

The Gerasene Demoniac Tony Hopkins

Introduction

Today's episode of Bible Love explores a story found in Mark 5:1-20, Matthew 8:28-33, and Luke 8:26-34. Typically Mt follow Mk more closely than Lk does, and Mk's version of any synoptic story tends to be the briefest of the three accounts. This story goes against both of those trends: it is Lk who more closely mirrors Mk, and Mt is the one who offers the briefest account, less than half as many words as either Mk or Lk.

The story is generally referred to as "the Gerasene demoniac" or "the Gaderene demoniacs." While Mk and Lk locate the story in "the country of the Gerasenes," Mt locates it in "the country of the Gaderenes." The two place names are noticeably similar, and both locations were in the region known as the Decapolis (literally "ten cities"), a Gentile region east of the Jordan River. Much ink has been devoted to explaining—or resolving—the difference, but it may be a case of much ado about very little: the places were connected geographically, the names were similar, and the location makes very little difference to the significance of the story. Perhaps the more striking difference is that Mk and Lk tell of *one* man living among the tombs while Mt tells of *two*. This is one of several instances where Mt "doubles" a character from Mk. Where Mk has one demonic in this story, Mt has two. Where Mk has one blind man healed by Jesus outside of Jericho (Mk 10:46ff), Mt has two (Mt 20:29ff; see also Mt 9:27ff). Mt even has Jesus riding two donkeys into Jerusalem during the triumphal entry! (Mt 21:7). This "doubling" seems to be a literary technique of Mt (or the Matthean community, who put the Gospel into its final form), possibly because in Jewish Law, *two* witnesses were legally binding (and were considered to confirm that something was beyond doubt).

Demons in the ancient (and modern) world

Virtually every first century worldview, including the New Testament, assumed a supernatural realm which was mirrored by the human realm. Good persons and evil persons, on some level, were in constant conflict, struggling to gain the upper hand; in the same way, supernatural beings, both good and evil, were constantly contending against one another. In the New Testament, these beings are referred to as angels, who are in the service of God, and demons, who are in the service of Satan. In the following centuries, these supernatural beings were organized into a sophisticated hierarchy, not unlike ranks in the military. Modernity and post-modernity have largely deconstructed these past worldviews: far fewer people today believe in personal beings which they would refer to as "angels" or "demons." At the same time, it's hard to look at modern history and doubt that there is both cosmic good and cosmic evil in the world. Simply watching the evening news or checking our internet news feed, it seems clear that our struggle is not only against flesh and blood but also against powers and principalities of evil itself (see Eph 6:12).

It is also relevant to the present story that modern people—including medical doctors, psychologists, and theologians—have had complex and often fruitful discussions about how the worldview of the New Testament might or might not correlate to a modern, or scientific, worldview. Specifically, the question is: are there things which we would attribute to physical or emotional illness which the New Testament attributes to evil, or unclean, or demonic, spirits? For instance, is the boy in Mk 9—who is said to have "a spirit"—epileptic? The text's description of him certainly sounds like seizures or convulsions. Or could the man in this text from Mk 5 have schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder?—his identity is certainly blurred in frightening ways. (Actually, having had both a mother and a brother with addiction issues, if I were going to correlate this man's condition to a modern one, it would be addiction. In some real sense, he is powerless in the face of his condition, and he needs the help of a greater power to overcome it. These are, quite literally, the first two of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: to admit our own powerlessness and our need for a Greater Power to help us.)

