



SWINE FLEW: The curious case of the Gerasene Demoniac

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INTRODUCTION

The remarkable story of the Gerasene Demoniac has long fascinated me – it appears, slightly altered, in three of the Gospels (Mark 5: 1-17, Matthew 8: 28-34 & Luke 8: 26-37), and is sometimes known as the miracle of the Gerasene swine. Depending upon which version you read there are either one (Mark & Luke), or two men (Matthew) who are ‘demon possessed’ and confront Jesus as he passes by some tombs or memorial stones (μνήμασι)¹ in ‘the region of the Gerasenes’². The man is wild and violent, and immensely strong. He is described as unable to be restrained, having already snapped chains and manacles: throughout the narrative there’s a strong undercurrent of violence and physical threat. In Mark and Luke, the man is violent towards himself, injuring his body with stones, self-harming. When Jesus arrives, the man/men speaks to Jesus, demanding to know what he is doing there. There then follows some interaction between the man/men and Jesus, which eventually results in a dramatic narrative episode of deliverance, and some really interesting key words, in particular the memorable phrase ‘we are legion’. So what is happening in this story? What does it mean? The answer is that the meaning you take from it, depends upon the approach you take to reading it.

THE INTERPRETATIVE STANCE

Perhaps the most conventional contemporary interpretation of the story is the one which would today be understood as a fairly ‘literal’ one: Jesus, (understood as ‘God³ in human form’) meets a normal man (or men) who has/have been somehow taken over (become possessed) by evil spirits⁴ – there’s no direct indication to the ‘literal’ reader as to how this possession may have happened. Jesus uses his divine authority to make these spirits leave the body of the man/men, and at their request sends them in to a herd of pigs. In a final dramatic flourish, the pigs then hurl themselves in to the sea. This interpretation of the

¹ From the Greek: Mnaomai, meaning monument or memorial.

² Scholars are unclear where this refers to, but it may well be Gadara which was by the sea of Galilee. Gadara was a significant place in military terms, and was garrisoned by Vespasian around the beginning of the Jewish revolt.

³ ‘God’ here has a particular meaning, generally understood as relating to a transcendent divine being, a unique entity – there are various ways of understanding the term ‘God’ of which this is only one.

⁴ These evil spirits are ‘demons’ – which since the middle ages have been understood as ‘little devils’, angelic creatures of malign intent. (The original meaning of the word is considerably more subtle, the Greek term *daemon* refers to an idea along the lines of inner genius, lesser god, guiding spirit, and sometimes ‘souls of the dead’).

story makes sense in the context of an understanding of God-at-war⁵, part of a story of cosmic battle where heavenly beings have fallen out of love with God, and as Satan's envoys are making mischief on earth. The development of this kind of thinking is long and complex, but much of it relies heavily on the apocryphal (or deuterocanonical) book of Enoch (Enoch, n.d.), which has a fascinating section (Chapters 6 – 8) that recounts the story of the fall of the "Watchers"⁶, a cadre of angels who lusted after human women, descended to earth and fathered the Nephilim (see also Genesis 6: 1-4). Enoch tells how these fallen angels became the kind of agents of evil that are now familiar to us as 'demons'. This way of seeing things relies upon a now outdated ancient near-eastern cosmology which is known as a three-tiered universe⁷.

Among other problems, this form of interpretation does not take primary account of the context in which the story is set, or written, and relies instead upon an idea of cosmic battle which sees God as inherently violent. The idea of Divine violence is significantly problematic, particularly juxtaposed as it is with the idea of God as Love. The justification for this violent love⁸, which is ready to see humans and angelic beings consigned to eternal torment, or temporal punishment is usually something to do with justice. Simplistically, that it is 'just' that people should honour their creator, and that if they don't, it is appropriate that they should be exposed to extreme punishment – this goes not just for those who 'rebel' against God and choose to live in a way that God has proscribed, but also for those who make choices based on convictions e.g. atheism, 'other' religious adherence. These and other points notwithstanding, this is the most approach most widely accepted as orthodox.

LINGUISTIC CLUES

So back to the Gerasene swine story: when Jesus arrives he is recognised by the demons who cry from the man's mouth: "What business do you have with me, Jesus, son of

⁵ In this text I am using references to God that imply God is a static being, this is due to the fact that I am trying to talk about the kind of God-language to which these ideas belong, namely that of an immutable, omnipotent transcendent being. My own view of the Divine would be substantially more dynamic, and I recognise that in using this kind of language some confusion can occur.

