

# New Testament Criticism and Jesus the Exorcist

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*"What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the Holy One of God!" - Anonymous demon, (Mark 1:24).*

The New Testament presents Jesus as, among other things, "an exorcist par excellence." [1] Is the acceptance of this claim historically plausible in the light of New Testament criticism? I will argue that it is. John's gospel ignored the already well-trod subject of exorcism: "John's Gospel does not record any exorcisms. The author chose to use a selection of signs to enforce his teaching and it may be that the exorcisms did not achieve his purposes." [2] We will therefore concentrate upon the so-called 'synoptic gospels' of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

It is common today to divide Jesus' miracles into three categories: healings, exorcisms and nature miracles: "It may be surprising that the community of critical scholars appears to have adjusted its stance toward at least the first two divisions," says Gary R. Habermas, but he nonetheless reports that this is indeed the case: "A majority of recent scholars believe that Jesus was at least a healer and an exorcist."<sup>3</sup> According to Craig L. Blomberg, "Jesus was most certainly an exorcist". [4] Even as liberal a scholar as 'Jesus Seminar' member Marcus Borg concludes: "it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist." [5] Fellow Jesus Seminar member John Dominic Crossan affirms: "You cannot ignore the healings and exorcisms", and adds that: "throughout his life Jesus performed healings and exorcisms for ordinary people." [6] Rudolf Bultmann concurs that there is "no doubt" Jesus really "healed the sick and expelled demons" [7] A. M. Hunter's statement on the matter is carefully worded: "No Christian with a respect for his intellectual integrity need doubt that Jesus. . . cured those thought to be possessed by evil spirits. . ." [8] As Habermas concedes of Jesus' healings and exorcisms: "Usually, these are recognized as historical and explained cognitively. Both sick individuals as well as those who thought they were possessed by demons get better when they believed they were well." [9]

A. M. Hunter's judicious affirmation is compatible with both acceptance and denial of genuine demon possession and exorcism. The question remains: Do the gospels understandably but falsely portray Jesus as exorcising real demons, or is the portrait of Jesus as exorcising demons correct? Can an investigation of the historical data lead us towards a more definite conclusion either way? One's answer to that question will be primarily determined by a priori philosophical beliefs; but it may also be effected by the evidence. As Habermas writes:

"Scholars sometimes speak as if the factual data can be divorced from worldview concerns. . . Yet it is undeniable that everyone generally operates within his or her own concept of reality. . . Having said this, however, the factual data are still equally crucial. . . We do need to be informed by the data we receive. And sometimes this is precisely what happens - the evidence on a subject convinces us against our indecisiveness or even contrary to our former position." [10]

An historical event and its metaphysical interpretation are often separate issues, but they are not unrelated. If one accepts that Jesus and his contemporaries thought that he performed successful exorcisms, one can go on to ask how best to interpret this data, metaphysically speaking; and the data itself must play a role in this process. With this in mind, let us begin by considering the status of that data, historically speaking.

## General Evidence

What sort of literature are the gospels? Discussion of the genre of 'gospel' has been dominated by an unfortunate dichotomy, between viewing them as essentially "accurate records of the life of Jesus" [11] (a view associated with seeing the gospels as biography), and viewing them as "'proclamation' and not in any sense 'records' of the past." [12] This dichotomy is clearly false. Something can be both an essentially accurate record and a passionate proclamation. The assumption of some critics that "the early church was so taken up with its proclamation of the Risen Christ that it was not interested at all in the past of Jesus" [13] is just that, an assumption. It is also a highly implausible assumption, in that the earliest Christian proclamation is tied directly to the past reality of Jesus (as well as to the present reality of Jesus). That past reality includes Jesus' exorcisms; it is this past reality that informs the present reality of a continuing Christian ministry of exorcism in the name of Jesus.

