

Jesus and the Psychiatrists

This paper will examine the exorcisms and other miracles of Jesus in the light of modern psychiatric thinking, and in the light of personal experience. It will be shown that that psychiatric models fit the Gospel descriptions only partly. It will also be suggested that pastoral experience sometimes mirrors the New Testament picture of evil personalities which are dispersed by exorcism. These two models are each applied to the text with interesting results.

My approach to the New Testament is usually that of a scholar, but in the area of exorcisms it is likely that my personal background will colour any conclusions reached. Before going into academic Biblical studies, I studied medicine for four years. My main interest was in psychiatry which resulted in the neglect of other areas, so I never completed my training. My thinking has therefore been shaped by modern psychiatric theory and practice. However, certain experiences I had while I was a medical student, and subsequently when I was a Baptist Minister, have also shaped my thinking in a completely different way.

Most psychiatrists do not accept the reality of demons or exorcism. They would regard the exorcisms of Jesus as old-world descriptions of psychiatric problems. Some of the healings described in the Gospels might also be regarded as the correction of hysterical disorders. This does minimise the wonder of these healings, because hysterical disorders are among the most difficult to treat, but it does help to describe the healings in terms which fit into a 20th century world view.

The idea that Jesus was merely using first century language when he spoke about demons may explain the wide variety of disorders which are blamed on demons in the gospels. Jesus cured someone who was deaf and dumb, when this was supposedly caused by an evil spirit (Mk.9.25 & par). He also cured the paralysed and the blind etc., though these ailments were not necessarily attributed to evil spirits.

The idea that these exorcisms were actually correction of hysterical disorders is also plausible. Hysteria is a condition where a person's subconscious tells the conscious brain that they have some kind of disability, such as blindness or paralysis. Using hypnosis one can find out why the subconscious would want the person to be blind or paralysed, correct the fallacy or calm the fears, and tell the person that they can see or walk again. During my medical training I saw someone who was paralysed and someone who was blind, cured instantly by this technique. Although such treatment often takes many sessions to get to the bottom of the problem, the very first session

looks quite miraculous. When a blind person wakes up and can see again, or when a paralysed person is able to walk back to his room, it is very startling. It might be assumed that Jesus healed people in a similar way.

Jesus also cast demons out of people who were "possessed" - who suffered seizures, or were uncontrollably violent, or who heard voices telling them about Jesus and retribution. Similar symptoms are cured every day on psychiatric wards by the use of drugs rather than by exorcism. Perhaps 'cure' is the wrong term, because the drugs control the symptoms rather than remove their origin, but this at least indicates that these problems can be due to an illness and not a demon.

The majority of psychiatric disorders get better by themselves, with time. One consultant said to my class: "Medicine is a very hopeful profession, because most of your patients will get better whatever you do." It is now recognised that the placebo effect of drugs (that is, the curative effect which comes from the simple expectation that a drug will do you good) accounts for about 20% of the efficacy of any drug, and often much more. I have seen people cured of dermatitis and hallucinations by injections of sterilized water. The placebo effect is particularly important in psychiatry and it is often difficult to decide whether someone has been cured by a drug or by the person's own expectation of recovery.

'Talking treatments' such as psychoanalysis, cognitive therapy, group therapy and any number of others are also effective for some disorders, especially neuroses. Research suggests that the actual method of treatment matters very little in many cases of neurosis. So long as you treat the patient seriously and with some empathy, they are just as likely to get better, whatever treatment is used.

Given all this, a psychiatrist might make two suggestions concerning Jesus' miracles. First, some of the seemingly physical miracles, even such as curing paralysis or blindness, may in fact be psychological cures. Second, the exorcisms should perhaps be reinterpreted as dealing with psychiatric disorders. However, it will be shown that both of these suggestions have only limited value as explanations of what is described in the Gospels.

The first suggestion, that physical miracles may in fact be psychological, cannot be carried very far. Hysterical illness is actually fairly rare, and the idea that Jesus was able to identify the few rare cases of hysteria and heal them, while ignoring all those with physical disabilities and illnesses is untenable. Also, if we accept any of the details in the gospels about the people whom Jesus cured, hysterical illness is ruled out in almost all cases.

