

Spirit Possession as a Cross-cultural Experience

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Various cross-cultural parallels to NT spirit-possession narratives (in terms of both behavior and interpretation) suggest that scholars should respect the NT descriptions as potentially reflecting eyewitness accounts or sources. Anthropologists have documented spirit possession or analogous experiences in a majority of cultures, although interpretations of the experiences vary. In some cases, possession trance can produce violent behavior toward oneself (cf. Mark 5:5, 9:22) or others (cf. Acts 19:16), and some cultures associate it with publicly recognized, apparently superhuman feats of strength (cf. Mark 5:4) or knowledge (cf. Mark 1:24, Acts 16:16–17).

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In this article, I am not primarily interested in the exegesis of specific passages about demonization or the theology of the early Christian works in which they appear. Rather, my focus involves a more fundamental historical question: whether many of the sorts of descriptions we find in early Christian documents reflect genuine eyewitness material. The argument here will not relieve scholars of the task of examining these texts individually to determine their editorial tendenz and other features and discussing to what extent the evidence suggests historical tradition in a particular account.¹ What I do wish to challenge here is the frequent assumption

1. For detailed examination of NT exorcism passages, see sources such as Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson / Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993); idem, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); for one approach to evaluating redactional elements, see Benjamin E. Williams, *Miracle Stories in the Biblical Book Acts of the Apostles* (Mellen Biblical Press Series 59; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2001). I am grateful to Paul Eddy (whose work also appears in *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* [ed. Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 67–69) for sharing with me some of the initial sources from which this study grew (in addition to those I had already cited in my *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 285). I will provide additional anthropological sources, and more-detailed interaction with some of them, in Appendix B of my forthcoming *Miracles: The Plausibility of Healing Accounts in the Gospels and Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson).

that these descriptions cannot stem from eyewitnesses. The basis for this challenge is the frequency of analogous descriptions today.

In this article, I contend that spirit-possession claims (known to NT scholars from the Gospels and Acts) are a fairly widespread cross-cultural experience. They are often expressed and interpreted in culturally specific ways, but the claims themselves appear widely. That some accounts today bear striking resemblance to reports from Mediterranean antiquity warns against skepticism that the ancient accounts can reflect genuine eyewitness sources or experience.²

Even some NT accounts that some scholars consider overly dramatized, such as the self-destructive behavior of possessed persons in Mark 5:5 and 9:22, the violent behavior in Acts 19:16, and the mantic behavior in Acts 16:16–17, have clear analogues in modern accounts not influenced by them. After surveying the pervasiveness of the experiences and various anthropological interpretations, I will briefly note these features of some possession accounts in modern sources. I will then conclude with a sample ancient depiction that has often been treated as fictitious yet likely reflects at least some genuine acquaintance with the character of possession behavior.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

New Testament scholars have often treated spirit possession as an ancient Mediterranean (or even early Christian) belief in isolation from apparently analogous phenomena today.³ Although some Gospel scholars have noted current analogies,⁴ most NT scholars appear unfamiliar with the voluminous anthropological documentation of analogous claims today. While I will not rehearse in any detail the accounts in the Gospels and Acts with which readers are familiar, I want to introduce concisely into the NT discussion a broader repertoire of sources for consideration. One could illustrate the widespread character of possession experiences abundantly from missiological literature (often with theological perspectives shaped by the NT models), but I focus instead on anthropological literature, which is largely independent of NT descriptions.

2 Some have argued for significant eyewitness tradition in the Gospels (notably Richard J Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006]), I argue here that NT spirit-possession accounts cannot be used against that thesis.

3 E.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 231–32. Mediterranean antiquity does, of course, provide the most important context to examine (as also in my *Matthew*, 283–86).

4 E.g., Marcus J Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision (Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship)* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 62; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991), 315–17; for Luke–Acts, see Todd Klutz, *The Exorcism Stories in Luke–Acts: A Sociostylistic Reading* (SNTSMS 129, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 196–97. Some earlier scholars used psychological approaches, see S. Vernon McCasland, *By the Finger of God: Demon Possession and Exorcism in Early Christianity in the Light of Modern Views of Mental Illness* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

I pause to observe here that an anthropological approach to spirit possession may prove useful even to scholars more generally reticent about anthropological models. Whereas the availability of concrete ancient sources regarding customs (my own usual scholarly focus) sometimes relativizes the value of more abstract anthropological approaches to the NT, beliefs in control by a foreign spirit are so common among unrelated cultures that they appear to reflect a common human experience of some sort rather than a mere custom. Although the particular expressions vary from one culture to the next, anthropologists have documented possession claims in some form in a strong majority of the world's cultures studied. Their wide occurrence beyond a particular culture warns against assuming that they are generated solely from a particular cultural framework (e.g., early Judaism or Hellenism), although I readily acknowledge that ancient contexts such as these are the primary contexts for understanding NT interpretations of the reports.⁵

Whereas seeking to provide a transcultural framework for classifying or interpreting spirit-possession claims would be beyond the scope of this study (and unlikely to command consensus in any case), I note the breadth of interpretations to illustrate that we may take for granted the pervasiveness of experiences of this sort more readily than the interpretive constructions modern reporters sometimes place on them. Some factors such as neurological stress are fairly common to many of the accounts, but the postulation of other factors often depends on the sociological, psychological, and other models of explanation employed. Although Western scientific interpretations tend to be materialistic, increasing sensitivity to local cultures has invited a growing appreciation for indigenous interpretations that often include the activity of actual spirits. I am sympathetic to this appreciation of non-Western perspectives. My limited purpose in this article, however, is to introduce the value of the broader discussion rather than to arbitrate among the competing scientific or other interpretations.

THE PERVASIVENESS OF POSSESSION BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOR

Despite various interpretations assigned to it, no anthropologist today denies possession trances and the like.⁶ Possession experience is not limited to either the NT or the ancient eastern Mediterranean world. One specialist, Erika Bourguignon, has observed that spirit-possession beliefs are geographically and culturally pervasive, "as any reader of ethnographies knows."⁷ After sampling 488 societies, she found spirit-possession beliefs

5. My dominant focus, for example, in *Matthew*, 283–86.

6. This denial has been regarded as the anthropological equivalent of "being a 'flat-earthier'" (Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1969], 4 n. 2, as cited in David C. Lewis, *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy, or Fact?* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989], 321–22 n. 15).

7. Erika Bourguignon, "Spirit Possession Belief and Social Structure," in *The Realm of the Extra-Human: Ideas and Actions* (ed. Agehananda Bharati; The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 17–26,

in 74% of them (that is, 360 societies), with particularly high ranges in the islands of the Pacific (88%) and 77% around the Mediterranean.⁸ Among these, the forms of "possession" vary. Thus, 16% of these 360 societies have possession trance only, 22% have other forms of possession, and 35% have both.⁹ The overall evidence suggests some sort of common experience in conjunction with more-specific cultural patterning.

Most regions of the world provide some examples, though possession experience is more common in some regions than in others.¹⁰ A concise geographic survey would leave no doubt about this; for this reason, in the notes to this paragraph, I seek to illustrate at some length (yet not comprehensively) just how pervasively anthropologists have documented possession experience. As noted above, they appear widely in the Pacific.¹¹ More often studied are the common experiences throughout Africa, where anthropologists have documented these experiences in a variety

esp p 18 (hereafter, *Realm of Extra-Human*), cf also idem, "Introduction A Framework for the Comparative Study of Altered States of Consciousness," in *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change* (ed Erika Bourguignon, Columbus Ohio State University), 3–35, esp pp 17–19 (hereafter, *Religion, States, and Change*), idem, "The Self, the Behavioral Environment, and the Theory of Spirit Possession," in *Culture and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology* (ed Melford E Spiro, New York Free Press, 1965), 39–60, Janice Boddy, "Spirit Possession Revisited Beyond Instrumentality," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994) 407–34, esp p 409, Raymond Firth, foreword in *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* (ed John Beattie and John Middleton, New York Africana, 1969), ix–xiv, esp p ix (hereafter, *Spirit Mediumship*), Soheir A Morsy, "Spirit Possession in Egyptian Ethnomedicine Origins, Comparison and Historical Specificity," in *Women's Medicine The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond* (ed I M Lewis, Ahmed al-Safi, and Sayyid Hurreiz, Edinburgh International African Institute–Edinburgh University, 1991), 189–208, esp p 189 (hereafter, *Women's Medicine*) For the wide geographic distribution of cultures practicing trance, possession trance, and spirit possession, with maps, see Bourguignon, "World Distribution and Patterns of Possession States," in *Trance and Possession States* (ed Raymond Prince, Montreal R M Bucke Memorial Society, 1968) 3–34, esp pp 18–32 (hereafter, *Trance and Possession States*) On the pervasiveness of negatively perceived spirit "possession" and attempts to control it, see I M Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Middlesex Penguin, 1971), 100–126