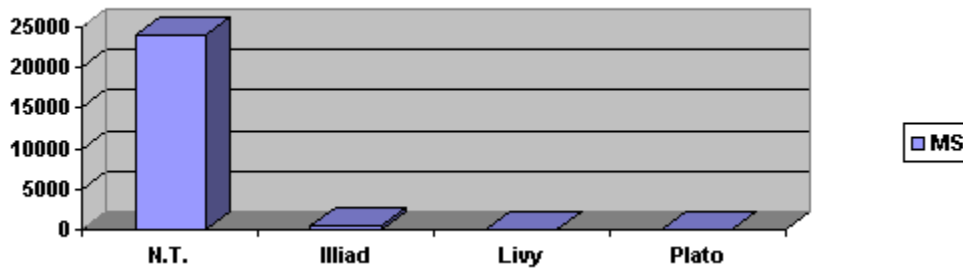
While the gospels are not biographies in the modern sense, when the above false dichotomy is rejected: "it becomes clear that the evangelists are concerned with the story as well as the significance of Jesus." [14] The only reasonable justification for the denial that essentially accurate story and significance are combined in the gospels is the claim that the gospels are not essentially accurate: "Many readers of the gospels have assumed that they are intended to be accurate records of the life of Jesus, perhaps from eyewitnesses. They are then very puzzled by the differing accounts of the same incident in two or more gospels." [15] In general terms, this is a view of the gospels that I share; but I think that one's puzzlement can be handled by good hermeneutics. As Craig L. Blomberg concludes: "The gospels may be accepted as trustworthy accounts of what Jesus did and said. . . other conclusions, widespread though they are, seem not to stem from even-handed historical analysis but from religious or philosophical prejudice." [16] Accepting this proposition does not require one to view the gospels as straightforward biography or as a set of disinterested historical accounts of Jesus.

The gospels are closer in genre to ancient biography, although these are themselves so diverse that comparison is difficult (Matthew and Luke are perhaps a little closer than Mark to ancient biography): "To readers familiar with the Old Testament or with later Jewish writings, or with Greco-Roman writings of the period, the gospels would recall either some of the elements of a biography, or of a theological treatise, or perhaps even of a tragedy. But the gospels do not fit easily and naturally into any of these categories." [17] Journalist William Proctor (perhaps unsurprisingly) suggests that "the accounts of the Resurrection in the New Testament seem to fit rather nicely into [the] journalistic genre - either as stand alone investigative articles, or as part of a longer, book-length journalistic treatment of the early Christian movement." [18] After all:

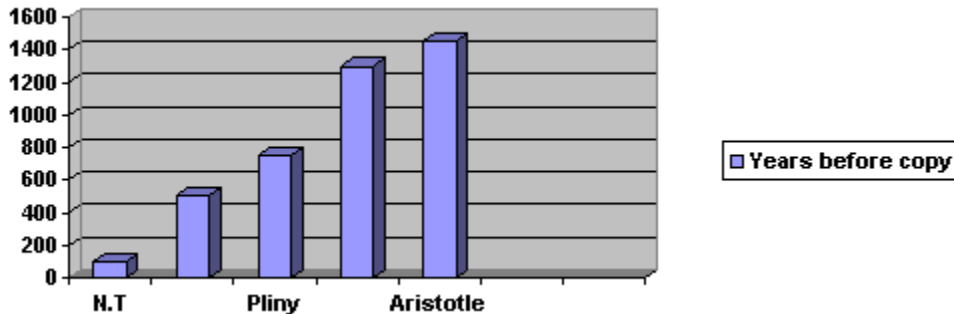
"Like modern-day journalists, the New Testament writers reported occurrences and encounters involving relatively recent or ongoing current events. . . Like reporters today - and unlike most historians - the resurrection reporters wrote soon after the events they described. . . Also, the techniques and sources the reporters used in putting together the resurrection narratives are similar to the approach used in modern-day news media. It is clear, for instance, the reports are based on eye-witness interviews, first-person observations, and backup written materials." [19]

Gospel means 'good news', a description that entails a combination of journalism and proclamation. In the end, the gospels are perhaps best assigned a genre of their own: journalistic proclamation. As such, I contend that the gospels are, at the very least, a well-attested, generally reliable source of information about Jesus. [20] As the Cambridge theologian David Ford writes: "The mainstream position has never been that every detail of the biblical records need to be precisely accurate. . . Rather, the emphasis has been on trusting the stories to give a testimony good enough to know Jesus and what he did and suffered, and to relate to him." [21]

We know that the texts as we have them are better attested than any other piece of ancient literature. The gap between the events and their being recorded, and between their being recorded and the earliest surviving manuscripts, is extremely favorable compared with other historical documents. In fact, if you want to deny the historicity of the New Testament you must deny the whole of ancient history. Consider the number of New Testament manuscripts compared to other ancient works: The writings of Plato survive in 7 manuscripts; the work of the Roman historian Livy comes to us through 10 manuscripts. Homer's Illiad is the closest comparison with 643 surviving manuscripts. The New Testament comes to us through over 24,000 manuscripts (including some 5000 Greek Manuscripts)!



