

Who is Jesus?

Part 2: Jesus and the Gentiles, continued

The Synoptics record only a few interactions with Gentiles, including minimally the **healing of the Centurion's servant** (Lk 7:1-10), the **healing of the Gerasene demoniac** (Lk 8:26-39), the **Canaanite/Syrophenicean Woman** (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:21-30), and Jesus' **healing of the ten lepers** (Lk 17:11-19).

1. **The Gerasene Demonic:** We know Jesus as a teacher, prophet, and healer. Scholars broadly agree, though, that Jesus had a reputation in his own day as an exorcist:
 - a. The wealth of exorcisms in the gospels (there are more exorcisms than healings in the synoptics)
 - b. Jesus' identification as an exorcist in the gospels [e.g. in Jesus' own words, "Go tell that fox, 'behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and the third day I finish my course'" (Lk 13:32)]
 - c. In the NT era, the names of exorcists with high reputations were used by other exorcists in their healing incantations, and the NT has a number of reports of this happening: the strong exorcist, Mk 9:38; Lk 9:49; the reports from the 70, Lk 10:17; Acts 16:18, where Paul is depicted as using the name of Jesus to perform an exorcism
 - d. Evidence from outside the NT that Jesus cast out demons, , e.g. the Magical Papyri have the now-famous incantation intended for use by exorcists, "I adjure you by the god of the Hebrews, Jesu, ..." Also, the Jews forbade use of Jesus' name for exorcisms (t. Hul. 2:22-23, etc.; cf. DJG)

Jesus was unusual as an exorcist: He didn't use mechanical devices (e.g. amulets, incense, etc.); he didn't pray; he didn't use command formulas ("I adjure you"); and he didn't invoke the name of a power authority.

In other ways the accounts of Jesus' exorcisms are typical: They include a dramatic and sometimes violent confrontation, some demonstrate exorcism from a distance, and, in this case, involve transferal of demons to a different vessel (here, the swine). "...it was sometimes thought appropriate to transfer the demons from the sufferer to some object like a pebble, a piece of wood, a pot or some water in order to effect a cure. These objects, thought to contain the demons, were thrown away or destroyed to effect and perhaps signify the demons departure from the situation" [DJG]. Writing on this passage, Gregory of Nazianzen suggests that the swine were actually integral to the cure, when he refers to Jesus as "drowning deep a legion of spirits."¹ Michael Green concurs: "...the phenomenon of evil spirits moving from one carrier to another is attested both in antiquity and today: I have seen it myself during ministry" (*Matthew*, 121).²

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke clearly didn't seem troubled by the death of the herd, modern readers may wonder if it was necessary to deprive the swineherds of their livelihood. Some commentators (Jerome and Chrysostom) pointed out that the swine showed the effectiveness of the cure, though the fact that man is in his right might also does that. The suggestion by various commentators that transferal of the demons to a different "vessel" was necessary for the cure is another possibility.

¹ "[Water] is, however, a 'demon-destroying force' (T. Sol. 5:11; 11:6, cited by J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*)."
[I. Howard Marshall, *Luke*, 340]

² Keener (*Matthew*) also sees the swine as part of the cure, and concludes that a main point of this passage is that Jesus values the wellbeing of the man above the lives of the pigs.

Why do you think Jesus used the pigs? Does the context of ancient exorcism practices help in understanding this account?

2. **The Syrophenician/Canaanite Woman:** Read Mt 15:21-28.

a. Read Mt 10:6; Romans 15:8; Isa 49:6. What is God's two-part plan for the spread of the gospel? Why does God decide to work this way?

b. Context, as we know, is everything. Keener points out in his commentary,

As a member of the Hellenistic citizen class in the Markan account, she belonged to a group that had routinely taken the break belonging to the impoverished Jews residing in the vicinity of Tyre. Now Mark's Jesus reverses the power relations, for the 'bread' Jesus offers belongs to Israel first; this 'Greek' must beg help from an itinerant Jew. By instead calling her a Canaanite, Matthew mutes the class issue but focuses on the ethnic issue more relevant to his audience, again underlining the importance of the Gentile mission for his community (cf. Jn 4:7-42). [417]

How does this affect your reading of this passage?³

c. Read John 6:6. It is common to suggest Jesus is testing the woman. Is there any evidence to support this theory? If Jesus *is* rebuffing her to test her, or to push her, is there any way this could be for her good?

d. Given the extremely negative history between Israel and the Canaanites, how might it affect those watching if Jesus had *not* rebuffed the woman? Should this matter?

e. Ultimately we can only guess why Jesus humbled this woman. (Matthew apparently doesn't see this as a potential stumbling block for his readers, which certainly included both Gentiles and women.) Much as Elisha required Naaman to dip in the *Jordan* river, when there were plenty of wet Aramean rivers available (2 Kings 5:10-12), Jesus is pushing this seeker to acknowledge who he was, and her dependence on him.

Has Jesus done this to you? How much of our difficulty with this passage stems from this?

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Fun fact: Jesus had two Canaanite women in his family tree, Tamar and Rahab.

Further fun fact: "Second-century patristic sources unabashedly report Christianity spreading especially through exorcisms, claiming Christians' success in exorcisms as a matter of common knowledge. Tertullian challenges the authorities to bring in a demon-possessed person to court; any Christian will make short work of the demon, forcing it to confess its deceit. If the demons do not immediately confess their identity, he insists, then execute that impudent Christian immediately!" [Keener, *Miracles*, Vol. 2, 785]

Yet another fun fact: Some Mesopotamian rabbis thought even numbers rendered one susceptible to demonic influence. [Keener, *Matthew*, 284]

³ Matthew's focus is on the contrast between the Canaanite woman's faith and that of the disciples and Pharisees earlier in the chapter. Here we are lucky to have Mark's account. Without it, Matthew's emphasis might inadvertently cause us to miss the woman's social status, a potentially important element of context. Alternately, Matthew may be deliberately bringing out the harshness of Jesus' response in order to satisfy hardline Jewish converts among the early community.

