament writers used, but only one. In particular, in contrast to the more popular Greek thought (above p 215), neither they nor Jesus himself thought of demons as individual spirits of the dead acting on their own capricious impulse. Evil and hostility to God was perceived as much more unified and deliberate, and demons (whether thought of



as a single demon or as many demons) were only one way of understanding or picturing the malicious effects of that single will opposed to God. Jesus and his first disciples were clearly conscious not only of the world as imperfect and flawed, but also of an organized and unified centre of evil manifesting itself both in the partial incapacities of some and in the total domination of others (=demon-possession).

It is worth pausing to consider the theology of Paul at this point. In the undisputed Pauline letters, demons are mentioned in only one passage (1 Corinthians 10:20f; elsewhere only 1 Timothy 4:1): '... what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not wish you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.'

Here Paul takes up the typical Jewish polemic against idolatry, that those who worship idols are actually worshipping demons (see above p 216; similarly Revelation 9:20). Even here, however, it is not finally clear what Paul himself believes, as we may see when we compare his comments earlier in the same section on the same subject (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:4 and 10:19), 1 Corinthians 8:5f: 'Although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—yet for us there is one God, the Father . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ . . .'

Such a formulation inevitably leaves the reader wondering: Does he believe that there actually are many gods and many lords? Or is he simply taking serious account of current beliefs and practices? That is to say, he may simply be acknowledging that since so many gods and so many lords are being worshipped, this is the reality (these beliefs and practices) which Christians must take into account in their own evangelism and worship.

Elsewhere, he seems to prefer to speak of 'principalities and powers' and similar words (e.g. Romans 8:38; 1 Corinthians 15:24; Galatians 4:3,9f; Colossians 1:16), and 'Satan' is referred to regularly.<sup>28</sup> Whether the former are understood as individual beings is again unclear. When Paul goes into any detail about the powers that enslave and corrupt men, the three powers that appear with great frequency are the fearful triumvirate sin (personified singular), law and death (see particularly Romans 7:5-13, 8:2; 1 Corinthians 15:56; 2 Corinthians 3:6f; Galatians 3:22f); we may note in particular the way Paul seems to identify slavery to the elemental spirits with bondage under the law in Galatians 4:1-5,8-10. It is they which in Paul take the place that the unclean spirits fill in the Gospels, as the particular manifestations and instruments of Satan's sustained purpose against the purpose of God.

In short, Paul, like the other New Testament writers, has no doubt that evil stems from a conscious and deliberate rebellion against God, that there is a personal principle of evil (Satan) seeking to thwart the

will of God at every turn (cf. e.g. Mark 1:13; John 13:2,27; Hebrews 2:14; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 12:9). To describe the particular outworkings of that evil power he uses a variety of conceptualities, and it remains unclear whether he conceives of serried ranks of evil beings (fallen angels, demonic spirits) or simply of a single focus of hostility to God of cosmic proportions (that is, not reducible to psychological or sociological neuroses) with many particular manifestations in the lives of individuals and societies. In other words, the way in which the outreach of Satan is conceptualized is not a matter of great importance requiring careful and consistent definition. It is the reality of evil, of human beings enslaved by a power or powers hostile to God (however described), of the purpose of God hindered and countered by antagonistic forces (however conceived)—that is the reality with which Paul deals and to which he offers the answer of the gospel.

### **3 The significance of Jesus' exorcisms**

Here, more than anywhere else in our enquiry, we can move out directly from Jesus' own words.

a) It follows from what was said in part 2 that Jesus saw his exorcisms as *the defeat of Satan*. He was casting out Satan himself (Mark 3:23). He was the one stronger than the strong (Satan) who had overcome Satan and was now plundering his goods (Mark 3:27). His response to the disciples who rejoiced at the demons being subject to them in Jesus' name was, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven' (Luke 10:18). In other words, Jesus saw his exorcisms not so much as cures of some merely physical ailment or mental illness, but as the wresting of particular individuals and personalities from the grip or the dominating influence of Satan. That is to say, Jesus not only saw various maladies as manifestations of the single power of evil (Satan), but he also claimed that release could be won by tackling the malady (whatever the physical manifestation) at its spiritual root and source.

