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More than Suicidal Swine: Jesus' Mission to the Gentiles in Mark 5:1-20

Jeffrey R. Reed

Introduction

Often viewed as another of the Jesus miracle stories, the interaction with the demoniac at Gerasene is a much richer, deeper story. I will examine the story in its entirety, review several interpretations of the story, and offer my alternative view of the deeper meaning behind Mark's description of Jesus' foray into Gentile territory.

Narrative

The episode begins as Jesus has stilled the storm and rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith as they crossed the lake and encountered a storm (Mark 4:35-41). Jesus has stilled the seas, demonstrating his control over the chaotic forces of nature, and his actions become a symbol of divine power (Pss 89:8-9; 106:8-9; Isa 51:9-10).¹ Crossing the lake or Sea of Galilee represents not only an actual physical barrier between the Jews and Gentiles but a symbolic one as well.

They have crossed the boundary, landing on "the other side" (v. 5:1) in the land or region of the Gerasenes. There has been a great deal of scholarly debate over the name of the town or village to which Mark is referring. Most commentaries note that Gerasa is some thirty miles from the shore of the Sea of Galilee making it unlikely the herd of swine ran that distance to plunge themselves into the water. There is also the lack of cohesiveness with Matthew's version of the story (8:28-34), which places the event in Gadara, a village only five or six miles from the lakeshore.² Regardless of the location, Mark is more interested in "articulating geo-spatial 'space' in terms of narrative symbolic than actual place names."³ Getting bogged down on the historical accuracy of the location misses the larger point, that Jesus has purposefully entered Gentile territory.

As Jesus leaves the boat, he is accosted by a man who has been living among the nearby tombs.

The man is possessed by an unclean spirit. Although the man is most likely a Gentile, Mark goes to substantial effort to inform the reader that under rabbinic law he was unclean: he lived among the tombs and the dead (v. 3), he cut himself (v. 5; see Deut 14:1), and he lived among unclean animals (v. 11).⁴ These conditions would also indicate under rabbinic law that the man was indeed mad.⁵ The text would lead the reader to conclude that the man had been exiled from his community to the tombs. Repeated attempts to shackle him with chains and manacles had all been unsuccessful; nobody had been able to subdue him (v. 4). This man is physically strong and the spirit that has possessed him has made him even stronger. The stage is set for a dramatic interaction between Jesus and the demoniac. The sheer strength of the man and the strength of the spirit possessing him provide the reader at least a hint that this is a second battle between Jesus and Satan (Mark 1:13).

The cosmic nature of the exchange that is about to be played out is emphasized by Mark's description of the man crying out among the tombs, "Night and day" and "on the mountains" (v. 5). That he was active during the night indicates he had little or no fear of the evil that was thought to be present in the darkness. Generally speaking mountaintops indicate a divine revelation; symbolizing where people went to meet the living God. Jesus went there to appoint disciples (3:13) and to pray (6:46). The possessed man, however, went there to cry out and to hurt himself. Interestingly, Mark juxtaposes the tombs, places of the dead, and the mountains, places of the living, here as well (just as he does with the night and the day). Mark also uses a great deal of the language and imagery from Isaiah (65:3-5) in which Isaiah rebukes the "rebellious people" who have incorporated Gentile rituals. They too sleep among the tombs and eat the flesh of swine. For Isaiah and Mark, spending a night in a tomb is pagan behavior.⁶

¹ D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 146.

² John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 163.

³ Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 190.

⁴ This then leaves open the possibility that Mark expected purity laws to be applicable to Gentiles who enter the community as they are to Jews who do the same.

⁵ *The Gospel of Mark*, Donahue and Harrington, 164.

⁶ *Ibid.*

As mentioned earlier, the possessed man is also bruising himself or cutting himself with stones. This is often seen as an indication that the man suffered from some type of mental illness, and ultimately his healing is a sign of hope for those who suffer from a similar illness. While certainly a valid interpretation of the narrative, it is unlikely that Mark structured the story to convey this message and this hermeneutic is a construct of our modern times.⁷ Regardless, Mark has carefully painted a rather ominous and bleak outlook for the possessed man that evokes a great sense of sympathy, even empathy, toward him. The man personifies self-destruction and social isolation.⁸