Be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.

Notes and observations:

1. Canaanite/Syrophenician woman

- a. DJG (on demons): “The woman, being Hellenized, may have been from the leading stratum of society and found her daughter’s sickness and embarrassment, for the demon-possessed were the focus of ridicule (cf. Philo *Flacc.* 36, 40). And, if being cared for at home is sign of wealth, we perhaps have here, as in the story of the epileptic boy, some evidence that these families may have had some financial means above the average.”

2. Gerasene demoniac

a. The main points appear to be:

- i. Jesus is more powerful than demons
- ii. Jesus values humans above swine
- iii. Jesus goes into a terrifying and unclean place to rescue someone lost to evil
- iv. The kingdom is already and not yet—i.e., we learn through the words of the possessed man that demons have limited time

b. There’s good evidence, and it’s generally accepted, that Jesus was well known as an exorcist

i. DJG: Four reasons:

1. The wealth of accounts in the gospels; Sanders: exorcisms are the most common type of healing in the synoptics
2. In the gospels the sayings about Jesus presume his role as an exorcist, e.g. Jesus’ own words, “Go tell that fox, ‘behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and the third day I finish my course’” (Lk 13:32)
3. In the NT era the names of exorcists with high reputations were used by other exorcists in their healing incantations, and the NT has a number of reports of this happening: the strong exorcist, Mk 9:38; Lk 9:49; the reports from the 70, Lk 10:17; Acts 16:18, where Paul is depicted as using the name of Jesus to perform an exorcism
4. There is evidence outside the NT that Jesus cast out demons, e.g. the Magical Papyri have the now-famous incantation intended for use by exorcists, “I adjure you by the god of the Hebrews, Jesu, ...” Also, the Jews forbade use of Jesus’ name for exorcisms (t. Hul. 2:22-23, etc.)

ii. Typical exorcism techniques which Jesus used:

1. Initial dramatic confrontation (including attempts to bind)
2. Use of formulas to expel demons

3. Transferral of demons to a different vessel (e.g. the swine). "...it was sometimes thought appropriate to transfer the demons from the sufferer to some object like a pebble, a piece of wood, a pot or some water in order to effect a cure. These objects, thought to contain the demons, were thrown away or destroyed to effect and perhaps signify the demons departure from the situation."
 4. Exorcism from a distance
 5. Violence: this is a general part of Jesus' and others' exorcisms
- iii. Atypical techniques Jesus used:
1. He didn't use mechanical devices (amulets, apparatuses, etc.). "...in the Babylonian Talmud amulets, palm tree prickles, woof chips, ashes, pitch, cumin, dog's hair and thread are used" [DJG]
 2. Jesus didn't pray to cast out demons
 3. Jesus did not invoke any power authorities (either exorcists, deities, etc.)
 4. Jesus did not use the command to bind or adjure or charge (Gk *horkizo*)
- c. Random facts:
- i. Origen: The name which makes the most sense for the location is Gergasa, which means "dwelling of the one who drove out"
 - ii. Keener suggests that the reason Mt's account of the demoniac is shorter is that he was trying to fit his gospel account into a single scroll.
- d. What about the swine? Isn't it a problem that he killed those animals and destroyed the livelihood of the swineherds?
- i. Gregory of Nazianzen: Jesus "drowns deep a legion of spirits"—i.e., G of N believed the swine were the vehicle for the destruction of the demons
 - ii. DJG: The swine weren't there to show the effectiveness of the cure; that the man is described as sitting in his right mind is the proof of that. The swine were part of the cure itself.
 - iii. "[Water] is, however, a 'demon-destroying force' (T. Sol. 5:11; 11:6, cited by J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*)." [I. Howard Marshall, *Luke*, 340]
 - iv. Green, *Matthew*, 121: "Finally, the phenomenon of evil spirits moving from one carrier to another is attested both in antiquity and today: I have seen it myself during ministry."
- e. The account is paradigmatic:
- i. The man, a slave to evil, is freed
 - ii. Jesus turns him from out of control to calm and desiring of Jesus
 - iii. The man's desire for Jesus is met by a call to spread the gospel

1. And also note, Jesus resist the spread of the gospel in Jewish territory but not in Gentile territory
- iv. The man, after being “saved” (Luke), sits at Jesus’ feet—the attitude of a disciple
- v. The man is rescued even when unable to ask for rescue himself
- f. FF: Ephraim the Syrian: this passage shows that spiritual beings are effectively without physical extent
- g. Question ideas:
 - i. List reasons commentators have given for the destruction of the swine
 1. Jerome: They were destroyed to demonstrate to all who were watching that they had been cast out, and that there were many
 2. Chrysostom: Jesus allowed the demons to drown the swine to demonstrate what they would have done to humans had they been allowed
- h. Things which would have been evident to a first-century reader:
 - i. Legion first tries to control Jesus (though some commentators think Jesus must first have tried to command them to leave)
 - ii. Jesus in turn demands their name to control *them*
 - iii. Exorcisms could entail transfer to another “vessel,” a common feature of exorcisms
 - iv. The account reeks of uncleanness (Gentiles, demons, tombs, pigs) yet Jesus is unstained
- i. The “what to thee and to me” is also used by Jesus when talking to his mom