Consider the time between the original writing and the earliest surviving manuscript fragments: Between Aristotle writing his philosophy and our earliest copy lie 1,450 years. Between Herodotus and our copies lie 1300 years. Between Pliny the Younger and our copies lie 750 years. Between Homer and our earliest copy (again, this is the closest comparison) lies 500 years. Between the New Testament and the earliest surviving fragment lies 100 years at most:



In short: "No other ancient document equals the New Testament when it comes to the preservation of manuscripts, both in terms of number and closeness in time to the original autographs." [22]

The New Testament gospels were all written within the lifetime of eyewitnesses. [23] J.P. Moreland affirms that: "Prima facie it would seem that a strong case could be made for the fact that much of the New Testament, including the Gospels and the sources behind them, was written by eyewitnesses." [24] Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough point out that: "according to the best evidence available from the early years of the church, three of the four gospels are directly linked to the apostles; the fourth, Luke, by his own testimony (Lk. 1:1-4), was dependent on eyewitnesses and those who had known Jesus from the beginning." [25] Moreover, most of these eyewitnesses were martyred for refusing to renounce the truth of their accounts. [26] On the authorship of the gospels R.T. France notes:

"Luke, the doctor who was a companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24) is the most widely accepted, as the author of both the third gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. Mark, similarly a colleague of Paul (Acts 12:25; 15:37-41; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy

4:11; Philemon 24), but also, if the same Mark is intended, a companion of Peter (1 Peter 5:13), is accepted by many as at least a possible author of the second gospel. . . There are in fact weighty defenders today of the traditional authorship of all four gospels. . . Personally I find all four traditional ascriptions at least plausible." [27]

According to Irenaeus (c. 125/140-200):

"Matthew published. . . the gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, he too handed down to us in writing the things preached by Peter. Luke also, the follower of Paul, put down in a book the gospel preached by that one. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord who also leaned upon his breast, he too published a gospel while residing in Ephesus". [28]

Tertulian (c. A.D. 155-222) testifies that: "of Apostles, John and Matthew instill us with faith; of Apostolic men [i.e. disciples of Apostle's], Luke and Mark renew it. . ." Let's review the evidence for authorship of the synoptic gospels, book by book (in probable chronological order):

**Mark:** "The only author ever attached to the second Gospel is that of Mark. There is an unbroken testimony that includes Papias, Irenaeus. . . Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Jerome, and Eusebius the church historian. . . The question then arises as to who this Mark is. Here, again, only one suggestion was ever made by the early believers, and that was John Mark, one who worked so closely with Peter as to be called his "son" (1Pt 5:13). He was a cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10), a traveler with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:5), and the son of a wealthy family in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12-14). . ." [29] According to Papias (as quoted by Eusebius), the early second century bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia:

"the presbyter [John the apostle] used to say this: "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not indeed in order of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them." [30]

Here we have a direct link to the testimony of John the apostle as to the authorship, the authority (derived from the apostle Peter upon whom Mark relied for his information) and the episodic, un-chronological nature, of Mark's gospel.

**Matthew:** "The only person ever suggested as the author of the first gospel until recent times was the apostle Mathew. Among the Church Father, Irenaeus, Origen, and Eusebius, quoting earlier sources, all attest to this. . . Those who were closest and knew best named the apostle Matthew as the author. There is no compelling reason their testimony should be rejected. . ." [31]

**Luke:** "All of the early evidence, including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertulian, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome, states that Luke, the traveling-companion of the apostle Paul, was the author of this two part work (Luke-Acts). Even the early opponent of the church, Marcion, affirmed this." [32] As Irenaeus testified in A.D. 180: "Luke, also who was a follower of Paul, put down in a book the Gospel that was preached by him." [33] Luke was an educated Gentile, a doctor and a close friend of Paul (Col 4:14). He traveled with Paul towards the end of his life (2 Tim 4:11): "The sections from the Book of Acts where Luke becomes part of his own narrative can be easily identified, because Luke switches from "they" to "we", including himself in the group. . ." [34] Luke's professed purpose is clear:

"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the

Word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1-4.)

