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## An Exegesis of Mark 5:1-20



## Mark 5: 1-20

5 They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.[a] 2 And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. 3 He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; 4 for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. 5 Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. 6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; 7 and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." 8 For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" 9 Then Jesus[b] asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." 10 He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. 11 Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; 12 and the unclean spirits[c] begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." 13 So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herds, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

14 The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. 15 They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. 16 Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. 17 Then they began to beg Jesus[d] to leave their neighborhood. 18 As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. 19 But Jesus[e] refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." 20 And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed. (NRSV)

### Introduction

Upon first read, Mark 5: 1-20 appears to be simply a miracle or wonder story—an exorcism story to be precise. Jesus's powerful and restorative actions in the story result in feelings of both fear and amazement throughout the community. Upon a deeper reading of the text, three distinct talking points arise which will be covered in greater detail later in the paper. Those three points are: (1) ministry to Gentiles in Gentile territory, (2) the presence of an "unclean spirit," and (3) a departing from the larger Markan theme of the Messianic Secret. These three points combine to form the thesis for this paper:

The casting out of the "unclean spirit" from the demoniac into the swine was one of the many ways Jesus systematically dismantled the erroneous or "unclean" idea of the Messiah as a conquering, militaristic hero intended only for the Jews, instead of a suffering servant Messiah sent for all of humankind.

### Historical and Literary Context

Mark's gospel was written in approximately 70 CE in either Galilee or Rome. Scholars have made extensive arguments for both locations.[1] Historical interpretations of Mark have passed through various phases beginning with the early church fathers prior to the advent of modern scholarship to the most recent creative interpretations concerned mostly with composition and literary patterns.[2] There is a traditional understanding that Mark recorded his conversations and correspondences with Peter, and a general scholarly consensus that Mark provides the literary basis for the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mark's probable intended audience was early Church Christians living under Roman persecution at the hands of Nero. These early Christians probably met in house church congregations.

Mark's writings are classified in the "unique literary form and genre of religious testimony" known as the

Gospels, according to William Franke.<sup>[3]</sup> This particular genre denotes a transition of sorts from the oral storytelling tradition of this ancient culture to actual written accounts of history. The genre of Gospels would have been very familiar to the ancient Greco-Roman world as it was the preferred genre for telling of the brave and mighty deeds of ancient heroes. Mark probably penned his gospel account with the characteristics and hallmarks of this format in mind. This particular text-segment falls into the shorter narrative episode of a wonder story or miracle story. There are various types of wonder stories; this text-segment reads as an exorcism story. A focus of exorcism narratives is the communication between Jesus and the demon, which he exorcises from a fully possessed individual who subsequently is returned to his “right mind” (v. 15). This is evident in the text segment at hand.

The account of the demoniac is included in three of the four gospel accounts: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. All three accounts follow the same trajectory, except that Mark and Luke provide a more detailed portrayal and Matthew writes of two demoniacs instead of one. This discrepancy in the number of demons is not as problematic as it may initially seem due to Matthew’s pattern of using doubles and “where there are two, there is certainly one. Thus, there is no necessary contradiction.”<sup>[4]</sup>

### **Formal Analysis**

The movement of the text-segment can be divided into five distinct parts:<sup>[5]</sup> (1) the setting (5: 1-5), (2) Jesus and the demon(s) (5:6-10), (3) the swine (5:11-13), (4) the witnesses (5: 14-17), and (5) the healed man’s response (5: 18-20). The narrative follows the predictable format of introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. The text-segment begins in a place of hopelessness, intrapersonal chaos, interpersonal tension, marginalization, and suffering (vv. 2-5). It segues into an encounter and negotiation with Jesus (vv. 6-13) that ultimately results in the elimination of the source of the hopelessness, chaos, tension, marginalization, and suffering. Next, the text moves to a place of healing and restoration for the demoniac, but fear (v. 15) and “amazement” (v. 20) on the part of the witnesses that ultimately results in their formal request for Jesus to leave their community (vv. 14-17). The text-segment closes with a commission to the demoniac to go and tell his community of the Lord’s mercy.