While these discussions (about how biblical texts correlate to modern conditions) may have merit—indeed they seem almost inescapable for thoughtful modern readers—suffice it to say that the ancient worldview and the modern worldview cannot be reduced to a one-to-one correspondence; that is, it oversimplifies both scripture and science to correlate New Testament events and conditions to corresponding events and conditions from our world. For the purposes of Bible Love, we will instead concentrate on the text. Since Mk's version of the story is the oldest, I will focus on it. In Mk's (very skillful) telling of the story, there are five scenes:

1. the setting/introduction of characters (5:1-5)
2. Jesus and the demon(s) (5:6-10)
3. the pigs (5:11-13)
4. the witnesses (5:14-17)
5. responses by the healed man and Jesus (5:18-20)

The setting/introduction of characters

Jesus has crossed to "the other side of the sea" (the Sea of Galilee). This puts Jesus in the region of the Decapolis, and it is the first time in Mk that Jesus has been in a *Gentile* region. When Jesus gets out of the boat, he "immediately" encounters a man with "an unclean spirit." The man is described at great length:

- he lives among the tombs (which are probably caves);
- no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain;
- he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces;
- no one had the strength to subdue him;
- night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.

Remarkably, other than Jesus, no one in Mk has been described in greater detail, not even the disciples! The description of the man highlights his dire situation:

- he is completely isolated, utterly alone;
- because he lives in the graveyard, he is ritually unclean—in the world of Judaism, this fact underscores his isolation;
- living in the graveyard is an almost unbearably painful oxymoron: he is not dead, but he is not really alive either;
- he is howling— not like a person but like an animal;
- the noun "shackles" and verb "restrain" suggest that he is like a prisoner (though apparently these were attempts to keep him from injury);
- "bruising himself with stones" – perhaps convulsions, perhaps striking himself, but either way, it is a painful, desperate situation.

Jesus and the demon(s)

The demons (speaking through the man) immediately identify Jesus as "the Son of the Most High God." In the first century world, both demons and Jesus belong to the realm of the supernatural, so the demons know who Jesus is. (The same thing happens in Mk 1:24. The first miracle in Mk is Jesus casting out an unclean spirit at the synagogue in Capernaum. As here, the demon there knows Jesus and identifies him as "the Holy One of God.") The man acknowledges Jesus' identity by bowing down to Jesus. The man's words and actions recall Mk 3:11: "Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!'"

The man shouts "at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.'" Having bowed to Jesus a moment ago, the man now shouts his demands, another indication of the confusion and chaos in which he lives. The word "adjure," not at all part of our daily vocabulary, means to command or constrain by oath. Ironically, the man says/does three things typical of an exorcist (rather than the possessed person). (1) He

identifies Jesus by name. In the biblical world, to know someone's name was to have power over them. The demons are hoping to use Jesus' name to leverage power over him (though that hope is in vain). (2) He "adjures" Jesus, that is, he attempts to control, or command him, by the power of an oath. The exorcists of Acts 19 use the same strategy when they try to coerce an unclean spirit by saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul proclaims" (Acts 19:13). (3) He invokes the name, or power, of God.

What is meant by "do not torment me" likely depends on whose voice is primary. For the demons, being cast out would be felt as "torment." If the reader primarily hears the voice of the desperate man, it probably means, "Don't torment me by offering me false hope!" As stated in vv.3-4, every other attempt to help, control, or subdue the man has been a complete failure. If Jesus can't really help him, he doesn't want to get his hopes up.

"Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion, for we are many'" (5:9). Again the story reflects the biblical notion that to know someone's name is have to power over them. That both parties attempt to leverage this power recalls the story in which Jacob wrestles all night with the angel (Gen 32:22-32); each tries to use the other's name to gain the upper hand. The man's response, like his description in vv. 3-5, signifies the hopelessness of the man's situation. A "legion" was a unit of the Roman army, comprised of ten cohorts of 480 men; the destructive power of this military unit symbolizes the destructive power of the demon(s). Note, too, the shift in pronouns, from "my" (singular) to "we" (plural). Once again, the man's identity and life are blurred into the life and identity of the demons, yet another indicator of the chaos and confusion of his existence.