Hysterical illness should not be confused with the term 'hysteria' when used in a non-medical context. Hysteria, in medical contexts, means a subconscious wish which is often caused by the person's inability to face up to something they have to do. Someone who has hysterical paralysis may be fearful of what they may have to do if they were able to walk. They may be afraid of what they face at work, or they may be afraid to go out of their house, or they may be afraid of life in general. Someone who is hysterically blind may have witnessed something horrific which they cannot now recall and which they are subconsciously afraid to witness again. Hysterical fits may mimic epilepsy in all outward appearances, but an electroencephalograph will show none of the characteristic spikes of electrical brain activity which cause normal fits.

When treating an hysterical disorder one must not only convince the person that their disability will get better. One must also find the cause of the disability and deal with that. A psychiatrist would use hypnosis or drug induced relaxation to bring about abreaction, where the repressed emotion or memory is released and dealt with appropriately. This is often a long process involving weeks or months of treatment. Much of the time is spent finding out where the cause lies, but even if this is found very quickly the person still needs time to face their fears or memories and come to terms with them. The first release from these symptoms may be dramatic and seeming miraculous, but if the underlying cause is not dealt with the same disability will reappear, or a completely different set of symptoms may take over. Hysterical symptoms may be 'cured' by suggestion through hypnosis or other therapy, but the underlying problem must also be treated, and this is usually a lengthy process.

When one tries to describe the Gospel miracles in terms of hysterical illness, there are sometimes considerable problems. For example, the man born blind could not have been hysterically blind, because hysteria needs a triggering event and a complex level of thinking which is not possible in a young baby. Also, the two cases of healing at a distance (or three if Jn.4.46-54 is not a version of Mt.8.5-13//Lk.7.1-10) could not have been cases of hysteria cured by suggestion, because the afflicted person would not know that they were supposed to recover. Even if they knew that Jesus was being consulted, they would not know when. Matthew in particular seems to refute this idea because he records in both cases that the person was healed "at the very time" that Jesus was consulted (Mt.8.13; 15.28). ¹.

¹ It is unlikely that Matthew was concerned to avoid the conclusion that an hysterical disorder was being healed. It is much more likely that he is following the literary model of the well known story of Jose ben Hinina (c 80 BCE) who healed someone when he prayed for them at a distance. In bBer.34b and yBer.9d it is recorded that when he prayed

Other miracles which could not be the result of curing hysterical disorders include the healings of lepers. The disfigurements of leprosy, which was the primary horrifying symptom, could not be produced by hysterical illness, and nor could it be cured immediately by suggestion. Similarly the man with a shrivelled hand and the high priest's servant who lost an ear, could not be cured by treatment for hysterical disorders.

On closer inspection, it is difficult to regard many, if any, of Jesus' healings as the correction of an hysterical condition. He does not do anything which might be useful for helping someone with an hysterical disorder, except provide the expectation that they would be healed. Even if some of them did have an hysterical disorder, the expectation of healing could only, at the best, result in a temporary relief followed by quick relapse. If Jesus' healings had been followed by a rapid relapse, the news would quickly spread that these miracles were only a temporary relief from symptoms. A miracle worker whose cures last only a few hours or days would not be revered for long.

The only healing by Jesus which has some definite similarities to the healing of an hysterical disorder is that of the paralysed man who was let down through the roof. Jesus told this man, before he healed him, that his sins were forgiven. It is possible that this man had hysterical paralysis which had been caused by a severe fear of doing further evil after committing a crime, or something which he perceived to be evil. He felt subconsciously that he could not be trusted not to commit the same thing again, and his subconscious found paralysis easier to cope with than the fear that he would be free to act again in the same way. Perhaps, as well as telling him that his sins were forgiven, Jesus also assured this man that he would not fall into the same sin again. If the man believed this sufficiently, this could result in the ending of his hysterical symptoms, and if he continued to believe it, the recovery might even be permanent. ²

However, there are many assumptions underlying this understanding of the miracle, and it is only one of the miracles which are attributed to Jesus.