The man, seeing Jesus from afar, runs to him and prostrates himself before Jesus. This verse is placed in great tension with 5:2, which states that he accosted Jesus the moment that he stepped from the boat, from which we would assume that he was very close to Jesus.⁹ The demoniac has apparently returned and is in close proximity to Jesus and falls to the ground, prostrating before him, a sign of obedience to Jesus. That he would subject himself in such a manner suggests that he knows who Jesus is and even that this isn't their first encounter with each other. The man cries out to Jesus repeating the same statement made by the demon in 1:24, "what do you and I have in common?" tying the two incidents together. Mark is clearly using this to parallel the two exorcisms, the first on Jewish soil and the second on Gentile soil.¹⁰ Addressing Jesus as "Son of the Most High God" further represents an acknowledgement by the man that Jesus is of a superior power and he is expecting to be subject to punishment, fearing the ultimate judgment of God.¹¹ As such, the demoniac then pleads with Jesus not to torture or question him, thereby framing the exorcism in an eschatological

context; the man is thus asking for salvation (v. 7).¹² The parallel text in Matthew (8:29a) is explicit in the eschatological reference: "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us *before our time*?"¹³ The narrative hits an awkward tone in 5:8 and presents some difficulty in interpretation. In "he had been saying" (v. 8), the text would indicate that Jesus had been trying unsuccessfully to exorcise the demon. John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington cite several sources that lead to a conclusion that the text implies Jesus was about to do something, i.e., exorcise the demon.¹⁴

In 5:9 Jesus speaks for the first time in the narrative, engaging the demoniac; he asks the possessed man "What is your name?" Knowing the name of the demon gives the exorcist power over it. The answer is of course, "My name is Legion; for we are many." The man is possessed by a great number of demons, greatly raising the stakes for the cosmic battle that will ensue between the forces of death and Jesus. Traditionally, the reference to Legion has been understood to be a subtle reference to the occupying Roman army. Most commentators will note that a legion refers to unit of soldiers numbering about six thousand. This socio-political analysis of the text would therefore indicate that Jesus was making a veiled attempt to rid the land of the occupying Roman army, but Jesus wouldn't be expelling Roman troops from Jewish lands but rather from Gentile areas. Therefore, this political reading makes little sense as it was likely that the Gentiles had benefited from Roman rule and were quite friendly to their occupation. They certainly would not have viewed their occupation as oppressive as the Jews on the other side of the Sea of Galilee would have.¹⁵ Still other commentators see this as somewhat of a literary device used by Mark to provoke humor from Jewish readers of the text. Most notably, Jewish readers would have found it quite humorous to have the demons, named after Roman authorities, enter swine and eventually kill themselves.¹⁶ The use of

⁷ Elizabeth S. Malbon, "Echoes and Foreshadowings in Mark 4–8: Reading and Rereading," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 2 (1993): 215.

⁸ Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 96.

⁹ Interestingly, only Donahue and Harrington make note of this discrepancy within the story. They attribute the first encounter (5:2) as one that previews the entire story while the intervening verses describe the demoniac before moving the attention to Jesus as the exorcist (5:6-10). It could also indicate that even during the events that are unfolding the demon-possessed man was running around wildly as he had been doing prior to Jesus' arrival.

¹⁰ *The Gospel of Mark*, Donahue and Harrington, 164.

¹¹ *A Costly Freedom*, Byrne, 96.

¹² *The Gospel of Mark*, Donahue and Harrington, 165.

¹³ My emphasis added. Also note the use of the plural in Matthew where two demoniacs are said to have approached Jesus.

¹⁴ Donahue and Harrington cite works by J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963); and Blass, et al., *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

¹⁵ *The Gospel of Mark*, Donahue and Harrington, 66.

¹⁶ Marie Noonan Sabin, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Colleg-

legion in reference to demons is also not unique. Demons refer to themselves in such a manner when questioned by Solomon (Test. Sol. 11:5; see also 5:1-13; 11:3; and 13:1-7).¹⁷

The demons beg and bargain with Jesus not to drive them out of the land. Evidently they have found a place to their liking and hope to continue demonizing the area even if they are driven from this particular individual. They beg Jesus to let them inhabit a group of swine grazing on a nearby hillside. Therefore, unclean spirits enter unclean animals. Jesus grants their request, sending them out to the pigs. Again, Solomon's interaction with a demon plays out in Mark's narrative (Test. Sol. 11:5). The pigs, numbering in the thousands, run headlong into the sea killing themselves, reminding the reader of Pharaoh's army being swept away during the Exodus story (Exod 15:4).¹⁸ Modern readers of the story are commonly troubled by the notion that Jesus would wantonly kill such a large number of livestock.¹⁹ While these concerns are reasonable, they demonstrate the dangers of literalism, thereby missing the point of Jesus' power over the demons. The suicidal swine reinforce the uncleanness of the demons and potential for destruction that they pose to those living near them. It also demonstrates a certain amount of cunning on the part of Jesus. He allows the demons to negotiate and they are likely pleased that he hasn't expelled them from the region. They likely don't count on their destruction as Mark describes it, however.²⁰ Jesus has used the same chaotic forces that he tamed prior to his arrival in Gerasene to ride the land of demons; the Gentile region is now clean.