⁶ It was also precisely this story that inspired Alan Moore's 'Watchmen' graphic novel series.

⁷ The three-tiered universe was the idea that the world is made up of the earth, the sea (which formed the boundary of the earth) and the heavens (where heavenly beings lived). This was a common and experientially understandable ancient belief, which was challenged first by the likes of Aristotle, before Copernicus then Galileo and others developed the kind of understanding of the cosmos we now have.

⁸ This is reminiscent of the character of King George in the musical 'Hamilton' who sings: "I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love..."

God most High? I beg you, do not torment (βασανίσῃς)⁹ me.” (Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28) In the Matthean version of the story (which has two demoniacs rather than one) the plea is subtly different: “What do you want with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the appointed time?” (Matthew 8:29) The story is resolved when Jesus exorcises the demons from the man/men and sends them into a herd of pigs, the pigs then plunge to their deaths.

There are all sorts of things going on in this story, in particular I would suggest that there are various linguistic clues as to the potential original meaning of the tale. The way we approach it though, is governed by the way we approach the text as a whole. As the saying goes: if one only has a hammer – then everything looks like a nail. So if one assumes that the Divine is in the business of violence, then it is natural enough to assume that this story is an example of violent justice – meted out in this case via some unsuspecting pigs. If, however, we do not begin with this assumption, then other possibilities become open to us. In the case of the Gerasene demoniac, there is a clear political narrative which sits like an elephant in the room whatever one’s interpretation.

ANOTHER WAY OF READING

Here’s the story told in another way: Jesus was a Jewish reformer who lived at a time of political occupation, and as an adult began to lead a movement of people who stood up against the Roman authorities.¹⁰ So there he was, travelling around the country, telling people his alternative political ‘good news’ (εὐαγγέλιον). Now there’s something we need to understand about the word we know as ‘gospel’ or ‘evangel’: While it might seem like a politically neutral term now, in the first century CE it was anything but. That’s because it was the same term employed by Caesar Augustus who sent envoys to states he wished to occupy with the ‘good news’ (gospel/evangel) that they were invited to be part of the Pax Romana – this was effectively a kind of massive protection racket.¹¹ A state could either submit, and pay taxes etc, or find themselves in the equivalent of a concrete overcoat. Either way, it was about domination, and it was about accepting the divinity of Caesar and all that entailed. The

⁹ This word means ‘to examine as by torture’ from the verb ‘basanos: to torture’.

¹⁰ There were a number of such movements, the Jesus movement is the best known, but others included those led by: Judas the Galilean; Athronges the shepherd; Simon of Perea; Theudas; and a mysterious character called ‘The Egyptian’ for whom Paul was briefly mistaken (Acts 21:38).

¹¹ The word ‘evangel’ as used by Augustus remains extant in its plural form in a text known as the Calendar of Priene which dates from 9 BCE.

beginning of Mark's gospel "...the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1) is therefore sometimes seen as a direct reference or challenge to such claims (Evans, 2000) which made it political dynamite at the time.

"The gospel of the kingdom was an alternative metanarrative to Rome's claims of manifest destiny and its good news of peace (Pax Romana). It was not about individual bliss in the afterlife. The message of the resurrection of Christ in its first-century context was essentially a counter-imperial proclamation that was subversive to the core" (Streett, 2018, p. 157)

And so in this story Jesus arrives in a disputed military area, and meets a violent and self-destructive man who is 'living among the memories' of his people. The man symbolises, or perhaps embodies the spirit of the people of his area – he is violent and self-destructive. He recognises Jesus, acknowledges him and then proceeds to identify the guiding spirits within himself to him as 'Legion'. Legion, as I noted earlier, is a key word. While now it is understood as simply meaning 'many', back then it had a very specific (and again very political) meaning, it was a Latin word which referred to a number (some thousands) of soldiers – specifically Roman soldiers. In other words this was a place where the people were in violent thrall to the occupying Romans. If these clues aren't enough to tell us what the story is about, there's a final whopping great big one at the climax of the drama. Just at hand, as Jesus exorcises the demons, were a herd of pigs. Of course pigs were (are) unclean animals to the Jews, but very acceptable food for Roman soldiers – the fact that they were there is, in itself, a massive hint. So Jesus frees 'the man' when he sends this spirit of Legion in to the pigs, which then cast themselves in to the sea. What Jesus has done, in ridding the place of the pigs is to have symbolically purified the area – of course observant Jews were not allowed to touch the carcasses of pigs, so driving them into the sea was one of the only ways of getting rid of them.