8 Bourguignon, "Belief and Structure," 19–21, idem, appendix to *Religion, States, and Change*, 359–78, followed also in Harold I Kaplan and Benjamin J Sadock, *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* (4th ed, Baltimore Williams & Wilkins, 1985), 259, 1237 It occurs in the West, though often interpreted less benignly (June Macklin, "A Connecticut Yankee in Summer Land," in *Case Studies in Spirit Possession* [ed Vincent Crapanzaro and Vivian Garrison, New York Wiley, 1977], 41–86, esp p 42, hereafter, *Case Studies*)

9 Bourguignon, "Belief and Structure," 21

10 See, for example, Vincent Crapanzaro and Vivian Garrison, *Case Studies, Felicitas D Goodman, How about Demons? Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1988), 1–24, 126, Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* For bibliography, see Boddy, "Spirit Possession," 428–34 (listing 221 sources), for zar, tumbura, and bori cults, see G P Makris and Richard Natvig, "The Zar, Tumbura and Bori Cults A Select Annotated Bibliography," in *Women's Medicine*, 233–82

11 E.g., A R Tippett, *Solomon Islands Christianity A Study in Growth and Obstruction* (World Studies of Churches in Mission, London Lutterworth, 1967), 14, 250–51, Catherine H Berndt, "The Role of Native Doctors in Aboriginal Australia," in *Magic, Faith, and Healing Studies in Primitive Psychiatry Today* (ed Ari Kiev, New York Free Press, 1964), 264–84, esp p 269 (hereafter, *Magic, Faith, and Healing*), in New Guinea, see R F Salisbury, "Possession among the Siane (New Guinea)," *Transcultural Psychiatric Research Review* 3 (1966) 108–16

of forms in the northeast, southeast, central east, northwest, and west.¹² Less widely studied but nevertheless documented in anthropological studies, they also appear in the Middle East, many parts of Asia, and the Americas.¹³ Local incidents of "possession" on a notable scale (though

12 *Throughout Africa* see John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (Garden City, NY Doubleday, 1970), 106, 111, 113, 249–50, John Beattie and John Middleton, *Spirit Mediumship*, passim

Northeast see Richard Natvig, "Some Notes on the History of the Zar Cult in Egypt," in *Women's Medicine*, 178–88, idem, "Oromos, Slaves, and the Zar Spirits A Contribution to the History of the Zar Cult," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 20 (1987) 669–89, Michel Leris, *La possession et ses aspects theatreaux chez les Ethiopiens de Gender* (Paris Librairie Plon, 1958), I M Lewis, "Spirit Possession in Northern Somaliland," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 188–219, Simon D Messing, "Group Therapy and Social Status in the Zar Cult of Ethiopia," *American Anthropologist* 60 (1958) 1,120–47, Janice Boddy, "Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance," *American Ethnologist* 15 (1988) 4–27, idem, *Wombs and Alien Spirits Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) See Lucie Wood Saunders, "Variants in Zar Experience in an Egyptian Village," in *Case Studies*, 177–92, Alice Morton, "Dawit Competition and Integration in an Ethiopian Wuqabi Cult Group," in *ibid* , 193–234, see Joseph Tubiana, "Zar and Buda in Northern Ethiopia," in *Women's Medicine*, 19–33, Pamela Constantinides, "The History of Zar in the Sudan Theories of Origin, Recorded Observation and Oral Tradition," in *ibid* , 83–99, Susan M Kenyon, "The Story of a Tin Box Zar in the Sudanese Town of Sennar," in *ibid* , 100–117, Gerasimos P Makris and Ahmad al-Safi, "The Tumbura Spirit Possession Cult of the Sudan," in *ibid* , 118–36, Virginia Luling, "Some Possession Cults in Southern Somalia," in *ibid* , 167–77

Southeast see Michael Gelfand, "Psychiatric Disorders as Recognized by the Shona," in *Magic, Faith, and Healing*, 156–73, Peter Fry, *Spirits of Protest Spirit-Mediums and the Articulation of Consensus among Zezuru of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1976), in Madagascar, see Lesley A Sharp, *The Possessed and the Dispossessed Spirits, Identity, and Power in a Madagascar Migrant Town* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1993), Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, see Michael Lambek, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery, and Spirit Possession* (Toronto University of Toronto Press, 1993), elsewhere, see G Kingsley Garbett, "Spirit Mediums as Mediators in Valley Korekore Society," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 104–27, Elizabeth Colson, "Central and South Africa Spirit Possession among the Tonga of Zambia," in *ibid* , 69–103

Central east see Grace Harris, "Possession 'Hysteria' in a Kenya Tribe," *American Anthropologist* 59 (1957) 1046–66, D A Noble, "Demoniacal Possession among the Giryama," *Man* 61 (1961) 50–52, Linda L Giles, "Possession Cults on the Swahili Coast A Re-examination of Theories of Marginality," *Africa* 57 (1987) 234–58, Roger Gomm, "Bargaining from Weakness Spirit Possession on the South Kenya Coast," *Man* 10 (1975) 530–43, John Beattie, "Spirit Mediumship in Bunyoro," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 159–70

Northeast see Vincent Crapanzaro, "Mohammed and Dawia Possession in Morocco," in *Case Studies*, 141–76, Sophie Ferchou, "The Possession Cults of Tunisia A Religious System Functioning as a System of Reference and a Social Field for Performing Actions," in *Women's Medicine*, 209–18

West see Andras Zempleni, "From Symptom to Sacrifice The Story of Khady Fall," in *Case Studies*, 87–140, Margaret J Field, "Spirit Possession in Ghana," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 3–13, Raymond Prince, "Indigenous Yoruba Psychiatry," in *Magic, Faith, and Healing*, 84–120 See Nicole Echard, "The Hausa Bori Possession Cult in the Ader Region of Niger," in *Women's Medicine*, 64–80, Ismail H Abdalla, "Neither Friend nor Foe The Malam Practitioner—Yan Bori Relationship in Hausaland," in *ibid* , 37–48

13 *Middle East* Taghi Modarressi, "The Zar Cult in South Iran," 149–155 in *Trance and Possession States*, Zubaydah Ashkanani, "Zar in a Changing World Kuwait," in *Women's Medicine*, 219–30

Westerners often attribute these to mass hysteria) have also been documented.¹⁴

The few NT scholars mentioned above who have noted anthropological parallels for possession behavior have rightly observed that it is fairly transcultural.¹⁵ Transcultural elements in fact include a biological element that cannot be reduced to (though may be patterned according to) cultural models. Studies reveal “an altered neurophysiology” during many possession states.¹⁶ While some anthropologists note that neurophysiological studies cannot resolve whether supernatural factors might supplement natural ones, it is clear that neurophysiological changes, including hyperarousal, do occur.¹⁷

In a diverse sampling of societies, possession produces major personality changes, with notable, abrupt alterations in “behavior, timbre and pitch

Parts of Asia John N Gray, “Bayu Utarnu Ghost Exorcism and Sacrifice in Nepal,” *Ethnology* 26 (1987) 179–99, Larry Peters, *Ecstasy and Healing in Nepal An Ethnopsychiatric Study of Tamang Shamanism* (Malibu Undena, 1981), John T Hitchcock and Rex L Jones, eds, *Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas* (New Delhi Vikas, 1976, repr, 1994), Alex Wayman, “The Religious Meaning of Possession States (with Indo-Tibetan Emphasis),” in *Trance and Possession States*, 167–79, Bruce Kapferer, *A Celebration of Demons Exorcism and the Aesthetics of Healing in Sri Lanka* (2nd ed, Oxford Berg, 1991), Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute Women, Power, and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 106–7 See Gananath Obeyesekere, “Psychocultural Exegesis of a Case of Spirit Possession in Sri Lanka,” in *Case Studies*, 235–94, Clive S Kessler, “Conflict and Sovereignty in Kelantanese Malay Spirit Seances,” in *ibid*, 295–332