The second suggestion which arises from a psychiatric view of the Gospels regards exorcism. This suggestion may prove to be more fruitful because it certainly appears to bring some modern understanding into very strange texts. The words "psychosis" and

"that was the hour that the fever left him". See G Vermes *Jesus the Jew* (Collins, London 1973) p76.

² It is also possible that this could be regarded by the gospel writers as another exorcism. The Prayer of Nabonidus (4QPrNab or 4QsNab) describes an exorcism where "an exorcist pardoned my sins".

"hallucination" are far more acceptable words today than "demon possession" and "evil spirits".

There are two main indications in the New Testament that 'demons' may simply be old-world terminology for madness and other little-understood illnesses. First, there is sometimes a link made between demons and madness, though this is mainly used as a taunt. The Jews in John say that Jesus has a demon and is mad, when Jesus says that he is older than Abraham and when he says other things which appear to them to be impossible (Jn.7.20; 8.48-52; 10.20). John the Baptist's strange behaviour is also attributed to the madness brought on by a demon (Mt.11.18 // Lk.7.33).

Second, demons are said to be the cause of a variety of physical and common psychiatric disorders. The physical disorders include epileptic convulsions, deafness and dumbness, and the psychiatric disorders include hearing voices, uncontrollable violence and possibly suicidal urges ³.

The only symptoms attributed to demons in the gospels which cannot be regarded as psychiatric or medical symptoms is the insight that many of the demonized have into Jesus' true identity. The man in the synagogue shouted out that Jesus was the Holy One of God (Mk.1.24 // Lk.4.34). The mad man of Gadera called him Son of the Most High God (Mk.5.7 // Mt.8.29 // Lk.8.28). Many other demonized people are also recorded as shouting that he was the Son of God and had to be silenced (Mk.1.34; 3.11; Lk.4.41). This insight into Jesus' character cannot be explained in psychiatric terms, though of course it could certainly be explained in literary terms, as a device for introducing the secret of Jesus' real identity.

It was generally recognised that a demon would have such insight. "Demon" and "demonized"⁴ are common terms in classical Greek, referring to gods and those who are affected by the gods. Acts 17.18 has a typical Greek use of *daimonion*: **'A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.'** It was generally accepted that poets and those who spoke in an oracular way were touched by the gods. Even Philo accepts that a Greek poet is inspired a god who speaks through

³ Mark 9.22 may describe suicide attempts, or perhaps they are accidents which occurred during convulsions

⁴ The term "demonized" is far preferable to the common term "possessed". The term "possessed" suggests that the person has completely lost control, which is not the case in the majority of examples in the gospels.

him.⁵ It would therefore be expected that a demonized person would speak the truth about Jesus, rather like Balaam in the Old Testament was forced to prophesy truthfully, against his will.

These oracular utterances of the demonized could therefore be discounted as literary devices. A demonized person was expected, in the first century, to be able to tell fortunes and reveal unknown truths, so the Gospel writers might be expected to reveal the secret of Jesus' identity through their utterances.

All the other symptoms of demonization mentioned in the Gospels can be understood in psychiatric terms.

Schizophrenia is usually characterised by voices, and occasionally by hallucinations and paranoid delusions. The voices usually speak about a person in the second person, so that the person feels that they can hear some invisible other person speaking to them. In modern society people often say that they can hear voices on the radio or television speaking to them or about them, or that they are getting messages from aliens. A religious person may think that the voices come from God or from Satan or indeed, from a demon. The source of the voices is interpreted differently according to the world-view of the sufferer.

Paranoid delusions can result in sudden and uncontrollable violent outbursts. The sufferer may interpret a voice as something which the person behind them has just said, and attack them as a result. Or they may hear generalised whispering which they interpret as the thoughts or whispers of the people all around them, and so they lash out to protect themselves. Their rage, which can be all-consuming, results sometimes in terrific strength, and it can require several strong people to bring them under control.