b) Jesus also saw his exorcisms as *effected by the power of the Spirit*. 'It is by the Spirit (or finger) of God that I cast out demons', was his own quite specific claim (Matthew 12:28/Luke 11:20).<sup>29</sup> Hence the warning against blaspheming the Spirit: the beneficial effect of his exorcisms was so self-evidently of God and wrought by his Spirit, that to attribute it to Satan was the worse kind of perversity—deliberately to confuse the Spirit of God with the power of Satan was to turn one's back on God and his forgiveness (Mark 3:29). Not only do these sayings remind us that Jesus actually did heal and liberate people—he spoke and something happened, the sufferer was relieved, the prisoner freed, the evil departed. But we have also Jesus' own explanation for this success—not because he had a 'way' with

neurotics, or was simply a 'strong personality'. Jesus' own testimony is that he experienced these healings as an otherly power; God's own power working through him. The dominion of Satan was being confronted and defeated by the effective power of God, the Spirit of God working in him and through him.

c) Finally, we can say that Jesus saw his exorcisms thus effected as the *manifestation of the final reign of God*. 'Since it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then has come upon you the kingdom of God.' (Matthew 12:28)<sup>30</sup> The binding of the powers of evil was looked for at the end of the age.<sup>31</sup> So when Jesus spoke of having bound the strong man and of despoiling his goods (Mark 3:27; cf. Luke 10:18) his readers would know what he meant: the end of the age is upon you; the characteristics of the final reign of God are already being enacted in my ministry; you are witnessing the power of the age to come already in operation. It was this which in Jesus' own view distanced other Jewish exorcisms from his (cf. Matthew 12:27). His were effected by the power of the Spirit (Matthew 12:28), and, since the Spirit was popularly thought to have been withdrawn till the end of the age,<sup>32</sup> his own anointing by the Spirit and effective ministry as healer and exorcist in the power of the Spirit was proof enough that the end of the age had come (Matthew 11:5, 12:28).<sup>33</sup>

Since the kingdom of God was such a central feature of Jesus' proclamation, as all would agree, this link which Jesus himself maintained between his exorcisms and the kingdom is one which should not be ignored—although it often has been.<sup>34</sup> At the very least it prevents any reduction of the idea of the kingdom to a merely 'spiritual' character or narrowly moral category. The kingdom, the final rule of God, manifested itself in healings and cures which liberated individuals at every level of their being, including not least the physical and mental. Wherever Satan exercised his sway, the proclamation and power of the kingdom was concerned to bring about release and liberation.

If exorcisms were so important for Jesus, we should not ignore a rather puzzling fact on which we have not so far commented—the absence of exorcism from John's Gospel. Why does the Fourth Evangelist disregard Jesus' exorcisms so completely? Two answers to this question are worth considering:

a) One answer could simply be that John selected only outstanding signs out of the many more (John 20:30) available to him. For certainly the signs he does record are all outstanding in one way or another, including the sick man in John 5 (ill for thirty-eight years) and the blind man in John 9 (blind from birth). Moreover, they symbolize aspects of the total significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection in particularly appropriate ways (water into wine, darkness into light, death into life, etc.). Beside them, exorcisms were nothing much out of the ordinary to an audience familiar with wandering exorcists (see

part 1 above), and the symbol of liberation from the power of this world was better illustrated by the raising of a man four days dead than by any exorcism.

b) Another reason may be that John has chosen to make little or nothing of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom, and may even be using a somewhat different concept of the kingdom of God (he uses the word only in John 3:3,5, 18:36). But Jesus, as we have seen, specifically understood his exorcisms as manifestations of the kingdom, the effective power of God's final rule. So it may well be that John chose to view Jesus' whole ministry from an angle which largely precluded his making use of Jesus' exorcisms or of his teaching about them—hence the rather different handling of the charge that Jesus himself was possessed by a demon (7:20ff, 8:48ff, 10:20f; cf. Mark 3:22ff).

Less striking, but also deserving some comment, is the relative silence regarding exorcism in the post-Easter church and its mission. In contrast to the commission given to his disciples when they shared in his pre-Easter mission (Mark 6:7/Matthew 10:1/Luke 9:1), Jesus' final commission makes no mention of exorcism (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-9; John 20:21-3; Acts 1:8).<sup>35</sup> Acts mentions exorcisms of the first Christian missionaries only twice (Acts 8:7, 16:16-18, cf. 19:11-20). And exorcisms are never given specific mention in any of the other New Testament documents—though it is by no means impossible, of course, that they are included in such passages as Romans 15:19, 1 Corinthians 12:9f and Hebrews 2:4.