Craig L. Blomberg writes that: "a good case can still be made for Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the authors of the Gospels that have traditionally been attributed to them". [35] After all, "Why would Christians. . . ascribe these otherwise anonymous Gospels to three such unlikely candidates if they did not in fact write them? Mark and Luke, after all, were not among Jesus' twelve apostles. . . Though an apostle, Matthew is best known for a negative characteristic, his unscrupulous past as a practitioner of a trade [tax-collecting] Jews considered traitorous to their nation (Mat. 9:9-11)." [36] This being so, one would expect the gospels to date from reasonably close to the events they record. Is this the case? It is. The following table lists the general range of (minority) 'conservative' and (majority) 'liberal' dates proposed for the writing of the gospels (in probable chronological order):

Gospel/Dates	'Conservative'	'Liberal'
<b>Mark</b>	40s-mid 50s	Late 60's-70s
<b>Matthew</b>	40s-early 60s	80s-90s
<b>Luke</b>	50s-early 60s	80s-90s
<b>John</b>	Mid 60s-mid 90s	90s

The majority of scholars are thus agreed that all four gospels were written within about 60 years of Jesus' death (in A.D. 30/33). As Raymond Brown affirms: "The gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus were written anywhere from thirty to sixty years after the events they narrate." The majority liberal dating places Mark within about 40 years of Jesus' death. More 'conservative' scholars think that all or most of the gospels (i.e. the synoptic gospels) were written within 30 or so years of Jesus' death and that Mark's gospel was written within about ten to twenty years of Jesus' death. According to F.F.Bruce, "even with the later dates, the situation is encouraging from the historian's point of view, for the first three Gospels were written at a time when many were alive who could remember the things that Jesus said and did, and some at least would still be alive when the fourth Gospel was written." [37] However: "in recent years, there has been a trend in New Testament studies towards dating the Gospels earlier." [38] As Carsten Peter Thiede reports: "those who argue for early dates of authentic Gospels as sources of information about an historical Jesus. . . are no longer the conservative or fundamentalist outsiders." [39]

According to Graham Stanton, it is widely accepted that Mark was "the first gospel to have been written" and that it is "therefore the gospel with the highest claims to be accepted as a reliable historical source." [40] While the second part of Stanton's claim does not necessarily follow from the first, since there are other factors besides historical proximity to consider in weighing the historical reliability of a report, temporal proximity is an important factor in weighing historical evidence. Several arguments are advanced for Marcan priority:

- (1) It is easy to see why Matthew and Luke might want to expand Mark's gospel with their own material, but less obvious why the reverse process would occur: "If an early Christian writer knew both Matthew and Luke, it is difficult to see why he would ever want to write. . . Mark's gospel." [41]
- (2) "Matthew and Luke frequently modify or omit redundant phrases or unusual words found in Mark, and improve his rather unsophisticated literary style." [42]
- (3) "A number of Marcan passages which seem to place Jesus in a bad light have been modified by Matthew and Luke."43 For example, "Mark 3:21 notes that some people were saying that Jesus

was 'out of his mind'. Neither Matthew nor Luke includes this strongly critical comment." [44] It may be plausible to think that a latter Matthew and Luke 'tidy up' Mark in this way; but it is also possible that a later Mark simply has an author with a more open approach to his reporting potentially embracing events if they happened, as shown by his even-handed portrayal of the disciples.

(4) "Matthew and Luke never agree in order against Mark: they seem to have made occasional changes to Mark's order quite independently. But it is now generally accepted that while this observation does support Marcan priority strongly, it can also be used to support rival hypotheses." [45]

In sum, of these four arguments the first two arguments offer the best evidence for Marcan priority, while the last two arguments offer evidence that is more ambiguous. Nevertheless, this evidence is sufficient to warrant the inductive conclusion that Mark was written first and that it was used by both Matthew and Luke as one of their sources.

A point worth making in this context is this: just because Luke, for example, copied some material from Mark, doesn't automatically mean Luke's report can't count as a separate source to Mark where they relate the same story, because Luke (and Matthew for that matter) presumably cross-checked the accuracy of Mark (and Matthew) as source material with his other sources where possible. After all, Luke himself writes that: "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning. . ." (Luke 1:3)

The book of Acts, the second half of a two-part work by Luke, a physician and companion of Paul, ends with Paul in prison (about AD 62). That nothing is said about Paul's trial indicates that Acts was written before it took place. As New Testament scholar R.T.France argues: "If then Acts is to be dated in the early sixties, Luke cannot be later. . . The arguments for an early date for Luke on this basis are strong, but the implications of accepting such a date are clearly far-reaching." Since Marcan priority is generally agreed (with Luke being written after Matthew and Matthew after Mark), it would seem that all three 'synoptic' gospels were written within thirty years of Jesus' death. Other evidence supports this conclusion: "In particular, various passages in Matthew refer to details of temple worship, which would be unnecessary anachronisms after AD 70, and one passage (17:24-27) would be positively misleading since it approves the payment of the temple tax, which after AD 70 was diverted to the upkeep of the temple of Jupiter in Rome!" [46]