They may also feel inordinately guilty or have a sense of personal holiness, which may reinforce their conclusions that God or Satan is speaking to them. It is quite common to find someone on a psychiatric ward who thinks that they are Jesus Christ or the Devil. Presumably in a society dominated by the ideas of demons, people would regard themselves to be possessed by a demon, or to actually *be* a demon.

Severe depression can also produce similar voices which are condemnatory: 'You are a very bad person . . . ugly . . . shouldn't be alive' etc. Severe depression is also characterised by suicidal urges. Very severe states can result in a complete distraction and seeming

⁵ eg Spec.IV.49 "knowing not what he does he is filled with inspiration as the reason withdraws and surrenders the citadel of the soul to a new visitor and tenant, the divine spirit, which plays upon the vocal organism and dictates words" (cf also Her.265).

slowing down of the brain, so that they become unable to comprehend speech and eventually unable to speak.

Schizophrenia and Depression therefore account for the voices, the delusions, the uncontrollable violence and the suicidal urges which are attributed to demonized people in the Gospels. The deafness and dumbness which is occasionally described may possibly be due to depression, but it is far more likely due to any number of physical causes, and the convulsions can of course be attributed to epilepsy.

A psychiatrist could therefore feel fairly satisfied that the Gospel accounts of demonization can be dealt with in terms of modern psychiatry or medicine.

However, I have personally been persuaded away from this viewpoint by a series of events which occurred while I was studying psychiatry, and during my time in pastoral work. I present these experiences here with much hesitation, because I recognise the dubious value of anecdotal evidence, and also because I realise that they sound very unreasonable in this modern age.

I went once to interview a patient but found that he was asleep. He was lying on his bed, facing the wall, and he did not turn round or respond when I walked in. I sat in his room for a while thinking that he might wake up, and after a while I thought I might pray for him. I started to pray silently for him but I was immediately interrupted because he sat bolt upright, looked at me fiercely and said in a voice which was not characteristic of him: "Leave him alone - he belongs to us".

Startled, I wasn't sure how to respond, so we just sat and stared at each other for a while. Then I remembered my fundamentalist past and decided to pray silently against what appeared to be an evil spirit. I prayed silently because I was aware that an hysterical disorder could mimic demon possession. If the person felt that I was treating them as if they were possessed, this would exacerbate the condition and confirm in his mind that he really was possessed. I also prayed silently in case I was making a fool of myself. I can't remember exactly what I prayed but probably rebuked the spirit in the name of Jesus. Immediately I did so, I got another very hostile outburst along the same lines, but much more abusive. I realised then that I was in very deep water and continued to pray, though still silently.

An onlooker would have seen a kind of one-sided conversation. I prayed silently and the person retorted very loudly and emphatically. Eventually (I can't remember what was said or what I prayed) the person cried out with a scream and collapsed on his bed. He woke up a little later, unaware of what had happened. I was still trying to act the role of a medic, so I did not tell him anything about what had

happened. His behaviour after waking was quite striking in its normality. He no longer heard any of the oppressive voices which had been making him feel cut off and depressed, and his suicidal urges had gone.

This incident made me question every assumption I had made about Gospel exorcisms. Unfortunately for the person involved, this was only the beginning, and as time went on there were many more spirits which had to be dealt with. By this time I had got to know him outside the hospital context, and I was able to deal with these during several sessions at my home with the help of my wife. The story has a happy ending in that this person is no longer troubled by such problems, and has remained so for several years.

When I was dealing with the strange personalities which spoke out of this person I was always careful to speak silently, even if the person appeared to be asleep. If these personalities were part of a multiple personality syndrome or an hysterical reaction, it would have been counter-productive to speak out loud anything which might make him believe that these personalities were distinct from himself.

These voices answered specific silent questions such as What is your name?, When did you come? This gradually convinced me that I was not dealing with a purely psychiatric disorder. After such 'conversations', which often involved much shouting, rage and abuse from him, the person usually had no memory of any of these disturbing events.