The reason, if reason is needed, may be complex. For example, the comparative decline in instances of exorcism is matched by a comparative decline in talk of the kingdom. Where Jesus spoke mostly of the kingdom, the first Christian evangelists spoke primarily of Jesus and of his resurrection. Again, if exorcisms were not distanced from magic in the wider Hellenistic world (see above, part 1), perhaps the widening mission of the church practised exorcism only when necessary (cf. Acts 16:18); Luke, for one, certainly seems to be desirous to distance Paul's ministry from magic (Acts 19:11-20).<sup>36</sup> And in general one could say that Paul does not see the Spirit as simply reduplicating the *ministry* of Jesus, but rather as reproducing the *character* and *grace* of Christ, in the Christian community (the body of Christ) and in its gifts or charismata (= manifestations of grace) and love (cf. particularly 1 Corinthians 12-13).<sup>37</sup>

Whatever the reason for this comparative neglect of exorcisms in the post-Easter church, we should avoid two corollaries as mistaken. We should not attempt to play down the importance of exorcism within the ministry of Jesus,<sup>38</sup> particularly when we have such explicit teaching of Jesus himself as to the significance he saw in his exorcisms. Nor should we attempt to drive a wedge between Jesus' exorcistic ministry and the wider ministry of healing both of Jesus himself and of the first Christians. The manifestations of Satan's

authority, of the grip and ill-effects of evil, were not confined to demon-possession, and Paul (and the other New Testament writers) were very conscious of the malignant power of evil that darkened men's minds, enslaved their passions, and corrupted their bodies. The gospel and the Spirit of God are God's most emphatic counter to such evil in all its range and manifestations.

### **Concluding reflections**

a) The New Testament neither contains nor is interested in a fully worked out demonology. When the New Testament talks about demons, its concern is to describe various manifestations of spiritual bondage. Such bondage can be described also as 'having an unclean spirit', or being dominated by Satan, and is essentially of a piece with being 'enslaved by the elemental spirits', being 'blinded by the god of this world', being afflicted by 'an angel/messenger of Satan', or being inspired by 'the spirit of antichrist'. 'Demon-possession' was one way of understanding and representing such bondage, particularly when more disturbing physical manifestations were involved, but it was not the only way.

b) On the other hand the New Testament does give a consistent portrayal of evil as having a unified personal centre, organized on a cosmic (not merely social) scale, and essentially characterized by hostility to the good purpose of God in creation and redemption. Seen from this perspective, the manifestations of this power of evil are very diverse—from the corruption of a cosmos subject to meaninglessness (Romans 8:20), to the particular enticements of sin working through the weakness of the flesh (Romans 7). Within this range, all illness and every defect can be reckoned as a manifestation of the corruption of the cosmos and the mortality of the flesh, and can be attributed directly to Satan (Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38; 2 Corinthians 12:7). And in cases where the evil power dominates an individual completely, he can quite properly be spoken of as possessed—possession by 'an unclean spirit' as in the Gospels being cases in point, though presumably not all cases of possession will display such obvious physical disturbance.

c) Some of the cases of demon-possession in the Gospels can be 'demythologized', at least to some extent. In particular, in the case of Mark 9:14-26 it may well be that we should recognize the signs of epilepsy and recategorize it accordingly. That is to say, Mark 9 is probably a good example of 'pre-scientific' man attributing to demon-possession a malady whose physical mechanism we have since learnt to identify and largely control. But such demythologizing should not go so far as to eliminate the spiritual dimension from that, or indeed from any, illness. Even more important, we should recognize that many maladies are rooted in man's spiritual being. We recognize, after all, that mental disorders can have physical symptoms—that is,

that many physical ailments are rooted in man's mind. As soon, then, as we recognize that man is also spirit as well as body and mind, it becomes equally obvious that physical or mental illness can have spiritual causes. The label 'demon-possession' never was particularly specific (a) above), and if on one side it needs to be more carefully delimited to take account of our fuller knowledge of the working of man's body and man's mind, on the other side it needs to be given more scope to take fuller account of the evil active in the spiritual dimension, which is one aspect of all illness and the source of many particular ailments.