While the majority of scholars still advocate the later composition dates for the gospels (i.e. 60s-90s A.D.), their arguments often rely upon naturalistic assumptions that more 'conservative' scholars do not share. As a case in point: "all the Gospels record Jesus prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem. Now, liberal scholars who don't believe anything supernatural can occur, argue that this shows that the Gospels must be written after the fall of Jerusalem [in A.D. 70] (a main reason they date the Gospels late)." [47] To adopt such an approach is to beg-the-question from the outset. It is no less question begging to conclude that Jesus' exorcisms must have purely naturalistic explanations because one assumes that demons cannot, or do not, exist. Thus we can say that the synoptic gospels were probably all written by the people whose name they bare within 35 years of the crucifixion; in the order of Mark (c.40s - mid 50s), Matthew (c. mid 50s - early 60s) and Luke (c. early 60s). As R.T.France testifies: "It is. . . probable that some. . . of the gospels were written in substantially their present form within thirty years of the events, and that much of the material was already collected and written a decade or two before that." [48] We can additionally note that: "Many gospel critics will accept the earlier existence of a written collection of Jesus' sayings (usually called 'Q') on which both Matthew and Luke drew. . ." [49] This 'source', material absent from Mark but common to Matthew and Luke, would have to date from the mid 50's or earlier.

A.N.Sherwin-White, the Oxford scholar of ancient Roman and Greek history, studied the rate at which legend accumulated in the ancient world, using Heroditus as a test case. He concluded that a span of two generations is not sufficient for legend to wipe out a solid core of historical facts. But as J.P.Moreland writes: "The picture of Jesus in the New Testament was established well within that length of time." [50] Hence I agree with Craig L. Blomberg's conclusion that: "Whatever else one may or may not believe by

faith, on sheer historical grounds alone there is substantial reason to believe in the general trustworthiness of the Gospel tradition." [51] As R.T.France says:

"At the level of their literary and historical character we have good reason to treat the gospels seriously. . . Indeed, many ancient historians would count themselves fortunate to have four such responsible accounts written within a generation or two of the events and preserved in such a wealth of manuscript evidence. . . Beyond that point, the decision as to how far a scholar is willing to accept the record they offer is likely to be influenced more by his openness to a "supernaturalist" world-view than by strictly historical considerations." [52]

### **Specific Evidence**

Aside from the general trustworthiness of the gospels, what specific historical warrant do we have for taking the claim that Jesus was an exorcist seriously? In answering this question I will deploy some tools of New Testament scholarship, a set of criteria that serve to highlight those parts deserving particular esteem historically speaking. This is not to say that anything that does not trigger identification by one or more of these criteria is therefore unreliable. The proper critical rule is 'innocent until proven guilty'; besides, we have all of the general historical warrant mentioned above. Rather, the triggering of one of these 'marks of authenticity' indicates that the text in question is to be considered especially reliable from a purely historical point of view. In addition to drawing heavily on Mark as the earliest Gospel, the criteria I will use are:

- 1) Multiple Source Attestation (the more sources, and the more independent they are, the better),
- 2) Dissimilarity (anything that differs from first-century Judaism is likely to be authentic),
- 3) Embarrassment (anything embarrassing to the church would hardly be made up by them!), and
- 4) Admissions by antagonistic witnesses (anything admitted by the enemies of the church is probably authentic since it is unlikely that the Christians put hostile words into their opponents mouths).

Graham Twelftree notes several marks of authenticity in Jesus' exorcisms, unusual facts about his mode of operation that cannot have been borrowed from the common practice of the day and thereby pass the criterion of dissimilarity: Jesus used no material devices (in contrast to other ancient cases), neither did he require departing demons to give proof of their exit, nor did he use common formulas such as "I bind you". Finally, Jesus did not pray to remove the evil spirits or invoke any authority beyond his own:

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed, they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching - and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." (Mark 1:25-27, cf. Luke 4:31-37.)