The swineherds leave the area and begin telling, or announcing, what had happened in the city and the surrounding countryside (v. 15). The people of the region come to see what has happened; evidently a couple thousand pigs jumping off a cliff didn't happen every day. The crowds see Jesus and the once-possessed man who is now clothed and speaking normally. It is obvious to them that he has been cleansed of the demons. Unlike those near the exorcism in Capernaum who were "amazed" (1:27), these people are afraid. So frightened are they that

eville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 49–50.

¹⁷ Testament of Solomon as cited in Donahue and Harrington, 167.

¹⁸ *The Gospel of Mark*, Donahue and Harrington, 167.

¹⁹ *A Costly Freedom*, Byrne, 96.

²⁰ Michael Willet Newheart, *My Name is Legion: The Story of the Gerasene Demoniac* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 45.

they plead with Jesus to leave the area. Some commentators claim the plea to leave the area is because of the destruction of their property, i.e., the swine. This again is an attempt to introduce history into the narrative and again misses the point Mark is trying to make. The people are afraid because they didn't expect to see the man sitting with Jesus, upright and speaking coherently.

Jesus obliges the people. As he is about to leave, the formerly possessed man pleads with Jesus to allow him to "be with him" (v. 18). The man is begging to be part of the group following Jesus in the same tone that the demons begged not to be sent out of the region and used by the people of the region when they pleaded with Jesus to leave the area.²¹ The call of the disciples (3:14) is repeated here ("be with him") as well. The man not only is begging to be among Jesus' followers but also to be counted among the Twelve. Jesus denies the man's request, however, for Jesus is the one who calls people to discipleship (3:13). Instead the man is instructed to go back home and tell his family just what Jesus had done for him and how the Lord had bestowed his mercy upon him (v. 19). This sending of the cleansed Gentile stands in stark contrast to the Jews that Jesus had previously healed or exorcised. In those cases Jesus had either forbid them telling what had happened (1:43-44) or made no request for them to speak of his deeds. In the case of the Gentile man, there is no messianic secret. The man goes throughout the Gentile region proclaiming what had happened to him just as Jesus had instructed him. Apparently the man was quite a successful missionary as well, as the story concludes by noting that "all were amazed," presumably by the story he told about Jesus' work and God's mercy (v. 20).²²

Interpretations of the Gerasene Demoniac

There are basically three prevailing interpretations of the story of Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac; one is "traditional" in that it demonstrates Jesus as a miracle worker. I see the other interpretations somewhat more compelling and will focus on them. Both of these interpretations see the story as one of liberation. The first interpretation strongly suggests that the story was Mark's subversive manner of uniting the people to stand up and reject the

²¹ *The Gospel of Mark*, Donahue and Harrington, 167.

²² Alternative reading is that "all were amazed" is a closing to the pericope referencing the works of Jesus; however, given that the people were afraid and requested they leave, it is likely they were also amazed.

Roman occupation, that this story in particular and Mark's gospel in general were political manifestos aimed at reminding the Jewish community that Jesus had come to free them from the bondage of the Roman occupation. Indeed, Ched Meyers has taken this Markan story and used it to turn the entire gospel into what is basically a liberation theology.²³ While Meyers does an admirable job relating the early Christian community to the problems we face in modernity, i.e., "empire building, multi-corporate liars," and scorched earth environmental policies, his political reading is largely flawed.²⁴ Meyers points to the use of words that promote military imagery in 5:1-20. For example, "Legion" is in direct reference to the occupying Roman forces; the term for herd in reference to the swine is *agele*, a term also used to denote new recruits to the Roman army; the phrase "he dismissed them" suggests a military command; and the pigs *charging* into the sea provides an image of troops rushing into battle.²⁵ As mentioned earlier, the pigs charging into the sea also recalls the fate of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. While these images may be real, what is less certain is that Mark intentionally used them to push forward a political agenda. It is as likely that these terms were central to people that had been occupied by a foreign force for some time, i.e., they made sense to the people living in war-torn first-century Palestine. Meyers's approach is well thought out and represents a valid, modern hermeneutic of Mark's gospel. It fails, however, to recognize the hidden symbolism that is common in the Markan text.

The other liberation view of this story focuses on the mental state of the possessed man. A number of recent journal publications have focused on this aspect of the story. One of the more compelling articles relates the story to broken lives caused by mental illness.²⁶ Gail O'Day notes that the man had been given up for dead by his community, a community that is lacking in compassion. In modern terms the possessed man had "suicidal tendencies," he was beyond hope, and his suffering was unabated. By yielding to the grace present in Jesus and God's mercy, the man acknowledges his lack of

independence. It is by that same grace and mercy that he is able to live again. Jesus' power to expel hatred and reestablish love is the most extraordinary power there is, its power overcomes death with life.²⁷ It is this reading of Mark that perhaps comes closest to what I see as the central message of the story.