The Americas Macklin, “Yankee”, Felicitas D Goodman, Jeannette H Henney, and Esther Pressel, *Trance, Healing, and Hallucination Three Field Studies in Religious Experience* (New York Wiley, 1974, hereafter, *Trance, Healing, and Hallucination*), Jay D Dobbin, *The Jombee Dance of Montserrat A Study of Trance Ritual in the West Indies* (Columbus Ohio State University Press, 1986), Esther Pressel, “Umbanda in São Paulo Religious Innovation in a Developing Society,” in *Religion, States, and Change*, 264–318 See idem, “Negative Spirit Possession in Experienced Brazilian Umbanda Spirit Mediums,” in *Case Studies*, 333–64, Joan D Koss, “Spirits as Socializing Agents A Case Study of a Puerto Rican Girl Reared in a Matrocentric Family,” in *ibid*, 365–82, Vivian Garrison, “The ‘Puerto Rican Syndrome’ in Psychiatry and *Espritismo*,” in *ibid*, 383–449 See Emerson Douyon, “L’Examen au Rorschach des Vaudouisants Haitiens,” in *Trance and Possession States*, 97–119, Ari Kiev, “The Psychotherapeutic Value of Spirit-Possession in Haiti,” in *ibid*, 143–48

14 E.g., Keller, *Hammer*, 107, Felicity S Edwards, “Amafufunyana Spirit Possession Treatment and Interpretation,” in *Afro-Christian Religion and Healing in Southern Africa* (ed G C Oosthuizen, S D Edwards, W H Wessels, and I Hexham, *African Studies* 8, Lewiston, NY Edwin Mellen, 1989), 207–25, esp p 220

15 E.g., Borg, *Vision*, 62, Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 315–17

16 Raymond Prince, “Can the EGG Be Used in the Study of Possession States?” in *Trance and Possession States*, 121–37, esp pp 127–29

17 For not resolving whether supernatural factors supplement natural factors, see Goodman, *Demons*, 126 For comparison with multiple personality disorder, see, e.g., Firth, foreword to *Spirit Mediumship*, ix–x, Erika Bourguignon, “Multiple Personality, Possession Trance, and the Psychic Unity of Mankind,” *Ethos* 17 (1989) 371–84, Field, “Spirit Possession,” 3 *Neurophysiological changes* Goodman, *Demons*, 1–24, 126

of voice."¹⁸ Those leaving the "possession" state often have no recollection of how they acted while "possessed."¹⁹ Thus, Raymond Firth notes that field experience has confronted social anthropologists with

dramatic changes of personality in men or women they were studying—startling yet evidently accustomed alterations of behaviour, with trembling, sweating, groaning, speaking with strange voices, assumption of a different identity, purporting to be a spirit not a human being, giving commands or foretelling the future in a new authoritative way. Sometimes it has been hard for the anthropologist to persuade himself that it is really the same person as before whom he is watching or confronting, so marked is the personality change.²⁰

Sometimes, the possessed act like the spirits that are believed to possess them.²¹

CULTURAL VARIATIONS

Despite the common neurological character of possession trance, possession behavior and beliefs vary widely among cultures. Forms of possession behavior vary in some respects even in the NT; it is possible that different types of possession existed in the early Christians' milieu and that cultural features sometimes either patterned some common elements or invited some particular transcultural elements to the fore. Thus, for example, the larger Gentile culture apparently valued the mantic abilities of the enslaved woman in Acts 16:16 yet recognized the danger in the more violent possession in Acts 19:16. As we explore analogies in a

18. A. R. Tippett, "Spirit Possession as It Relates to Culture and Religion: A Survey of Anthropological Literature," in *Demon Possession: A Medical, Historical, Anthropological and Theological Symposium. Papers Presented at the University of Notre Dame, January 8–11, 1975* (ed. John Warwick Montgomery; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1976), 143–74, esp. pp. 162–64. See, e.g., T. K. Oesterreich, *Possession: Demoniacal and Other among Primitive Races, in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modern Times* (trans. D. Ibberson; New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1966), 19–22; Mbiti, *Religions*, 225–26; Michael Gelfand, *Shona Religion: With Special Reference to the Makorekore* (Cape Town: Juta, 1962) 169; Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (London: Chapman / Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 177; David Instone-Brewer, "Jesus and the Psychiatrists," in *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm* (ed. Anthony N. S. Lane; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 133–48, esp. p. 140; cf. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937), 165.

19. E.g., Field, "Spirit Possession," 3, 6; Robin Horton, "Types of Spirit Possession in Kalabari Religion," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 14–49, esp. p. 23; Gelfand, *Shona Religion*, 166, 169; Eric de Rosny, *Healers in the Night* (trans. Robert R. Barr; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 185–86; cf. Michael Singleton, "Spirits and 'Spiritual Direction': The Pastoral Counselling of the Possessed," in *Christianity in Independent Africa* (ed. Edward Fasholé-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrian Hastings, and Godwin Tasie; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 471–78, esp. p. 477 (hereafter, *Christianity in Independent Africa*).

20. Firth, foreword to *Spirit Mediumship*, x (mentioning his own astonishment).

21. See, e.g., Pierre Verger, "Trance and Convention in Nago-Yoruba Spirit Mediumship," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 50–66, esp. pp. 50–51, 53.

broader range of cultures, therefore, we should allow for even greater variations in expression. This diversity need not surprise us; cultural conceptions shape the experience of many illnesses, sometimes including behavior that other societies associate with possession.²² For example, observers have noted one form of possession associated specifically with initial encounters with overhead airplanes.²³

Not all alleged activity with spirits produces possession behavior.²⁴ In many regions, for example, shamans believe that they communicate with spirits without being controlled by them. By contrast, shamans in some other regions believe that they are fully possessed, whether briefly or over a long period of time.²⁵ Possession states can be viewed as voluntary or involuntary,²⁶ though sometimes these alternatives coexist in the same society (e.g., voluntary for the medium but "hysterical" for the afflicted person being treated).²⁷ For an example of temporary, voluntary possession, mediums in many traditional African societies remain in control of their own minds except when spirit-possessed; they function as mediums only when in a trance state.²⁸ For such purposes, people can seek or inspire spirit possession, with drumming being one common technique.²⁹

Possession behavior often conforms to patterns particular to the cultures where it appears,³⁰ and some possessed persons respond in ste-

22 E.g., Bert Kaplan and Dale Johnson, "The Social Meaning of Navajo Psychopathology and Psychotherapy," in *Magic, Faith, and Healing*, 203–29, esp p 203

23 Colson, "Possession," 79, 85

24 Some groups also distinguish their revelatory trance states from possession (cf Albert de Surgy, *L'Église du Christianisme Céleste Un exemple d'Église prophétique au Bénin* [Paris Karthala, 2001], 216–17)

25 Tippett, "Possession," 165 (following Eliade), Peters, *Healing*, 10–11 For various proposed models, see Stanley C Krippner, "Conflicting Perspectives on Shamans and Shamanism Points and Counterpoints," *American Psychologist* (November 2002) 962–77

26 Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 64

27 Peters, *Healing*, 147–48

28 Mbiti, *Religions*, 225–26, cf Raymond Firth, *Tikopia Ritual and Belief* (Boston Beacon, 1967), 298

29 See Mbiti, *Religions*, 106, Peters, *Healing*, 46, 49, Pressel, "Negative Possession," 344, Aylward Shorter, "The *Migawo* Peripheral Spirit Possession and Christian Prejudice," *Anthropos* 65 (1970) 110–26, esp p 114, Firth, foreword to *Spirit Mediumship*, xiii, John Beattie and John Middleton, introduction to *Spirit Mediumship*, xvii–xxx, esp p xxvi, Horton, "Types," 19, Verger, "Trance," 55–59, Aidan Southall, "Spirit Possession and Mediumship among the Alur," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 232–72, esp pp 233, 236, 240–42, 248, 269, Constantines, "Zar," 89, 91, Luling, "Possession Cults," 173, Field, "Spirit Possession," 4, 7, Gelfand, "Disorders," 156, 162, idem, *Shona Religion*, 166–67, in the Dionysus cult in antiquity, Plutarch, *Table Talk* 1 5 2, *Mor* 623B Cf drumming in an exorcism ceremony in Robert F Gray, "The Shetani Cult among the Segeju of Tanzania," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 171–87, esp pp 177–79

30 See, e.g., Verger, "Trance," 64, Southall, "Possession," 243, Firth, *Tikopia Ritual*, 313–14 See, e.g., common African characteristics (e.g., Bennetta Jules-Rosette, "Creative Spirituality from Africa to America Cross-Cultural Influences in Contemporary Religious Forms," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 4 [Winter 1980] 273–85)

reotyped manners.³¹ Thus, for example, Somali possession cults do not emphasize different spirits with distinct behaviors (in contrast to related Sudanese cults); although the possessed dance, they speak little (in contrast to, say, Comoro island possession).³² In traditional Ghana, possession often begins with a stupor, then becomes frenzied.³³ A spirit may possess an established diviner to provide information as to what deity is possessing another person.³⁴ Among traditional Valley Korekore, mediums through whom spirits speak are fairly rare and typically must remain in the area belonging to the spirit possessing them; by contrast, possession more generally is common there, and cult groups dance it out.³⁵