As Keith Warrington writes: "The amazement of the people may have been due to the fact that Jesus dealt with the demon by a word, without resorting to magic." [53]

Dr. Twelftree examined the world of thought contemporary to Jesus' exorcisms. His conclusion: "[People] were not uncritical in their acceptance of a report of a miracle. . . Not everyone believed in demons and exorcism. . . People in the New Testament world [were able] to discriminate between those sicknesses which were and those which were not thought to be caused by demons." [54] For example, "All three synoptic Gospels record that, during the evening of the day on which Peter's mother-in-law was healed, many who were sick and demonised were brought to Jesus for ministry, each category of affliction kept separate in the accounts." [55] Again, compare the cures of deaf, dumb and blind persons in Mark 7 and 8,

where there is no exorcism (despite Mark's interest in such events), with the similar cases in Matthew 9 and 12, where dumb and blind people are exorcised: "There must have been some diagnosis or discernment by Jesus at the time, whereby he was able to tell which cases required the casting-out of evil spirits and which did not." [56]

What symptoms might Jesus have used for diagnosis? In New Testament times there were: "well-established maladies like fever, leprosy and paralysis it was not thought necessary to attribute either to Satan or to demons (Mark 1:29-31, 40-4, 2:1-12; cf. Mark 4:19). [Rather] the idea of demon-possession was reserved for conditions where the individual seemed to be totally in the grip of an evil power (using his vocal chords, Mark 1:24, 5:7, 9; Acts 16:16; convulsing him, Mark 1:26, 9:20-2, 26; superhuman strength, Mark 5:3-4; Acts 19:16)." [57] Some of these symptoms can, it is true, be given psychiatric explanations. However, "The presence of a diagnosable psychiatric disorder does not. . . invalidate a possible spiritual basis or trigger for the disturbance itself. . ." [58] As psychiatrist M. Scott Peck concludes:

"As far as I can currently understand these matters, there has to be a significant emotional problem for the possession to occur in the first place. Then the possession itself will both enhance that problem and create new ones. The proper question is: 'Is the patient just mentally ill or is he or she mentally ill and possessed?'" [59]

Psychiatric explanations do not contradict spiritual explanations. Then again, a face-to-face diagnosis can include more intuitive factors than a listing of symptoms. The Christian is quite within their epistemic rights to assume that Jesus' discernment in such matters was more than merely human. Nor is all the evidence amenable to psychiatric explanation. For example, in the story of the Gaderene demonic (Mark 5:1-20, Matthew 8:28-34, Luke 8:26-39), signs of possession include not only great strength (Mark 5:3) and a disregard for pain (Mark 5:5), but a stampede of local pigs into whom the demons beg to flee: "the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned." (Mark 5:13.) This event causes quite a public uproar:

"Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man - and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region." (Mark 5:14-16)

As for the previously possessed man himself, he "went away and began to tell in the Decapolis [ten cities] how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed." (Mark 5:20.) To lay claim to such wide spread public knowledge of a particular exorcism and its bizarre results, and to do so within a generation of its advent, is no way to make-up a story! One can only conclude that the story wasn't made up (the same point about the wide spread knowledge of non-Christian witnesses applies to the deliverance recorded in Mark 1:23-28 and Luke 4:31-37).

Matthew's account of this exorcism, although clearly an account of the same event (pigs and all), differs from the earlier Mark and the later Luke in mentioning two possessed men. It would seem that either Mark left out the second man as extraneous to his purpose (a not uncommon practice in the ancient world) or that his source did the same, and that Matthew (a probable eyewitness) gave the full details in his report. Assuming that Luke knew both preceding gospels, he clearly followed Mark's omission.

Although Matthew's account is thus more accurate by modern reporting standards, it does not contradict Mark or Luke when one accounts for the reporting conventions of the time. As Craig L. Blomberg writes: "It is more natural to suggest that there really were two characters present. . . but that one acted as spokesman for the two and dominated the scene in such a way that left the other easily ignored in narratives which so regularly omitted non-essential details." [60] Indeed, the fact that we have two different and therefore independent accounts of this exorcism actually adds to the historical justification for accepting the

reliability of the story. As Keith Warrington notes: "Each of the synoptic writers records this incident. . . Matthew records that Jesus delivers two demoniacs, though both Mark and Luke refer to only one. The similarities between the accounts suggest strongly that they are reflecting one and the same historical event, the difference in numbers being no hindrance to understanding of the passage." [61]

All three Synoptic Gospels recount Jesus' healing of the boy suffering demonically caused epilepsy (Matthew 17:14-21, Mark 9:14-29, Luke 9:37-43). Jesus' disciples fail to exorcise this demon, although they have recently been given authority by Jesus to do just that (Matthew 10:1, Luke 9:1): "Their incapacity is to be interpreted in the light of their not appropriating the authority that has been delegated to them." [62] Matthew and Mark record the disciples asking Jesus to explain their failure and Matthew records that it was due to their lack of faith (Matthew 21:21f, cf. Luke 12:5f). As Keith Warrington says: "Their trust and confidence in God's power available to them have for some reason deserted them." [63] The crucial point is that this episode is not only reported by all three synoptic gospels, but that it is highly embarrassing to Jesus' disciples. There are therefore good historical grounds for thinking that this incident happened, the only question is how to interpret it. Was the boy suffering from nothing but epilepsy? The fact that Jesus healed the boy through exorcism might be thought to indicate that there was more to the incident than that.