Increasingly I became convinced that I was addressing spirits which the Gospels call demons. I quickly learned that in order to get rid of these spirits with the minimum of fuss and abuse, I had to command them in the name of Jesus to be quiet. I then had to find out their name before I was able to command them to leave in the name of Jesus. I conducted my half of the conversation silently, but the spirits were anything but silent, and I often wondered what our neighbours made of it all. My demand that they be silent was not obeyed very quickly, and was frequently ignored. However, I did find that if I persisted in demanding their names or their type, I did eventually get them, and then it was a short process to get rid of them.

Most of the time I was able to address these spirits while the person was asleep or hypnotised. After a spirit had left, I always tried to debrief him while he was still asleep. This debriefing consisted of questions to find what type of spirit had been there (which he was able to remember for a short while after it had gone), when it had come in, and what it had communicated to him. This last question was to make sure that there were no hidden messages left around in his mind, such as suicidal feelings or other thoughts which would later explode like

time bombs in their subconscious. Also, I admit, I debriefed them carefully because I was curious.

During these debriefings I discovered some unexpected parallels with Gospel accounts. The most interesting of these were matters which appeared at first to have no links with Gospel traditions but which, on later reflection, help to explain some strange phrases used in the Greek text. Many other details have no relevance to the Gospel traditions.

The first surprise was that the spirits were very diverse. Some had personal names, usually Greek sounding, or Persian, but others were only known by their type. There appeared to be various types of spirit with titles which were sometimes similar to those found in the New Testament and sometimes completely different. These different types of spirit had names which usually described the kind of spirit they were. There were *thanatoi* who, as might be expected, brought suicidal urges and *phoboi* which created fear. I never discovered why some of these types should have Greek names. There were *collects* who also called themselves *censors* which seemed to act as blinkers to hide other spirits. When they were removed, other spirits were often discovered which had not been evident before. Some, like *kurestai*, remained a mystery to me. One common type called themselves *falling gods* (which I took to be a euphemistic way of saying *fallen gods*). These had distinct personalities and personal names, and were very vocal and argumentative. Most interesting to me were the types which are mentioned in the New Testament - the *powers* and the *unclean spirits*. The *powers*, which I only came across twice, were rather frightening because I had great difficulty sending them away. Far more common, and the most illuminating as far as the Gospels are concerned, were the *unclean spirits*.

The unclean spirits, unlike others, always gave names such as *a spirit of kindness*, or *a spirit of innocence*, but when pressed for their real name it turned out to be the opposite, like *a spirit of vindictiveness* or *depravity*. These names made me suspicious again that I was dealing with a very complex problem of the subconscious. It seemed likely from these names that the person's fears and guilt had become demons in their mind. However, I couldn't explain how they could answer questions which I posed silently.

Some very interesting details emerged concerning these *unclean spirits* which tied in unexpectedly with the gospels. The first time an unclean spirit was thrown out, I came across the *revenging spirits*. When I was debriefing him, he was clearly still distressed and persistently warned about *revenging spirits* which he said were ready to attack. I had never heard of such things and didn't know what was going on, but I prayed silently against them and the problem passed. On debriefing he said that six *revenging spirits* had left. It was with time

that I noted in debriefing sessions that these *revenging spirits* always came in groups of six, except once when there was only one which was later followed the next day by another five.

This may perhaps be connected to the strange saying of Jesus in Q about the man who gets rid of one spirit only to regain that one which "takes with itself seven others more wicked than itself" (Mt.12.45 // Lk.11.26). The group of seven would be the original unclean spirit and its six accomplices who come to bring revenge.

The person I was dealing with had a Christian upbringing, so it is difficult to know whether he remembered this text and his mind generated something from it. However, if this was the case, one would expect him to assume from this text that there should be seven *revenging spirits*. I am still unsure how to link this data from experience and from the Q logion. Perhaps the logion is speaking about a spirit which invites a completely different group of *unclean spirits*. This is somewhat supported by the detail in the text that they were "more wicked" than itself, which suggests that they were a different group. Personally I had always assumed that "seven" was just a number which Jews liked to use in religious contexts, but perhaps it has a literal significance after all.