In many cultures, general patterns allow observers to predict the likelihood of some elements, whereas other elements vary considerably. Thus, in Brazilian spiritism, nearly all participants see supernatural beings; in most cases, mediums and initiates are possessed; most include ecstatic trance, usually unconscious; in most cults, possession can be either spontaneous or induced. Nevertheless, these general cultural patterns do not produce complete conformity; for example, whereas over half of participants see spirits of the dead, the proportion is not overwhelming.³⁶

Cultures also vary as to whether they treat trance behavior as positive or negative; these and other interpretations influence how people in trance states behave.³⁷ Even cultures that seem to outsiders to share some common elements may vary with regard to particulars. Thus, while many societies feature spirits of the dead and even possession by ancestor-spirits,³⁸ interpretations vary. Some peoples, for example, regard spirit affliction as a danger caused by an ancestor spirit, but not all peoples view these spirits

31. E.g., Judith D. Gussler, "Social Change, Ecology, and Spirit Possession among the South African Nguni," in *Religion, States, and Change*, 88–126, esp. pp. 123–24; cf. mental illness in Kaplan and Johnson, "Psychopathology," 206.

32. Luling, "Possession Cults," 175.

33. Field, "Spirit Possession," 3–4.

34. *Ibid.*, 8.

35. Garbett, "Mediums," 105.

36. See Harmon A. Johnson, *Authority over the Spirits: Brazilian Spiritism and Evangelical Church Growth* (M.A. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1969), 15–65; I draw here on p. 65, table 3.

37. For variation in perspectives, see Bourguignon, "Distribution," 6–7, 13–15. Some societies have trance without possession; others possession without trance; and still others, possession trance (*ibid.*, 18; *idem*, "Belief and Structure," 21–22). For behavior of people in trance states, see *idem*, "Distribution," 12.

38. *Spirits of the dead*: Beattie and Middleton, introduction to *Spirit Mediumship*, xix–xxii; Beattie, "Mediumship," 162; Horton, "Types," 15; Southall, "Possession," 233, 246–49, 255; F. B. Welbourn, "Spirit Initiation in Ankole and a Christian Spirit Movement in Western Kenya," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 290–306, esp. pp. 291–92; Koss, "Spirits," 372. *Ancestor spirits*: Beattie and Middleton, introduction to *Spirit Mediumship*, xxvii; Field, "Spirit Possession," 9; S. G. Lee, "Spirit Possession among the Zulu," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 128–56, esp. pp. 131–32; Keller, *Hammer*, 131–32, 155; Zempleni, "Symptom," 92; Simon Barrington-Ward, "'The Centre Cannot Hold . . . Spirit Possession as Redefinition,'" 455–70 in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 456.

as malevolent or dangerous.³⁹ Many societies associate particular powers with possession.⁴⁰

Even within a single culture, possession behavior can vary widely (e.g., mediums in Palau display a range of trance forms).⁴¹ Some societies lack even dissociation in some cases, so that the common element in possession in these societies tends to be simply the belief that a spirit is overpowering one's personality.⁴²

Reviewing this sort of diversity of experience, Bourguignon remarks that despite transcultural constants stemming from "its psychobiological substrate," possession behavior "is subject to learning and by this means, it is amenable to cultural patterning. As such, it takes on a striking variety of forms."⁴³ Because of this culture-specific element, travelers can carry specific expressions of mediumship and possession behavior to societies without prior experience of them.⁴⁴ Likewise, the nature of possession cults can evolve; indeed, some societies have even gradually transformed therapeutic possession cults into group entertainment.⁴⁵

SPIRITS, RELIGION, ILLNESS, AND PROPHECY

While early Christians resisted depicting their own prophetic, mystical, and other divine "Spirit" experiences in terms of possession, they were ready to associate spirits with other cultic contexts.⁴⁶ Cultic or religious

39 *Affliction by ancestor spirits* Edith Turner, with William Blodgett, Singleton Kahoma, and Fideli Benwa, *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 182, Obeyesekere, "Case of Possession," 239, Garbett, "Mediums," 123. For propitiating ancestral spirits, see R. E. S. Tanner, "The Theory and Practice of Sukuma Spirit Mediumship," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 273–89, esp. p. 274, Wonsuk Ma, "Three Types of Ancestor Veneration in Asia: An Anthropological Analysis," in *Asian Church and God's Mission* (ed. Wonsuk Ma and Julie C. Ma, Manila: OMF Literature / West Caldwell, NJ: MWM, 2003), 163–77, esp. p. 168. *Peoples that do not view contact with ancestor spirits negatively* see, e.g., V. W. Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford: Clarendon and the International African Institute, 1968), 14, Garbett, "Mediums," 105, Murray Last, "Spirit Possession as Therapy: Bori among Non-Muslims in Nigeria," in *Women's Medicine*, 49–63, esp. p. 51.

40 Gelfand, *Shona Religion*, 177–78, cf. Turner, *Drums*, 206.

41 Anne P. Leonard, "Spirit Mediums in Palau: Transformations in a Traditional System," in *Religion, States, and Change*, 129–77, esp. p. 176.

42 Shorter, *Witchdoctor*, 180.

43 Erika Bourguignon, "An Assessment of Some Comparisons and Implications," in *Religion, States, and Change*, 321–39, esp. p. 337.

44 See, e.g., Aylward Shorter, "Spirit Possession and Christian Healing in Tanzania," *African Affairs* 79 no. 314 (January 1980): 45–53, esp. p. 47, idem, "Misgawo," 122, cf. Morsy, "Possession," 192–93.

45 *Evolving nature of possession cults* e.g., Natvig, "Zar Cult," 181, for syncretism, see, e.g., Constantines, "Zar," 91, Ferchiou, "Cults," 213. *Possession cults for group entertainment* e.g., Last, "Possession," 49–50, Sayyid Hurreiz, "Zar as a Ritual Psychodrama: From Cult to Club," in *Women's Medicine*, 147–55 (esp. p. 154), Barbara Sellers, "The Zar: Women's Theatre in the Southern Sudan," in *ibid.*, 156–64 (esp. pp. 156–57, 163).

46 Some emphasized that Christian experience was distinctively controllable (1 Cor 14:32, Chrysostom, *Hom. Cor.* 29.2, but cf. 2 Pet 1:21). For religious contexts, see, e.g., 1 Cor

settings provide a frequent context for possession behavior.⁴⁷ Haitian voodoo and various forms of spiritism in Brazil⁴⁸ offer obvious examples of this pattern. While these examples may be best known in the West, many other cults involve possession trance, such as in traditional Yoruba rituals, the Zar cult, practices in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, and even in some fundamentalist sects in St. Vincent.⁴⁹ The social pressure of cultic settings may frequently invite particular persons to experience possession trance.⁵⁰ Many cases of possession trance, however, lack particular religious connections.⁵¹

Spirits are often associated with sickness, as in some NT passages. In the Gospels (most clearly, Luke 13:11), spirits sometimes constitute a cause of infirmity.⁵² In Acts 10:38, Jesus' ministry by God's Spirit empowers him to "heal" those "exploited by the devil," an idea intelligible in an early Jewish milieu.⁵³ Although some cultures do not associate spirits with sickness, one could list vast numbers of cultures that do.⁵⁴ Still, many people in cultures today that embrace both some traditional and

10:20; Justin, *1 Apol.* 5; Athenagoras, 26; Tertullian, *Apol.* 23.5–6; in early Jewish sources, see Ps 106:37 (esp. LXX); Bar 4:7; *1 En.* 19:1; *Jub.* 1:11, 22:17; 4Q243–245, line 18; *Sib. Or.* 8.43–47; *T. Job* 3:3; *T. Sol.* 5:5, 6:4; *Sipre Deut.* 318.2.1–2.

47. Tippett, "Possession," 148–51; often in the literature, e.g., Gray, "Cult," 171.

48. *Vodun*: see Tippett, "Possession," 155–56; Douyon, "L'Examen"; Kiev, "Value." *Spiritism in Brazil*: Tippett, "Possession," 157–58; Pressel, "Umbanda in São Paulo"; idem, "Negative Possession," 333–35.