The pigs

A new detail is presented by the narrator: a "great heard of swine" are feeding nearby. The demons "beg" to be allowed to enter the pigs. The narrative is moving toward its outcome: the demons began by making demands, but their attempt was in vain; they tried commanding Jesus with oaths, but they had no success; they tried using his name to gain power over him, but they failed; now they take the only course left to them: they "beg" Jesus not to utterly destroy them.

Reminding the reader that Jesus is both powerful and merciful, Jesus grants their request. Once the demons enter the pigs, the entire herd—some 2,000 of them! (v. 13)—rush over the bank into the sea. The significance of the sea cannot be overstated. In the biblical world, the sea is the dwelling place of evil.

- The greatest crisis—and greatest miracle—in the history of Israel takes place when the Israelites are trapped between pharaoh's army and the sea (Ex 14). The former is the greatest of human evils, and the latter is the greatest of supernatural evils. This understanding explains why the situation is so dire and why the miracle is so great!
- In the book of Revelation, the great beast comes from the sea (Rev 13:1); and when the new heaven and new earth are established, "there was no longer any sea" (Rev. 21:1).
- In the previous chapter of Mk (ch 4), the disciples are terrified by the storm. That experienced fishermen were so afraid reflects their belief that evil resides in the sea. It also explains their amazement when Jesus calms the storm. With his mere utterance, "Peace, be still," the sea is utterly calm. As in this story (of the Gerasene demoniac), a word from Jesus completely banishes evil. The disciples respond with complete amazement: "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mk 4:41).

Now we, as modern readers, can understand why the pigs—actually, the demons—rush into the sea: having been banished by Jesus, the demons are going home!

The witnesses

If we are reading Mk's Gospel for the first time, it seems that the story is over. With masterful literary technique, however, Mk extends the story. The swineherds quickly run off and tell, both "in the city and the country," what has happened (v. 14). Understandably, many people come

to site of this remarkable event. The formerly possessed man is described in terms which illustrate the complete transformation of his life.

- where he used to bruise himself with stones, he is now sitting calmly, in complete control of himself;
- where he used to be naked, he is now clothed;
- where he used to be out of his mind, he is now “in his right mind” (v. 15).

The people’s response is two-fold. They are “afraid”—who wouldn’t be, in the face of the power Jesus has demonstrated?!—and they beg Jesus to leave. Their desire for Jesus to leave seems a combination of the upheaval Jesus has caused and their inability to understand the power he has displayed—we often fear what we don’t understand. Careful readers of the Gospel will also note that transformation often has a cost. In Mk 2, the paralytic is healed—a source of great joy to him and his friends—but the homeowner’s roof has been severely damaged. Similarly, the demoniac’s life has been transformed, but the owner of the herd has lost 2,000 pigs, which were extremely valuable.

Responses by the healed man and Jesus

While the people of the region beg Jesus to leave, the healed man begs Jesus that “he might be with him” (v. 18). We may now observe that the verb “beg” has been used four times in the story, twice by the demons, once by the people, and once by the healed man—in an effectively subtle way, Mk has made clear who is in control of this entire situation! The man’s request to Jesus that he “might be with him” echoes the primary function of the apostles in Mk 1:14: “he appointed twelve, whom he named apostles, *to be with him.*” This man, however, is not to be an apostle; instead, he is to have the equally important role of being a disciple and a witness. Immediately after this story, Jesus will leave Gentile territory; he will cross back over the sea of Galilee and return to Jewish territory. But the final significance of this story is that *Jesus himself initiates the mission to the Gentiles*. He commissions this man, saying, “Go home to your own people, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you” (v. 19). Like a good disciple and witness, the man responds in obedience: “And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed” (v. 20). Significantly, the verb translated “proclaim” in v. 20 is the same verb (*kērrusō*) that is used of John the Baptist in Mk 1:4. Just as John had a (co)mission from God, this man now has a (co)mission from the son of God; and both respond in faithful obedience. Actually, it is not unfair to say that just as God initiated salvation for the Jews through John the Baptist, Jesus now initiates salvation for the Gentiles through this man!