So here is a story about Jesus, the prophet of Jewish renewal, leading a grass roots uprising against the cult of Caesar, encountering a spirit of (impure) Roman militarism in a place which had been, and would continue to be, a place of conflict between Jews and Romans. Jesus' response is to purify the area and drive the unclean spirits/animals in to the sea. It 'just so happens' (nothing in the Bible really 'just so happens') that in doing so Jesus

lampoons the ritual sacrifices to Poseidon/Neptune¹². In this way of reading, this isn't a story of cosmic warfare in terms of angelic hosts pitted against one another, except in the metaphorical sense of powers. Rather it is classic example of Jesus at his subversive work, as he leads his followers in to a defiance of Roman rule. While we can understand the powers at work in this narrative in a spiritual sense, we should foremost understand the story in a physical one.

CONCLUSION

The earthly revolution that Jesus (and his cousin John) advocated and led was a non-violent one – neither were interested at any stage in taking on the Romans militarily, although initially some of Jesus' more bellicose followers were more inclined to do so. Early Christians too were non-violent in their resistance, and it was not until the adoption of Christianity as a state religion by Constantine in 313 CE that Christianity and militarism were able to live comfortably together, and not until Augustine's 'Contra Faustum Manichaeum' in 400 CE that war became 'just' (Enns & Mosher (Eds), 2013). So throughout his ministry, Jesus continually steered his followers away from the idea of a violent uprising.

In this story he symbolically purifies and exorcises the whole idea of militarism from an area – unfortunately, if it was indeed Gadara it would later be laid to waste by the Romans anyway. Some argue that this non-violent approach sets Jesus, and the Christian narrative, apart from the God of the Old Testament, my feeling is that this is to misunderstand both Jesus, and the Old Testament (I'd go so far as to describe this kind of approach as broadly anti-Semitic). Jesus was not a Christian, he was a Jewish reformer, who along with his 'partner in crime' (treason & sedition) John the Baptist, led a Jewish uprising against the Roman authorities and their puppet administration. Jesus' God was the God of the Old Testament, not the Christianised version of it, nor the Latin or Greek sense of God on

¹² It seems highly possible that Jesus and his followers did drive a herd of pigs into the sea here, although this would (in my experience of pigs at least) have been no easy task, and certainly not if there were some thousands of the animals. Sailors were known to sacrifice horses to Poseidon, who was a major Greek deity (equivalent to the Roman Sea God Neptune), particularly in cities such as Corinth. Mithridates VI (Mithradates) the great enemy of Rome was said to have driven a full chariot and four horses in to the sea as an offering to Poseidon. So driving pigs, the unclean animal, in to the realm of the God of empire feels like the kind of stunt that was entirely in keeping with Jesus' penchant for subversive anti-empire signalling. It is certainly interesting that it appears in all three gospels just after the story of Jesus calming the storm, which itself might be read as being about the way in which Jesus is able to calm the chaotic storm of Rome itself, or his supremacy over tyrants such as Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who the writer of Maccabees reminds us, thought he could: "command the waves of the sea" – but actually couldn't (2 Maccabees 9:8).

which much of Christian theology has become based, a point heavily relied on by Process and other Relational theologians who rely heavily on the differentiation between their approach and that of 'Classical' theology.¹³

The story of the Gerasene Demoniac is a great example of the way that the stories of Jesus are told. They are always political, often they are satirical too, they are full of rich textual images and wordplay. Our approaches to the text govern the way we see them: to read them without any thought about the depth or significance of the words employed risks that we miss the subtlety of a deeply subversive, political text about a deeply religious Jewish reformer leading a non-violent peasants revolt against the occupying Roman authorities.

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IMAGES

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exorcism_of_the_Gerasene_demoniac#/media/File:Healing_of_the_demon-possessed.jpg

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¹³ Process Theology's principal exponents in recent years have included John Cobb (Cobb, 2015) and various others, but it comes initially from the work of Alfred North Whitehead. (Whitehead, 1978)