The New Testament records that some strangers used the name of Jesus to perform exorcism: "Teacher", said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me." (Mark 9:38-39. cf. Luke 9:49.) This is not the sort of thing the gospel writers would want to invent, since it calls into question the claim of the church to be the sole purveyor of Jesus' power and teaching, "especially as Jesus does not condemn the practice." [64] This story also embarrasses the disciple John. Why would strangers use Jesus' name in exorcism unless Jesus was well known as a powerful exorcist? Again, we find some Jews experimenting with Jesus' name as an authority in exorcism, although without success, in Acts 19:13-17:

"Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding."

It is unlikely that anyone could have simply invented such a story, involving as it does the sons of such a prominent member of society in such a publicly embarrassing situation. The Jews would hardly want to lampoon themselves with such a tale, and the Christians would hardly have made up a story that important contemporaries would have been in a position to deny. It is also interesting to note that the possessed man was able to overpower, beat and strip naked seven men!

Graham Stanton reports, "it was very easy to 'write off' miracle workers in first century Palestine. Exorcisms could be readily explained as the result of possession by the prince of demons. . ." [65] This is just what some of Jesus' contemporaries did do, a fact attested by the earliest gospel (Mark 3:22) and by Q: "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." (Matthew 12:24); "By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons." (Luke 11:15.) Here we have multiple source attestation to an important admission by antagonistic witnesses: "All three Synoptists record Jesus exploring the folly of the Pharisees' claim that he operates in the power of Beelzebub, noting that a divided kingdom is doomed. . ." [66] The important thing is that Jesus' enemies did not attempt to refute the fact of his exorcisms. Instead, they merely sought to reinterpret those facts to suit their own worldview (which is exactly the response made by modern day sceptics). Hence Jesus' critics unwittingly testify to the fact that Jesus did indeed engage in successful exorcism.

David Instone Brewer, whose approach to these matters is formed both by an understanding of modern psychiatric thinking and person experience of exorcism, says that while a psychiatrist might suggest reinterpreting Biblical accounts of exorcism in terms of various psychiatric disorders, such an approach has

"only limited value as explanations of what is described in the Gospels." [67] For example psychiatry cannot explain the insight than many of the demonised have into Jesus' identity: "The man in the synagogue shouted out that Jesus was the Holy One of God (Mk. 1:24/Lk. 4:34). The mad man of Gadera called him Son of the Most High God (Mk. 5:7/Mt. 8:29/Lk. 8:28.) Many other demonised people are also recorded as shouting that he was the Son of God, and having to be silenced (Mk. 1:34; 3:11; Lk. 4:41). This insight into Jesus' character cannot be explained in psychiatric terms." [68] One explanation for the demon's actions is that they are disturbed by the mere presence of Jesus and vocalize their discomfort, a pattern recognizable from contemporary accounts of possession. Keith Warrington also suggests that the demons attempted to complicate life for Jesus by proclaiming his status at an inopportune time, but that "Jesus refused to allow any slowing down of his ministry and saw through the unsubtle (at least to him) strategy of the demons." [69]

## **Conclusion**

There is good historical warrant, both general and specific, for believing that Jesus performed successful exorcisms. Aside from the evidence for the general reliability of the synoptic Gospels, several relevant facts are additionally supported by the criteria of multiple source attestation, dissimilarity, embarrassment, and admission by antagonistic witnesses. The data is not only compatible with a literal understanding of possession and exorcism; it also includes several factors (Jesus' exorcisms healed people even when they were suffering from otherwise apparently natural illness; one man overpowering, beating and stripping naked the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest; a very public exorcism that results in a drowned herd of pigs; the demon's repeated insight into Jesus status) that are difficult to account for in purely naturalistic terms.

## **Endnotes**

[1] David Instone Brewer, 'Jesus and the Psychiatrists', *The Unseen World*, (Paternoster, 1996), p148.

[2] Keith Warrington, *Jesus The Healer*, (Paternoster, 2000).

[3] Gary R. Habermas, *Why I Am A Christian*, (Baker, 2001), p117.

[4] Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, (IVP, 1987), p90.

[5] Quoted by Gary R. Habermas, *op cit*.