49. *Yoruba rituals*: Raymond Prince, "Possession Cults and Social Cybernetics," in *Trance and Possession States*, 157–65. *Zar cult*: e.g., Modarressi, "Zar Cult." *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*: Wayman, "Meaning." *Sects in St. Vincent*: Jeannette H. Henney, "Spirit-Possession Belief and Trance Behavior in Two Fundamentalist Groups in St. Vincent," in *Trance, Healing, and Hallucination*, 1–111.

50. Firth, foreword to *Spirit Mediumship*, xiii; Horton, "Types," 24, 25, 35; Verger, "Trance," 52.

51. Shorter, "Possession and Healing," 48.

52. See discussion in John Christopher Thomas, *The Devil, Disease and Deliverance: Origins of Illness in New Testament Thought* (Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement 13; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 227; John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 105; Annette Weissenrieder, *Images of Illness in the Gospel of Luke: Insights of Ancient Medical Texts* (WUNT 2/164; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 338–39; Graham H. Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 154.

53. Demons were associated with various afflictions, from which deliverance could be sought (see Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus' Miracles* [JSNTSup 231; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002], 174–216).

54. Bourguignon, "Belief and Structure," 20–21; idem, "Distribution," 17; for examples, see Gray, "Cult," 171, 178; Lewis, "Possession in Somaliland," 193; Southall, "Possession," 259, 262; Welbourn, "Initiation," 292; Firth, *Tikopia Ritual*, 319; Saunders, "Zar Experience," 179; Morton, "Dawit," 193, 220; Pressel, "Negative Possession," 339; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 98; Turner, *Drums*, 34, 119, 296; Colson, "Possession," 71–72; Beattie, "Mediumship," 164; Peters, *Healing*, 65–68; Shorter, *Witchdoctor*, 174–76; idem, "Migawo," 124; Rosny, *Healers*, 116–19; Luling, "Possession Cults," 175; Ferchiou, "Cults," 214–15. See Christopher I. Ejizu, "Cosmological Perspective on Exorcism and Prayer-Healing in Contemporary Nigeria," in *Healing and Exorcism: The Nigerian Experience* (ed. Chris U. Manus, Luke N. Mbefo, and E. E. Uzukwu; Attakwu, Enugu: Spiritan International School of Theology,

some Western beliefs attribute sickness to spirits yet depend most often on medicine to cure it.⁵⁵

In texts such as Mark 1:24 and Acts 16:16–17, spirits display supernaturally acquired knowledge (in the latter case, the spirit's designation specifically associates it with mantic activity).⁵⁶ No less than in antiquity, many traditional societies today look to spirits for supernaturally revealed information.⁵⁷ Mediums in traditional African societies almost always claim to speak for lower spirits rather than for the supreme creator deity.⁵⁸ These societies usually envision some spirits as benevolent and others as malevolent, with most being neutral (on the analogy of people).⁵⁹ They may treat spirits as essential intermediaries for deities even in societies that normally consider them harmful.⁶⁰

This sort of supernatural knowledge also appears in an extensive survey of possession reports in traditional China, offered mostly from rural areas over a century ago when these experiences were far more common than they are in urban areas of China today. Informants claimed that some spirits spoke with unusual voices or poetic abilities and noted "northerners speaking the languages of the South, which they did not know."⁶¹ Although most of the study's informants naturally understood and presumably shaped their reports through the assumptions of their own Christian world view, a range of scholars have continued to find their information useful.⁶² We already noted above other reports that dramatic shifts in personality and persona are common during possession.

1992), 11–23 (esp pp 13, 15, 21), Goddy Ikeobi, "Healing and Exorcism The Nigerian Pastoral Experience," in *ibid*, 55–104 (esp p 57)

55 See, e.g., Robert W. Wyllie, "Do the Effutu Really Believe That the Spirits Cause Illness? A Ghanaian Case Study," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24 (1994) 228–40

56 With most scholars, e.g., Ivona Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (trans Linda M. Maloney, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 154–55

57 E.g., Mbiti, *Religions*, 233, Evans-Pritchard, *Religion*, 96, 303, Field, "Spirit Possession," 6, John Middleton, "Spirit Possession among the Lugbara," in *Spirit Mediumship*, 220–32, esp p 224, Southall, "Possession," 242–43

58 Mbiti, *Religions*, 249–50, Field, "Spirit Possession," 9

59 Mbiti, *Religions*, 111, Beattie and Middleton, introduction to *Spirit Mediumship*, xxi–xxii, xxvii, cf Shorter, *Witchdoctor*, 188–89, *idem*, "Possession and Healing," 48–49, 52, Field, "Spirit Possession," 13

60 Emuko Ohnuki-Tierney, "Shamanism and World View The Case of the Anu of the Northwest Coast of Southern Sakhalin," 175–200 in *Realm of Extra-Human*, 194–96, cf Mbiti, *Religions*, 233

61 *Voices and poetic abilities* John L. Nevius, *Demon Possession and Allied Themes* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1894), 46–47, 58 (hereafter, *Demon Possession*) Nevius (pp 140–43) defends the reliability of his Chinese informants, interestingly noting on p 143 that their reports are consistent with those from other cultures and eras As William M. Ramsay also noted (*The Teaching of St Paul in Terms of the Present Day* [2nd ed., London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913], 105–6), it was only Nevius's field experience that convinced him that spirit possession was genuine (Nevius, *Possession*, ix, 9–13, "informants" quotation from *ibid*) The use of allegedly alien dialects also appears in some other reports (Horton, "Types," 29, Shorter, *Witchdoctor*, 183)

62 Cf the use of various missionary reports in Oesterreich, *Possession*, 143–46, 213–15, 219–23, 229, 362–64

INTERPRETING THESE EXPERIENCES

My purpose in this section is not to offer a decisive interpretation of experiences of this sort, on which there is no agreement even among anthropologists. Multiple factors may be involved, and, unlike many other scholars, I am not willing to rule out the common indigenous and early Christian interpretations that genuine spirits are sometimes among the factors in possession trance. My purpose here, however, is to survey current views so that NT scholars studying the matter in further detail will be ready for the range of options with which the secondary literature will confront them.

Early Christian texts portray the source of possession as invasive spirits, an interpretation of spirit-possession experiences held in many cultures today. By contrast, Western scholars seeking to interpret possession behavior have traditionally interpreted it in nonspiritual ways that differ markedly from many indigenous interpretations.⁶³ Nevertheless, in recent decades anthropologists have sought to understand the experience in terms defined by the societies that claim it, rather than in traditional Western terms.⁶⁴ Already, more than three decades ago a major study on spirit possession suggested as a working definition for it “*any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit.*”⁶⁵ More recent studies are even more inclined to emphasize the indigenous understanding; traditional Western categories facilitate cross-cultural comparison more readily, but sensitivity to local interpretations cautions against pronouncing on the meaning of these experiences.⁶⁶

Various grids for interpretation today include neurological, sociological, psychological and spiritual frameworks, though these classificatory categories need not be construed in a mutually exclusive manner. Neurological approaches are illuminating, although they explain effects and causal factors rather than absolutely consistent causes. Many sorts of stimuli not normally associated with “possession” can produce trance states in normal people⁶⁷ (though not all experiences indigenously defined as “possession” involve trance states in any case).⁶⁸ People in all cultures can experience dissociation and altered states of consciousness, but world views affect how various societies describe them and under what conditions they most often experience them. (Degree of acculturation is often a common factor, and lack of suggestibility can sometimes render “possession” trance difficult.⁶⁹)

63. Thus, e.g., Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 9, reports his own observation of possession behavior, yet does not associate it with a spirit. Cf., similarly, Peters, *Healing*, 47, on his own “possession” state.

64. Tippett, “Possession,” 143–44.

65. Vincent Crapanzano, introduction to *Case Studies*, 1–40, esp. p. 7 (emphasis his).

66. See Boddy, “Spirit Possession,” 408, 410–14, 427.

67. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 39.

68. *Ibid.*, 45. Trance occurs without possession (p. 44), and Lewis regards “possession” as a cultural construction of the state (p. 46).

69. *Degree of acculturation*: Peters, *Healing*, 11–16, 46–47, 50; Lisa L. Frey and Gargi Roy-sircar, “Effects of Acculturation and Worldview for White American, South American, South Asian, and Southeast Asian Students,” *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*

Further, "altered states of consciousness" include a wide continuum of states, from rapid eye movement to a more traditionally defined "trance" state to "possession trance linked to impersonation behavior."⁷⁰ Some scholars note neurological parallels in sleepwalking, psychomotor epilepsy, and hysterical fugue states.⁷¹ Studies show that the nervous systems of organisms experiencing stress overload may collapse; health workers sometimes even employ an induced collapse to relieve stresses and help mental health.⁷² Consistent with these findings, studies confirm that stress may render a person more susceptible to a possession state.⁷³

In addition to neurological factors, some have linked possession experience to social frameworks; this interpretive model is not necessarily incompatible with some others, and some have applied it even to the proliferation of possession in Jesus' setting.⁷⁴ Sociological factors seem to influence susceptibility but do not by themselves appear adequate to explain all the phenomena. While these factors do not predict individual cases, however, they may correspond to larger patterns of incidence.