An Alternative Reading

It is my contention that Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee intentionally to begin his mission to the Gentiles, and Mark uses this story to foreshadow Jesus' own death and resurrection.²⁸ While several resurrection events have occurred prior to this story in Mark (cf. 1:35; 2:9; 4:35) this story amplifies the resurrection and its cosmic implications. Clearly the man that is possessed, for all practical purposes, is dead. Moreover, he is dead three times over: he is unclothed and ostracized from his community, he is possessed by unclean spirits, and he himself exists among the dead. That he is thrice dead reflects the three days that Jesus is dead before appearing to the women at the tomb.

The man, or the demon possessing him, also knows who Jesus is; they have met before. I believe this represents a continuation of the cosmic battle between Jesus and Satan that began in 1:12. Satan represents death and hatred, and therefore the possessed man is full of hatred. This is hatred that will eventually lead to death, but not until he, like Jesus, suffers. The man cannot be bound with chains or shackles because chains and shackles represent a vain attempt by humanity to restrain death, something only God can do. Death and hatred are powers greater than humans themselves, only the love and the grace of God can bind death and restore us to life. Jesus rebukes hatred, sending it to its own death inside the swine. Just as the man was resurrected by defeating the demon, i.e., death, so too is Jesus. As the demons leave the man and enter the swine, eventually killing themselves, we fully see the resurrection. The man is clothed, seated with Jesus, speaking normally, and he has left the tomb. He is fully restored, resurrected.

The reaction of the people to the man being cured is strikingly similar to the women who enter the

²³ *Binding the Strongman*, Meyers, 191.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁶ Gail R. O'Day, "Hope Beyond Brokenness: A Markan Reflection on the Gift of Life," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15, no.3 (1988): 244-51.

²⁷ Susan Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 134-35.

²⁸ Mark demonstrates that Jesus has largely been dismissed as a prophet by his own Jewish community (3:13-35), which may be the reason he has left Galilee seeking to spread the news of the kingdom of God.

tomb on the third day; both groups were seized with terror and were afraid. The Gentiles were afraid but not because they had lost their swine at the hands of Jesus. They were afraid because they didn't expect to see the demon-possessed man alive, let alone seated at Jesus' side completely resurrected. Evidently they are as unwilling as the people of Israel to accept the one who can drive demons from their lives. By choosing to ask Jesus to leave, the Gerasenes are saying they are comfortable with their lives and are rejecting the uncertainty of a life that Jesus calls us to, even if it means living with demons. Similarly, the women at the tomb were afraid; they expected to see Jesus dead. Mark's parallel resurrection story is powerful in that it is the first event in Gentile territory; it foreshadows to the Gentiles that his resurrection will represent a new creation that will include them. For Mark, this passage represents the real ending to his gospel; it is held in tension with the empty tomb (16:1-8) in deliberate fashion.²⁹ One shortcoming of my interpretation is that in prior exorcisms and healings, Jesus requests the healed individual to rise or stand (2:9) suggesting a true physical resurrection. Jesus makes no request to the possessed man. I contend, however, that when he appears clothed that is a truer reflection of a resurrection.

²⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 139.

Finally, I would argue that the demoniac presents the first commissioning, if not the first mission, of a disciple in the Mark's account. While Jesus has called the Twelve earlier in Mark's gospel (1:16-20; 2:13-14), it won't be until after the encounter at Gerasene that he sends them on their mission (6:6b-13). Up until the incident with the possessed man in Gerasene Jesus had purposefully avoided any unnecessary publicity, going so far as to instruct the leper not to tell anyone of the miracle (1:44). Therefore, sending the cured man from Gerasene to proclaim Jesus' works represents a dramatic shift in the overall mission. It is even more dramatic when one considers the cured man is a Gentile. The first person commissioned to proclaim Jesus' works is a Gentile, sent into Gentile territory to tell them that they too will be resurrected and be part of God's new creation.

Commentaries and interpretations that focus on the liberating theme of this story are certainly within reason and to a large degree are correct. Nonetheless, I contend that they are correct for the wrong reason. Jesus is indeed a liberating figure, but it is through his death and resurrection that we are liberated, not through an exorcism or a healing. The once-possessed man in Gerasene bears witness that each of us, complete with demons and whatever other baggage we might have, are capable of resurrection through the extraordinary power of Christ's love that leads us from death into life.