[6] Quoted by Gary R. Habermas, 'Did Jesus Perform Miracles?', *Jesus Under Fire*, (Paternoster, 1996), p124.

[7] *ibid*.

[8] *ibid*.

[9] *op cit*, p114.

[10] Gary R. Habermas, *Jesus Under Fire*, p126.

[11] Graham N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, (Oxford, 1993).

[12] *ibid*.

[13] *ibid*.

[14] *ibid.*

[15] *ibid.*

[16] Craig L. Blomberg, *op cit.*

[17] Graham N. Stanton, *op cit.*

[18] William Proctor, *The Resurrection Report*, (Broadman & Holman, 1998), p7.

[19] *ibid.*, p5.

[20] cf: Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, (IVP, 1987); William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, (Crossway, 1994); R.T.France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1986); Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, (Baker, 1976); Norman L. Geisler et al, *Why I Am A Christian*, (Baker, 2001); J.P.Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, (Baker, 1987); Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, (Harper Collins, 1998); Carsten Peter Thiede, *Jesus - Life or Legend?*, (Lion, 1997); Michael J. Wilkins & J.P.Moreland ed's., *Jesus Under Fire*, (Paternoster Press, 1996).

[21] David Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, 1999), p47.

[22] Winfried Corduan, *No Doubt About It*, (Broadman & Homan, 1997), p193.

[23] According to the Biblical Archaeologist William F. Albright: "every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century A.D. (very probably sometime between about A.D. 50 and 75)." - 'Towards a More Conservative View', *Christianity Today*, (January 18, 1963).

[24] J.P.Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, (Baker, 1987), p137.

[25] Walter A. Elwell & Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, (Baker, 1998), p75.

[26] cf. Josh McDowell & Bill Wilson, *He Walked Among Us*, (Alpha, 2000), p118-119.

[27] R.T.France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, p122 & 124.

[28] This testimony does not necessarily bear upon the question of what order these gospels were written in, since it talks about when the gospels were received by Irenaeus.

[29] Walter A. Elwell & Robert W. Yarbrough, *op cit.*, p88-89, *my italics.*

[30] Eusebius, quoting Papias, a second century bishop, Walter A. Elwell & Robert W. Yarbrough, *ibid.*, p88.

[31] Walter A. Elwell & Robert W. Yarbrough, *op cit.*

[32] *ibid.*, p98.

[33] Irenaeus.

[34] Walter A. Elwell & Robert W. Yarbrough, *op cit.*, p99.

- [35] Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, (Apollos, 1997), p365.
- [36] Craig L. Blomberg, 'Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?', *Jesus Under Fire*, (Paternoster, 1996), p28.
- [37] F.F.Bruce, *The New Testament Documents - Are They Reliable?*, (IVP, 2000), p17.
- [38] J.P.Moreland, *op cit*, p151.
- [39] Carsten Peter Thiede, *Jesus: Life or Legend?*, (Lion, 1990), p9.
- [40] Graham Stanton, *op cit*, p35.
- [41] *ibid*, p38.
- [42] *ibid*, p36.
- [43] *ibid*, p37.
- [44] *ibid*.
- [45] *ibid*, p36.
- [46] *ibid*, p121.
- [47] Gregory A. Boyd, *Letters From a Skeptic*, (IVP, 2000), p95.
- [48] R.T.France, *op cit*, p121.
- [49] *ibid*, p101.
- [50] J.P.Moreland, *op cit*, p156.
- [51] Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels - An Introduction and Survey*, (Apollos, 1997), p381.
- [52] R.T.France, 'The Gospels as Historical Sources for Jesus, the Founder of Christianity,' *Truth 1* (1985): 86.
- [53] Keith Warrington, *op cit*, p104.
- [54] cf. Graham Twelftree, *Christ Triumphant*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), p169.
- [55] Keith Warrington, *op cit*, p45.
- [56] Michael Perry ed., *Deliverance*, (SPCK, 1996), p146.
- [57] *ibid*.
- [58] Ernest Lucas ed., *Christian Healing*, (Lynx, 1997), p148.
- [59] M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*, p219.

[60] Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, (IVP, 1987), p151.

[61] Keith Warrington, *op cit*, p47.

[62] *ibid*, p88.

[63] *ibid*.

[64] David Instone Brewer, 'Jesus and the Psychiatrists', *The Unseen World*, (Paternoster, 1996), p147.

[65] Graham Stanton, *op cit*, p217.

[66] Keith Warrington, *op cit*, p77.

[67] David Instone Brewer, *op cit*, p135.

[68] *ibid*, p138.

[69] Keith Warrington, *op cit*, p45.