Whatever precisely this logion refers to, it is spoken as though the listeners would be entirely familiar with this concept. It is not presented as a teaching on exorcism, but as an illustration of how a faithless person who rejects Jesus can end up worse off than someone who never heard of him. ⁶ This could be used as an illustration only if it referred to a matter of public and commonplace knowledge. Presumably in the first century, when there was much more interest in exorcism, such matters were discussed as often as symptoms of arthritis or AIDS are discussed today.

Reading back to myself what I have written above, it seems like the ramblings of a rabid fundamentalist or the paranoia of someone who needs urgent psychiatric help. I can only invite you to assess this in the way in which I present it - as a report of experiences which I have been reluctant to air in public in case they provoke ridicule or condemnation. I have heard similar stories (though not in such detail) from other ministers who are also reluctant to mention such things in public.

⁶ The context in Matthew and Luke are completely different, but are linked by this same idea. In Matthew it is in the context of condemning the teachers who demand more signs, and in Luke it is in answer to the "exorcism by Beelzebub" accusation and the logion "he who is not with me is against me".

The Gospel record reads completely differently once experiences like these are taken into consideration. In the Gospel records Jesus healed individuals on about 23 occasions.⁷ Of these six or possibly seven are described as exorcisms. The rest of this paper will examine these exorcisms.⁸

Mark and Luke both put the exorcism in the Synagogue ⁹ at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, most probably for literary motives. Luke turned this event into the occasion of Jesus' first sermon at Nazareth which outlines his program in the Gospel. Mark used it to introduce a Christian exorcism in a way that emphasised the differences between Jewish and Christian exorcism techniques. In Mark 1.25 the demon is first "rebuked" (ἐπετίμησεν, *epetímésen*) and commanded to "be silent" (using φημώθητι, *phimōthéti*, which has the connotation of "to muzzle")¹⁰ and then to "come out" (ἐξέκθε, *exekthe*).

The contrast with Jewish exorcism would have been obvious to a contemporary reader. Although very few exorcism texts remain, it appears that Jews used the same kinds of techniques still practised by some Muslim groups and by religious groups in many parts of the world. The person is subjected to noxious smells or to pain or deprivation till they are "better".¹¹ This is similar to what is described in a Jewish description of exorcism dating from New Testament days which describes exorcism by burning herbs which presumably produced a very unpleasant or acrid smell.¹² Mark showed Jesus in total command of the situation, and in case the reader was unsure of the correct conclusions he recorded the people saying: "He commands the unclean spirits with authority and they obey him".

Luke's account is very similar, but he attempts to explain what an *unclean spirit* is. Mark uses the common phrase πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ (*pneumati akathartō*, Mk.1.23) but Luke tried to explain this with the

⁷ The parallels are not always exact, so the exact number is contentious.

⁸ For a more detailed examination of the gospel accounts, see Graham Twelftree *Jesus the Exorcist* (WUNT 54, J.C.B Mohr, Tübingen, 1993).

⁹ Mk.1.23-26; Lk.4.33-35

¹⁰ This may perhaps be equivalent to the term "to bind" demons, which are found on pagan execration texts

¹¹ I have no experience to know whether this works or not, but it is certainly dangerous, as witnessed by the death of a Muslim woman during an exorcism ceremony in Britain in 1994. It is unfortunate that some Christian groups also seems to practice shouting and physical abuse as part of exorcism practices.

¹² In NumR 19.8 R.Johanan b.Zakkai (40-80 AD) describes what is normally done at an exorcism: "We bring roots, make them smoke under him, then we sprinkle water upon the demon and it flees"

phrase πνεῦμα δαιμονίου ἀκαθάρτου (*pneuma daimoniou akathartou*, Lk.4.33) which a non-Jew would read as 'a spirit of an unclean god'.

Mark and Luke both put this account at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This is partly to introduce the topic of exorcisms which were a very important part of his ministry, but partly also to establish from the beginning the fact that Jesus was the Holy One of God (as the spirits call him). It may be, as suggested above, that this revelation by the spirits was simply a literary device. However, if these "demons" really were (and are) spiritual personalities, it may also be that these demons did indeed see what people could not see. Perhaps they realised the truth when they felt Jesus' authority, or perhaps they could see something beyond the physical nature of Jesus.