Thus, some scholars observe that possession without a trance is more common in hunter-gatherer societies; greater societal stratification and complexity corresponds to greater likelihood of added trance states.⁷⁵ Similarly, some have found that possession trance appears particularly likely to occur in stratified slave societies.⁷⁶ When societies become less stable, they seem to prefer trances in ritualized, controlled settings.⁷⁷

Perhaps this stratification increases social distance between social norms and marginal members of society. Bourguignon suggests that possession trance is most common among the latter; groups that once experi-

26 (3, Sept 2004) 229–48, citing a large number of other studies For lack of suggestibility, see cases in Last, "Possession," 52–53

70 Bourguignon, "Introduction," 14

71 *Sleepwalking* Prince, "EEG," 124–25, cf Field, "Spirit Possession," 4–5 *Psychomotor epilepsy* Prince, "EEG," 122–24 *Fugue states* *ibid*, 125–27

72 *Ibid*, 129–30 Both drum beats and flashing lights at the right intervals can produce emotional and neurological shifts (*ibid*, 133–34)

73 That stress or emotional conflict provides a precipitating factor appears in numerous studies (cited by Colleen Ward and Michael H. Beaubrun, "The Psychodynamics of Demon Possession," *JSSR* 19 [1980] 201–7 [esp p 206]) A psychological explanation seems to fit the second case in Ward and Beaubrun, "Psychodynamics," 203 Instone-Brewer, "Psychiatrists," 134–40, argues that psychological explanations suffice for some but not all cases

74 For possession experience and social frameworks, see, e.g., Prince, "Cybernetics" Cf even 19th-century observations in Nevius, *Possession*, 58 For their greater frequency among the uneducated, see Field, "Spirit Possession," 4 For proliferation of possession in Jesus' setting, see, e.g., Paul W. Hollenbach, "Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A Socio-Historical Study," *JAAR* 49 (1981) 567–88, Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 318

75 Bourguignon, "Belief and Structure," 22

76 *Idem*, "Introduction," 22, Lenora Greenbaum, "Societal Correlates of Possession Trance in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *Religion, States, and Change*, 39–57, esp p 54, *idem*, "Possession Trance in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Descriptive Analysis of Fourteen Societies," in *Religion, States, and Change*, 58–87, esp p 84

77 *Idem*, "Assessment," 339 But mediums initially uncontrollably possessed may learn to control the impulses (Horton, "Types," 36, 41, Verger, "Trance," 51)

enced it that have moved away from it as they have become increasingly respectable.⁷⁸ Some other anthropologists have observed that it appears among those marginalized from other means of power in their society.⁷⁹ Although association with gender varies from one society to another, in many traditional societies women prove particularly susceptible to spirit possession.⁸⁰ In some societies, possession behavior also can be used to achieve the fulfilment of desires that one would not otherwise dare express.⁸¹ Similarly, projecting guilt on a spirit can absolve an individual of responsibility.⁸² In some settings, some trance states might perform a cathartic function.⁸³ These sorts of psychosocial functions of possession have sometimes made it resistant to factors once expected to reduce it (such as urbanization or Western education).⁸⁴

Beyond psychosocial theories, diverse cultures offer a vast range of interpretations for possession trance.⁸⁵ Societies diverge, for example, as to whether they prefer naturalistic or supernaturalistic explanations.⁸⁶ (Not unexpectedly, naturalistic expectations predominate in the west, though they sometimes appear elsewhere.⁸⁷) The dominant

78. Erika Bourguignon, "Epilogue: Some Notes on Contemporary Americans and the Irrational," in *Religion, States, and Change*, 340–56, esp. pp. 342–43 (she offers early Methodists as an example). Marginalized groups experiencing phenomena such as these (e.g., Ghanaian movements in Field, "Spirit Possession," 9–10) might view it as God's favor toward the marginalized.

79. Lewis, "Possession in Somaliland," 189–90; cf. S. I. Rahim, "Zar among Middle-Aged Female Psychiatric Patients in the Sudan," in *Women's Medicine*, 137–46, esp. pp. 138–45; Morsy, "Possession," 204–5.

80. *Association with gender varying*: e.g., Tanner, "Theory," 281. *Susceptibility of women*: Kessler, "Conflict," 301–2; Shorter, "Migawo," 115 (cf. 119); Horton, "Types," 41–42; Colson, "Possession," 90–92, 99–100; Lee, "Possession," 143–44, 150–51, 154; Southall, "Possession," 244; Abdalla, "Friend," 41, 44; Last, "Possession," 58–59; cf. Gray, "Cult," 171; Lewis, "Possession in Somaliland," 216–17; idem, "Introduction: Zar in Context: The Past, the Present and Future of an African Healing Cult," in *Women's Medicine*, 1–16, esp. p. 5; Constantinides, "Zar," 89; Ashkanani, "Zar," 228–29.

81. Modarressi, "Zar Cult," 154–55; cf. Lewis, "Possession in Somaliland," 201–4, 210–12, 216–17; Southall, "Possession," 243; Arnold M. Ludwig, "Altered States of Consciousness," in *Trance and Possession States*, 69–95, esp. p. 86.

82. Ward and Beaubrun, "Psychodynamics," 201 (with a psychological explanation especially plausible in the second case); Gavin Ivey, "Diabolical Discourses: Demonic Possession and Evil in Modern Psychopathology," *South African Journal of Psychology* 32 (4 December 2002): 54–59 (esp. pp. 56–57).

83. Though Raymond Prince (foreword to *Case Studies*, xi–xvi, esp. p. xiii) warns that the cathartic model cannot explain societies where the healer rather than the patient enters a dissociated trance state.

84. Donald R. Jacobs, "Possession, Trance State, and Exorcism in Two East African Communities," in *Demon Possession*, 175–87, esp. pp. 186–87; Shorter, *Witchdoctor*, 179; Makris and al-Safi, "Spirit Possession Cult," 118.

85. See, e.g., Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 44; cf. also Peters, *Healing*, 11–16, 46–47, 50.

86. Bourguignon, "Distribution," 4–11.

87. In the West, e.g., many offer psychological explanations, such as the emergence of repressed subconscious thoughts (e.g., Singleton, "Spirits," 475); certainly, this appears to be the case in some instances (see, e.g., Lewis, "Possession in Somaliland," 201–3). *Naturalistic explanations elsewhere*: Bourguignon, "Distribution," 6.

supernaturalist or mystical explanations include soul absence or the presence of a spirit.⁸⁸

While anthropological literature normally seeks to maintain objective neutrality, simply describing experiences and the views of the subjects, some specialists in traditional beliefs now publicly contend that genuine spirits are sometimes involved.⁸⁹ Most notably, anthropologist Edith Turner claims to have personally witnessed visible "spirit" substance during a Zambian spirit ritual in 1985, and she afterward embraced the spirit experiences of traditional Eskimos she visited in 1987.⁹⁰ She questions whether it should be acceptable, in light of contemporary multicultural values, to impose on local cultures a traditional Western paradigm formed in a more positivist era.⁹¹ Some scholars have expressed appreciation for Turner's challenge to traditional Western reductionist treatment of possession claims.⁹²

Some other scholars have also opted for eclectic approaches. Some sociologists, for example, have allowed for both socially patterned, apparently culturally learned expressions of possession behavior and the possibility of genuine spirits in some cases.⁹³ Thus, a recent work notes that earlier anthropologists tended to explain possession in psychosocial terms, not commenting on possessing agents, but more recent research "does take seriously the agency of possessing ancestors, deities, and spirits."⁹⁴ In view of how widely the experience appears to surface in unrelated cultures, I believe that we should recognize this synthesis as a viable approach.