d) It follows that the continuing significance of exorcism should not be bound to a particular conceptuality of demon-possession. Exorcism can be understood in a narrow sense as the treatment for spiritual bondage when conceptualized as demon-possession, or in a broader sense as treatment of disordered humanity on the spiritual dimension appropriate to the disorder. The important point is that treatment of illness must take serious account of the different levels or dimensions of illness, and to be effective may well need to operate at all levels. It is equally foolish to treat a spiritually rooted malady merely as a physical or mental illness, as it is to treat an illness which may be primarily mental as a case of demon-possession.<sup>39</sup> Nor should it be assumed that successful diagnosis of a complex illness and multi-level treatment will inevitably result in a cure. If illness is part of this world's fallenness, life in this world will never be wholly free from it. So long as it is God's will for this age to continue, illness will be an inevitable concomitant.

e) On the other hand, Christians can expect that ministry to a spiritually rooted malady (ministry of exorcism) will be effective on at least some occasions. Where, for example, a condition is the result of some particular bondage (that is by Satan), then one who is empowered by the Spirit of Christ should be able to minister deliverance, as Jesus did. Individual Christians should be open to the possibility of such ministry, and the church should encourage those whom it discerns to have such ministry in its exercise. A healing which extends to the whole man is still a characteristic of God's kingdom. Release of the captives is still a sign of what God wills for his children and for his creation.

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## NOTES

- 1 D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835 ET 1846, reprinted 1892, SCM Press : London 1973).
- 2 In the Quest of the Historical Jesus subsequent scholarship concentrated on Jesus' teaching—the miracle stories offering too many difficulties. See also E. & M.-L. Keller, *Miracles in Dispute: A Continuing Debate* (1968, ET SCM Press : London 1969).
- 3 'New Testament and Mythology', in H. W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth* (ET SPCK : London 1953) p 5. Earlier W. Wrede had used the (in his view) inevitably unhistorical character of a supernatural knowledge possessed by demons (as attested in the Gospel exorcisms) as the starting-point for his very influential thesis, *The Messianic Secret* (1901, ET James Clarke : Cambridge 1971).
- 4 Reprinted in D. Cupitt, *Explorations in Theology 6* (SCM Press : London 1979) pp 50-4.
- 5 The 'criterion of dissimilarity' has been most sharply defined by N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (SCM Press : London 1967): 'The earliest form of a saying we can reach may be regarded as authentic if it can be shown to be dissimilar to characteristic emphases both of ancient Judaism and of the early Church' (p 39).
- 6 Fragments of Hebrew and Aramaic texts of the book have been found at Qumran.
- 7 Apollonius was roughly contemporary with Jesus and the first Christians; Philostratus's *Life* was written at the beginning of the third century. See also O. Bauernfeind, *Die Worte der Dämonen im Markusevangelium* (Stuttgart 1927) pp 13ff; R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (ET Blackwell : Oxford 1963) p 209 n 1; T. A. Burkitt, *Mysterious Revelation* (Cornell University Press : New York 1963) pp 74ff.
- 8 PGM = K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae: die griechischen Zauberpapyri* (Leipzig & Berlin) 3 vols., 1928, 1931, 1942. See A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (ET Hodder & Stoughton : London 1910) pp 254-64 (here pp 256 and 260 n 1); J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (SCM Press : London 1974) especially chap. III.
- 9 Cf. Deissmann, *Light* pp 257 and 261 n 7; E. Klostermann, *Markusevangelium* (Tübingen 1950) p 49; C. Bonner, 'The Technique of Exorcism', *Harvard Theological Review* 36, 1943, pp 44ff.
- 10 Cf. M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, (ET Nicholson & Watson : London 1934) p 89. But in these cases a definite proof is called for or offered. There is nothing of that in Mark 5. If anything the restoration of the demoniac to full health is regarded as proof in itself.
- 11 Count d'Alviella, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of the Conception of God* (ET Williams & Norgate : London 1892) pp 88f; M. P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion* (ET Clarendon Press : Oxford 1949) pp 85f.
- 12 See further J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Allen & Unwin : London 1925) pp 18-47; H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus*, Supplement to *Novum Testamentum IX*, 1965, pp 156-75. Celsus (second half of second century AD) levelled the same charge of sorcery against Jesus (Origen, *Contra Celsum* I:6, cf. I:38).
- 13 See also A. Fridrichsen, *The Problem of Miracle in Primitive Christianity* (ET Augsburg : Minneapolis 1972) p 170 n 29; F. F. Bruce, *Acts* (Tyndale Press : London 1951) p 358.
- 14 See G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Collins : London 1973) p 74
- 15 Mark 9:38; Matt. 7:22; Luke 10:17; Acts 16:18, 19:13; Josephus, *Antiquities* 8:47; Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities* 60; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 30:3; Origen, *Contra Celsum* I:6,25; PGM IV *passim*. See C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (University of Michigan Press : Ann Arbor 1950) pp 171,227f; E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period II* (Bollingen

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Foundation : New York 1953) pp 223f,226.