Matthew's first account of an exorcism is the most spectacular - the strong madman of Gadara. In his characteristic way, Matthew makes this even more spectacular by doubling the miracle.¹³ Matthew accentuates the violence and the revelation of Jesus' identity, but otherwise seems uninterested in the incident and allocates only 7 verses to it. He refers to the men using the general term "demonized".

Mark allocates much more space to this event - 20 verses in the traditional text divisions, which is six more verses than Luke and 13 more verses than Matthew. Mark is particularly interested in the history of this demoniac, both before he was healed, how people tried to chain him and how he cut himself and wailed, and his future history, begging to follow Jesus and witnessing for him in the Decapolis. Mark calls the demons *unclean spirits* and also records that he called himself "Legion". Luke records these same elements but summarises them a little. Luke adds the interesting detail that the spirits begged not to be sent to the "Abyss", while in Mark they beg not to be sent out of the area.¹⁴

In the light of my experience, there may have been many other types of spirit other than the *unclean spirits* named by Mark. "Legion" may have been an overall name for them, or it may even have been a version of the term *collect*. In the light of this passage I tried threatening spirits with the "abyss" and this certainly appeared to

¹³ See also the two blind men outside Jericho which are only one in parallel texts (Mt.20.29-34//Mk.10.46-52//Lk.18.35-43) and the two blind men in Mt.9.27-31 which have no parallel

¹⁴ The Abyss, in Greek mythology is the place of the dead, which became through the LXX and Enoch (Ps.71.20; Eth.En.10.4ff,11ff; 18.11ff etc) the place where spirits were imprisoned. The NT continues this Jewish apocalyptic meaning (2Pet.2.4; Rev.9.1,2,11; 11.7; 17.8; 20.1,3 and even Rom.10.7).

frighten them. I assume that this is a term for the place where they are sent when they are exorcised.

Matthew's next exorcism was also reported as a spectacular one, though it does not appear to be spectacular at first glance. In 9.32 Matthew records the astonishment of the people when Jesus healed a demonized man who was dumb. The onlookers were so astonished that they admitted "Never was this seen in Israel" and they accused Jesus of using the power of Beelzebub. This same set of events is repeated in Mt.12.22, followed by the same reaction, with the additional wonder that the man was also blind. The emphasis, however, is still put on the fact that the man was dumb, because Matthew summarised the miracle with the words "the dumb man both spoke and saw".¹⁵ The more likely summary would be "the blind man..." because he has already been referred to as "the blind and dumb man", but the wonder appears to lie in the fact that he was dumb.

This seems like an insignificant matter till one thinks about how such a demon might be expelled. In my experience, and in the pattern that Jesus is shown to use, the easiest way to exorcise a demon is to find out its name or title and then command it specifically to leave. If I tried commanding a spirit without knowing its name it appeared to simply ignore the command or answer back with abuse, as though they were able to pretend that my command was addressed to someone else. The best way I found to proceed was to silently command the spirit in Jesus' name to be quiet, then to command in Jesus' name that they speak their name. The spirit would say a name (such as a personal name or, for unclean spirits, a name such as *spirit of hatred*), or a title (such as *thanatos*). Then, if I silently addressed them by their personal name or title, they left almost immediately, though often with a cry of anguish or with a final protest.

The difficulty of exorcising a dumb spirit is therefore evident. How does one find the spirit's name? I have no idea how Jesus exorcised a dumb spirit, and it appears that his Jewish contemporaries were equally baffled and amazed.

A third example of a dumb demoniac is the boy whom the disciples fail to exorcise at the bottom of the mount of transfiguration. It is strange that Matthew does not mention that he is dumb, but perhaps he has made this point sufficiently already. Luke also fails to mention it, and it is found only in Mk. 9.17. Possibly Mark added this to explain why the disciples had such great difficulty, and to explain why for this type of demon "only prayer" will bring it out. This may in fact point to the way

¹⁵ A few manuscripts read "the blind and dumb man...", including the Syriac, but too few to be noted in the UBS text or Metzger's accompanying *Textual Commentary*

in which Jesus succeeded where all the Jewish exorcists and even his disciples failed. Jesus spent time in prayer. Perhaps the name of the demon was revealed to him during this time of prayer, or perhaps the exorcism was carried out in a completely different way.