Regardless of interpretation, however, the experience is well documented, and there is no reason to doubt that these experiences occurred in various forms in Mediterranean antiquity as well as today. Thus, we need not dismiss their occurrence in ancient sources as necessarily fictitious or legendary rather than potentially based on eyewitness claims, but we

88 Ibid, 7–12, Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 64

89 See especially Edith Turner, "The Reality of Spirits," *Shamanism* 10 (1997) n p, cf idem, "The Reality of Spirits," *Re-Vision* 15 (1992) 28–32 (also critiquing ethnocentric Western readings in *Ritual*, 3–4, advocating entering indigenous experience in "The Anthropology of Experience The Way to Teach Religion and Healing," in *Teaching Religion and Healing* [ed Linda L Barnes and Inés Talamantez, New York Oxford University, 2006], 193–205 [hereafter, *Teaching Religion and Healing*]) More view them as simply *psychologically* real to the patient (e g, Singleton, "Spirits," 477)

90 In *Zambia* Turner, *Ritual*, 149 On the *ihamba* more generally, see V Turner, *Drums*, 156–97 (on the *ihamba* tooth, e g, 175–83, 298–99) *Eskimos* Turner, "Reality," 29

91 Ibid, 30, comparing this anthropological approach to that of missionaries (whose perspectives she also dislikes)

92 See Rick Strelan, *Strange Acts Studies in the Cultural World of the Acts of the Apostles* (BZNW 126, Berlin de Gruyter, 2004), 51, citing Lynne Hume, *Ancestral Power The Dreaming, Consciousness, and Aboriginal Australians* (2nd ed, Edinburgh T & T Clark, 1998), cf Linda L Barnes, introduction to *Teaching Religion and Healing*, 3–26, esp pp 19–20

93 Donald E Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley University of California Press, 2007), 156, among psychiatrists, M Scott Peck, *Glimpses of the Devil A Psychiatrist's Personal Accounts of Possession, Exorcism, and Redemption* (New York Free Press, 2005), 237–38

94 Keller, *Hammer*, 39–40

should evaluate those reports on a case-by-case basis (involving a work's genre, sources, and similar factors).

VIOLENT EXPRESSIONS OF POSSESSION

Not only do early Christian spirit-possession claims and interpretation have cross-cultural parallels, but so do some behaviors associated with some forms of the experience. For example, the sometimes-violent expressions of spirit possession in early Christian narratives have parallels in some other cultures. Spirit possession is associated with extraordinary strength in Mark 5:4, where no one was able to bind the possessed man, and only Jesus could deliver him. For Mark, this image illustrates the principle that only one stronger than the "strong man" (Satan) could bind him and release his possessions from his authority (Mark 3:27).⁹⁵ Cross-cultural parallels suggest, however, that Mark need not have simply invented this illustration to fit his theological point. In a variety of diverse cultures in which it has been observed, spirit possession sometimes yields apparently superhuman strength that makes restraint difficult or impossible.⁹⁶

Possession can be expressed violently, toward oneself and others, both in the early Christian narratives and (as we shall observe afterward) in some modern accounts. Thus, possession is expressed self-destructively in Mark 5:5, where a demonized man cuts himself with stones, and in 9:22, where a spirit-afflicted boy falls into fire or water. While it is not impossible that Mark additionally intended a criticism of some pagan cults,⁹⁷ his descriptions probably reflect authentic tradition about possession behavior.

Spirit possession is expressed in violence toward others in Acts 19:16, where a possessed man overpowers the would-be exorcists and leaves some of them naked and injured.⁹⁸ This description does fit Luke's theology: whereas demons might normally cooperate with exorcists for strategic reasons, Satan's kingdom is here divided (cf. Luke 11:17–18) due to the invasion of God's kingdom (Luke 11:20). Earlier in Luke's material, "unclean" spirits both caused a demoniac to go naked (Luke 8:27) and gave him supernatural strength (Luke 8:29). In Luke's irony, it is here the exorcists

95. The image was apropos; for "binding" in ancient sources addressing spirits, see, e.g., Tob 8:1–2; Aramaic incantation texts 3.2, 7; 5.1–2; 5.3–4; 10.1; 27.2–3; 47.1–3; PGM 4.384–85, 2246–48; 101/1–3. One could also use spirits such as these to "bind" people (PGM 4.355–56, 376–83, 395; 7.912–13; 15.1; 32.1–19; 101.8–9, 16–17, 36).

96. E.g., Kaplan and Johnson, "Psychopathology," 208; Jane M. Murphy, "Psychotherapeutic Aspects of Shamanism on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska," in *Magic, Faith, and Healing*, 53–83, esp. p. 58; Field, "Spirit Possession," 5; cf. Borg, *Vision*, 62. But elsewhere, a "possessed" person could be bound (Gray, "Cult," 182).

97. Cf. 1 Kgs 18:28 (with J. J. M. Roberts, "A New Parallel to 1 Kings 18_{28–29}," *JBL* 89 [1970]: 76–77); Seneca, *Dial.* 7.26.8; the Galli in Lucian, *Syr. d.* 51; Lucretius, *Nat.* 2.614–15; *Rhet. Her.* 4.49.62; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.20.17, 19.

98. Given cross-cultural parallels, I am strongly tempted to suggest also 1 Sam 18:10–11. Because the meaning of the Hebrew text is debated, however, I defer that debate to my colleagues in Hebrew Bible.

(the “sons of Sceva”) who are stripped and cast out.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, historians typically offered their theological and moral points from genuine sources,¹⁰⁰ and cross-cultural studies show us that such violent expressions of spirit possession are not restricted to fiction.

We have noted that possession trance has sometimes provided culturally acceptable opportunities for expressing forbidden desires; sometimes, this may include aggression, especially for those not otherwise permitted to express it. More generally, in many cultures forms of spirit possession can yield destructive behavior.¹⁰¹ Sometimes, the destructive behavior includes violence against oneself, which can include self-laceration.¹⁰² For example, at a traditional Taiwanese festival, mediums become possessed and lacerate themselves to demonstrate immunity to pain.¹⁰³ Some observers of possession feats, however, note that some trancers “have died of post-possession exhaustion” or during the peak of ecstasy.¹⁰⁴ Among traditional !Kung Bushmen, people have to restrain those less experienced in possession from harming themselves or others. Those in trances there sometimes smear live coals on their flesh, burning their skin for several seconds.¹⁰⁵ One may also crash into a tree or attack a dog.¹⁰⁶

John Mbiti, a scholar of African religions, recounts a case of possession trance that he observed near Kampala, in which the person escaped injury

99 For similar irony of Stephen’s accusers stripping themselves, in contrast to conventional expectations at an execution, see my “Three Notes on Figurative Language Inverted Guilt in Acts 7 55–60, Paul’s Figurative Vote in Acts 26 10, Figurative Eyes in Galatians 4 15,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 5 (2008) 42–50 (esp pp 42–45)

100 For moral, political, and theological agendas in ancient historians, see, e.g., Polybius 1 11, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant rom* 1 21, 1 63–5, 8 56 1, Tacitus, *Agr* 1, *Ann* 3 65, Lucian, *Hist* 59, Maximus of Tyre, *Or* 22 5, C W Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1983), 115–16, Colin J Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (ed Conrad H Gempf, WUNT 49, Tübingen Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 79–85, John T Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke–Acts* (SNTSMS 76, Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1993), 15–20, Daniel Marguerat, *La Première Histoire du Christianisme (Les Actes des apôtres)* (Paris du Cerf, 1999), 28–29, Manfred Lang, *Die Kunst des christlichen Lebens Rezeptionsästhetische Studien zum lakemischen Paulusbild* (Lepizig Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008), 7–13, 97–167

101 Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (trans Willard R Trask, New York Harper & Row, 1958), 71, Gelfand, “Disorders,” 165, 170, K E Schmidt, “Folk Psychiatry in Sarawak A Tentative System of Psychiatry of the Iban,” in *Magic, Faith, and Healing*, 139–55, esp p 145, Kaplan and Johnson, “Psychopathology,” 227, for threats and aggression, see Obeyesekere, “Case of Possession,” 251

102 J Robin Fox, “Witchcraft and Clanship in Cochui Therapy,” in *Magic, Faith, and Healing*, 174–200, esp p 185, cf Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft*, 162, Ludwig, “Altered States,” 86 For spirits cursing and berating the possessed, see, e.g., Morton, “Dawit,” 221

103 Christian Jochim, *Chinese Religions A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ Prentice-Hall, 1986), 154 Possession in traditional Ghana does not lead to self-injury, but it can produce immunity to hunger (Field, “Spirit Possession,” 6)

104 *Ibid*, 5 For exhaustion after ecstasy, see, e.g., Lewis, “Possession in Somaliland,” 202, after possession by spirits additional to one’s normal one, see Firth, *Tikopia Ritual*, 311

105 Richard B Lee, “The Sociology of !Kung Bushman Trance Performances,” in *Trance and Possession States*, 35–54, esp pp 41–42, 47

106 Lee, “Sociology,” 42

while pounding his head on the floor. The person then resumed a normal state after the trance.¹⁰⁷ Mbiti's further description of spirit possession in many African societies would hardly surprise readers of Mark's Gospel: he notes that spirit possession drives the person to live in the forest, to jump into fire, or to use sharp objects to hurt himself.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, in Mark a person controlled by spirits might dwell outside society (Mark 5:3), jump into fire (Mark 9:22), or use sharp objects on his body (Mark 5:5).