- 16 See particularly J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (ET SCM Press : London 1971) pp 35f,250-5. Cf. Mark 1:27 (Luke 4:36), 'What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him'. Contrast Hanina ben Dosa whose authority is acknowledged by the demon because she heard a voice from heaven commending him (*Pesaḥim* 112b; Vermes, *Jesus* p 76).
- 17 W. Foerster, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, II p 8.
- 18 Liddell & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 'daimōn'.
- 19 In both Hebrew and Greek the same word means both 'angel' and 'messenger'.
- 20 Cf. G. von Rad; 'The angels of Judaistic angelology are always a naive representation of the omnipresent and omniscient Word and will of Yahweh' (*Theological Dictionary of the NT*, I p 81).
- 21 In 1 Enoch 15:8-12 only the spirits of the giants (offspring of the union in Gen. 6:1-4) are in view.
- 22 See further D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (SCM Press : London 1964) chap. IX; and for rabbinic material see Strack & Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. IV, Exkurs 21.
- 23 Descriptions of demons begin to appear in the second century; see Lucian, *Lies* 16 ('black and smokey in colour'); *Acts of Thomas* 42-6 ('He appears as he may wish'); and particularly *Testament of Solomon* 7, 10, 13, 47, 51, 54, etc.
- 24 Though Luke may attribute the fever to a demon—Jesus 'commands' it (cf. E. Klostermann, *Lukasevangelium*, Tübingen 1929) p 67.
- 25 Cf. Klostermann, *Markus* p 49. Though see also Matt. 12:43-5; Luke 11:24-6.
- 26 Cf. Jeremias, *Theology* pp 93f; B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (SCM Press : London 1979) p 156. Even in the case of the parable of the returning spirit (Luke 11:24-6), it is noticeable that Q (whose order is most probably preserved by Luke) links it with the collection of exorcism sayings whose common theme is the defeat of Satan (Luke 11:14-23).
- 27 J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (SCM Press : London 1980) chaps. V-VII.
- 28 *Satan*—Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 5:5, 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11, 11:14, 12:7; 1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Thess. 2:9; 1 Tim. 1:20, 5:15. *The devil*—Eph. 4:27, 6:11; 1 Tim. 3:6f, 11; 2 Tim. 2:26, 3:3; Tit. 2:3. *The evil one*—Eph. 6:16; 2 Thess. 3:3. *The god of this world*—2 Cor. 4:4. *Beliar*—2 Cor. 6:15. *The prince of the power of the air*—Eph. 2:2.
- 29 On the different versions (Spirit or finger) see J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (SCM Press : London 1975) pp 44-6. At this point the two concepts are virtually synonymous.
- 30 'Spirit of God' and 'kingdom of God' have the places of emphasis in the Greek. But see also p 214 and n 16 above.
- 31 Isa. 24:21f; 1 Enoch 10:4ff, 11ff; IQS 4:18f; cf. 1 Enoch 54:4ff; Rev. 19:20-20:15; Testament of Simeon 6:6; Testament of Levi 18:12.
- 32 See Dunn, *Jesus* p 82 and n81.
- 33 Dunn, *Jesus* pp 47f; Meyer, *Aims* pp 156-8.
- 34 Cf. R. H. Hiers, *The Historical Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (University of Florida : Gainesville 1973) p 60.
- 35 Mark 16:17 belongs to the longer ending of Mark's Gospel, generally accepted as having been added in the second century; cf. the Freer ending added to v14.
- 36 See A. Deissmann, *Bible Studies* (ET T. & T. Clark : Edinburgh 1901) p 323 and n5.
- 37 See further Dunn, *Jesus* pp 319-22.
- 38 As does e.g. K. Grayston, 'Exorcism in the New Testament', *Epworth Review* 2, 1975, pp 90-4.
- 39 A cautionary case in point is the 'Barnsley case', where a man killed his wife after being exorcised (see *The Times*, 26 March 1975, p 4; 27 March 1975, p 6). On this whole area see the very balanced treatment of K. McAll, 'The Ministry of Deliverance', *Expository Times* 86, 1974-75, pp 296-8.