Whatever the answer, it is these exorcisms of the dumb which amazed the Jews. It may be assumed that these Jews had already learned how to exorcise spirits using Jesus' methods, simply by copying him. The Gospels record that some strangers were using the name of Jesus in this way (Mk.9.38//Lk.9.49). This is not the kind of detail which the gospel writers would want to invent, because it casts doubt on the claim of the church to be the sole purveyor of Jesus' power and teaching, especially as Jesus does not condemn the practice. Also, when Jesus answers the charge that he used the power of Beelzebub, he retorts "by whom do your followers drive them out?" (Mt.12.27//Lk.11.19). It is quite possible that this response had an extra sting in it because some Jews were in fact using the name of Jesus for exorcism. In Acts too we find Jews experimenting with the name of Jesus, though with limited success (Act. 19.13-17).

Some Jews would therefore have discovered that these spirits could be exorcised in this way, but they were completely amazed by the exorcism of a dumb spirit.

One other interesting aspect of the boy at the mount of transfiguration is the fact that he suffered what appeared to be epileptic seizures. He fell to the ground, foaming at the mouth and grinding his teeth. Matthew adds that he frequently fell into fire or water (17.15) which may suggest suicide attempts or (as Matthew interprets it) a spirit was trying to kill him. However, Matthew is probably just heightening the seriousness of the affliction by emphasising the mortal danger the boy is in.

It is often assumed that epilepsy was regarded as a sign of demonic possession in the first century. No-doubt many did regard it in this light. The frightening and unnatural appearance of a *grand mal* fit could easily be interpreted as due to an outside influence, even by someone who would not normally think in terms of demons or spirits.

It is therefore doubly significant that Matthew himself made a distinction between epilepsy and demonization. Matthew used a common term for epilepsy in this account (σεληνιαζεται, *seléviazetai*, Mt. 17.15), which comes from the word for 'moon'. Epilepsy and other psychiatric disorders were assumed to be caused by the moon, and this has come down into our own language in the term 'lunatic'. Matthew distinguished between this and demonic problems when he listed the types of illness which Jesus healed in his summary of the ministry of Jesus in 4.24. He listed three types of healing "those which were demonized, those which were lunatic and paralytics".

Matthew therefore appears to regard epilepsy and other 'lunatic' illnesses as distinct from demonization. He does not regard epilepsy as proof of demonization any more than we regard a painful abdomen as proof of appendicitis. Epilepsy was *one* of the possible accompanying symptoms of demonization, but it was also regarded as an illness in its own right.

The only other two exorcisms ascribed to Jesus are the healing of the Syro-Phoenecian's daughter (Mt.15.21-28//Mk.7.24-30) and possibly the woman with a bent back (Lk.13.11-13). Matthew simply records the woman's conclusion that her daughter is demonized, but Mark makes several references to this demon, and calls it an *unclean spirit*. This is the only record of an exorcism at a distance. This too, would have amazed the Jewish exorcists, but they were not there to witness it. The woman with a bent back is described as having "a spirit of infirmity" (ἀσθενείας, *astheneias*, Lk.13.11) and is said to be "released" (ἀπολέλυσαι, *apolelusaí*) from this infirmity. Although it is possible that this was a physical illness caused by a demon, like the blindness and dumbness, it is more likely that this was a figure of speech. The "loosing" from her infirmity may possibly be linked with the concept of "binding" a spirit, but this link is tenuous.

In conclusion, Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as an exorcist *par excellence*. His healings of physical illness are remarkable, but his Jewish contemporaries appear to have been particularly impressed by his exorcisms.

When a psychiatrist examines the Gospel record there are some limited possibilities for interpreting the physical healings of the righting of hysterical disorders, but in most cases this is unlikely or impossible. The exorcism passages are more amenable to re-interpretation in psychiatric terms, but there are still difficulties. These passages make the most sense when they are read as literal descriptions of exorcisms which are paralleled in the experience of many Christian pastors.

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