SOME ANCIENT ACCOUNTS OF POSSESSION

Early Christian writings are not the only ancient sources to depict possession in ways that have modern analogies. Possession states appear in various genres of ancient literature. Many of the individual accounts are fictitious, but the descriptions probably often reflect known information about genuine possession behavior. Greeks and Romans believed that mantic ecstasy often involved possession by a deity.¹⁰⁹ People commonly associated madness with *daimones*.¹¹⁰ This sort of inspired madness might produce violence.¹¹¹ As in studies of possession today noted above, one temporarily possessed by madness might not recall the mad behavior afterward.¹¹²

Possession, inspiration, and ecstasy came in various forms. Plato thought of four kinds of ecstasy, one of the most important being prophetic ecstasy; Virgil associates this prophetic ecstasy with divine possession.¹¹³ Greeks expected this sort of divine seizure for inspiration only during the time of prophesying, rather than expecting a mantic to be possessed continually.¹¹⁴

In order to remain concise, I focus here on a single illustration. My focus here is one popular subject of ancient possession accounts, namely, the possession of Apollo's priestess at Delphi. Lucan depicts this possession particularly graphically, although he certainly dramatizes, and even Lucan himself acknowledges the event as unusual.¹¹⁵ He portrays complete

107. Mbiti, *Religions*, 225–26.

108. *Ibid.*, 106; cf. dangerous wandering in the forest in Gray, "Cult," 178. For people's throwing themselves into the fire (as in Mark 9:22), see, e.g., Kaplan and Johnson, "Psychopathology," 211 (noting multiple cases); Southall, "Possession," 234.

109. Fritz Graf, "Ecstasy: Greek and Roman Antiquity," in *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* (ed. H. Cancik et al.; vol. 4; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 799–801, esp. p. 800; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 1.31.1; cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 34.4.

110. Martin Persson Nilsson, *Greek Piety* (trans. Herbert Jennings Rose; Oxford: Clarendon, 1948), 172.

111. Strelan, *Strange Acts*, 103, citing Diodorus Siculus 4.11.1; see Euripides, *Herc. Fur. passim*.

112. *Studies noted above*: e.g., Gelfand, *Shona Religion*, 166, 169; Field, "Spirit Possession," 3, 6. *Forgetting mad behavior*: Achilles Tatius 4.17.4; but contrast Dan 4:36.

113. Plato, *Phaedr.* 265B. Virgil, *Aen.* 6.77–80; Graf, "Ecstasy," 800.

114. E.g., Arrian, *Alex.* 4.13.5–6.

115. C.W. 5.166–67; see Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (trans. Brian McNeil; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 187–88.

possession, to the extent that the deity controls the priestess's soul and lips.¹¹⁶ Without this kind of evidence of possession, she might be thought merely to simulate inspiration. But when she was genuinely frenzied, her hair would stand up, raising the wreath on her head, and her voice would fill the cavern.¹¹⁷ In Lucan's depiction, Apollo forcibly seizes possession of her body, forcing out her own consciousness; her head jerks, her hair again is said to stand up, and Apollo's fire burns within her. Apollo's invasion torments her; her lips foam, she pants inarticulately, wails, and finally issues the deity's articulate speech.¹¹⁸

Despite Lucan's literary exaggeration, we ought not suppose that Lucan has simply invented every element of her possession behavior.¹¹⁹ Precisely because Lucan's account is probably fictitious, it underlines the likelihood that some people in antiquity had some more general acquaintance with possession behavior, whether or not in the particular account a writer was offering. Although without Lucan's embellished depiction, a wide range of ancient sources claim that the Delphic priestess was possessed by a spirit and fell into a mad frenzy.¹²⁰ In addition to Greek and Roman sources, a Jewish source acquainted with Hellenistic oracular forms likewise speaks of the Pythia's frenzy.¹²¹ If multiple attestation counts for anything, we have plenty of it for this case.

That even a fictionalized depiction of dissociation like Lucan's shares common elements with modern observations of possession trance suggests that it rests on a repository of genuine ancient observations of possession behavior. Narratives and tales may include significant embellishment, but

Plutarch, who had significant knowledge of Delphi (cf. Domunue Jaillard, "Plutarque et la divination La piété d'un prêtre philosophe," *RHR* 224 [2007] 149–69) avers that the inspiration affects only her mind (*Or Delphi* 7, *Mor* 397C). Although ancient views varied regarding the subterranean exhalations that supposedly inspired the Pythia (Cicero, *Div* 2 57 117, Pliny, *Nat* 2 95 207–8), archaeology reveals no source for "mephitic vapors" (Klauck, *Context*, 187).

116 Lucan, *CW* 5 97–101. This conception of inspiration is not uniquely Lucan's; Maximus of Tyre, *Or* 9 1, for example, depicts spirits speaking through mortals as one would play a pipe.

117 Lucan, *CW* 5 148–57. While acknowledging cases of faked trances, Firth (foreword to *Spirit Mediumship*, xi) also notes that genuine trances (in which the "possessed" person genuinely believes) are common (cf. also Verger, "Trance," 64–65, Beattie, "Mediumship," 166–67).

118 Lucan, *CW* 5 165–93. Against some, her inspired speech was probably normally articulate (see David E. Aune, "Magic in Early Christianity," *ANRW* II [Principat] 23 1 1507–1557 [1951]).

119 As some appear to do, see Klauck (*Context*, 187–88), who notes that it depends solely on Lucan, *CW* 5 116–20, 161–74, 190–97.

120 *Possessed by a spirit*. Valerius Maximus, 1 8 10, Cicero, *Div* 1 36 79, Dio Chrysostom, *Personal Appearance* 12, Plutarch, *Or Delphi* 21, *Mor* 404E, Maximus Tyre, *Or* 8 1, Iamblichus, *Myst* 3 11. Some depict it as divine impregnation, e.g., Longinus, *Sublime* 13 2, probably Plutarch, *De defect Orac* 9, *Mor* 414E (see David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 40–41). *Fell into a mad frenzy*. Plutarch, *Dial* L 16, *Mor* 759B (regaining tranquility afterward), Aelius Aristides, *Def* *Or* 34–35, §11D.

121 *Sib Or* 11 315, 318. Some Tannaim believed that demons would enter people, forcing them to do what the demons desired (*Sipre Deut* 318 2 1–2).

possession experiences described in such ancient sources appear comparable to many modern accounts of such experiences. Whereas the Gospels and Acts portray full possession in negative terms,¹²² ancient Greeks, like many traditional peoples today, also affirmed some positive roles for the phenomena, especially in their oracular use. Regardless of their differing evaluation and interpretation, however, all these sources likely develop some information about at least the kinds of possession-behavior encounters that ancient observers genuinely reported.

CONCLUSION

Possession phenomena are widely attested, although many aspects of these phenomena vary from one culture to another. Interpretations vary from neurological and social explanations (more dominant in the west) to possession by ancestral spirits and other supernatural explanations.

In view of the wide range of phenomena attested, some features of early Christian accounts that have appeared suspect to modern western interpreters appear plausible as genuine descriptions of possession behavior. These include the self-destructive behavior of possessed persons in Mark 5:5 and 9:22, the violent behavior of the possessed person in Acts 19:16, and the mantic behavior of the enslaved woman in Acts 16:16–17. Early Christian writers interpreted cases of possession such as these as wholly negative, although many of their contemporaries and many traditional cultures today offer more-diverse evaluations regarding the benefits or disadvantages of possession behavior.

My goal in this article has been to introduce more NT scholars to samples of anthropological observations about spirit possession, rather than to offer detailed comparisons with individual NT texts. Nevertheless, it should be evident that anthropologists' accounts of this transcultural phenomenon can enrich our reading of the early Christian accounts, illustrating both what they share with other accounts and where they prove distinctive. Nothing in the early Christian descriptions requires us to assume that they could not depend on genuine eyewitness material.

122. The one disputed example appears to be Acts 16:16, but in light of the narrative unity of Luke's work (cf. Luke 4:33–36, 41; 8:28), I maintain that this one is also negative (see my forthcoming *Commentary on Acts* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson]).



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