- I. Setting/Occasion (vv. 1-2)
  - a. Geographic and geopolitical location (v. 1)
  - b. Introduction of demoniac and “unclean spirit” (v. 2)
- II. History and Present Condition of Demoniac (vv. 3-5)
  - a. Dwelling place and description of demoniac (v. 3)
  - b. History of restraint attempts (v. 4)
  - c. Present behavior of the demoniac (v. 5)
- III. Initial Encounter with Jesus (vv. 6-7)
  - a. Acknowledgment of Jesus as Son of God – both verbally and nonverbally (vv. 6 – 7a)
  - b. Plea for mercy (v. 7b)
- IV. Exorcism of the Demoniac (vv. 8-13)
  - a. Casting out of the demon(s) (v. 8)
  - b. Jesus questions the demon and the demon answers (v. 9)
  - c. Demon pleads not to be sent out of the country and instead into the pigs (v. 10-12)

d. Jesus grants permissions and the demons enter the pigs and the pigs promptly drown (v. 13)

V. Responses to the Exorcism (vv. 14-18)

a. Swineherds' response: "ran off and told it in the city and country" and townspeople's initial response: "came to see what it was that had happened." (v. 14)

b. Townspeople's secondary response (v. 15)

c. Townspeople's tertiary response (vv. 16-17)

d. Jesus' response to the townspeople and the demoniac's response to Jesus (v. 18)

VI. Jesus' Final Instructions (vv. 19-20)

a. Refusal and commission to the demoniac (v. 19)

b. Response of the demoniac to Jesus' commission (v. 20)

## Detailed Analysis

### Geographic and Cultural Settings

A theme that runs throughout Mark's gospel is the inclusion of, or the mission to, the Gentiles in the redeeming work of Christ. Some scholars posit that Mark's use of the geographic location of Galilee "symbolized the Christian mission to the world, especially to the Gentiles."<sup>[6]</sup> This mission arguably begins with the text-segment at hand:

In chapters 5-8 the spread of the kingdom is described first in terms of its power—miracles—then in reference to the role of the disciples in carrying on the work of Jesus, and finally through the motif of crossing the sea to spread the kingdom among the Gentiles. Kelber claims the east side of the Sea of Galilee, because it was primarily Gentile, represents the Christian mission to the Gentiles. Thus there is first a Jewish feeding miracle, and then a Gentile one. <sup>[7]</sup>

C.H. Cave argues that Mark used the phrase "the other side of the sea" not because he was limited in his geographic understanding of the area, but because it was "clearly indicative of the eastern, Gentile, shore by its use of *περαυ*, a word which in the Greek Bible nearly always points away from Israel to the lands outside of it."<sup>[8]</sup> Mark communicates this in the very first verse of the story: "They came to the other side of the sea to the country of the Gerasenes" (v. 1). As soon as Jesus departs the boat, the demoniac (a Gentile) "immediately" (v. 2) meets him. Until this point, Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus was primarily functioning in Jewish territory, so the entrance into Gentile territory should not be viewed as minor. The phrase "the other side" is used five times in Mark's account (4:35, 5:1, 5:21, 6:45, and 8:13). Each time, going to "the other side" involves traversing a body of water, which in the ancient biblical world was representative of chaos. Jesus demonstrated his power over the chaos by stilling the storm (4:35) and walking on the water (6:45). At least some of the time, going to the "other side" involved leaving Jewish territory to enter Gentile territory as we see in the text segment under examination and when Jesus "crossed to the other side" after the Pharisees demanded a sign in Mark 8:11-13.

Mark 5: 1-20 is positioned as the second of four miracles that follow a collection of parables in the Markan text. After stilling the storm on the sea, (the sea was associated with or representative of chaos in ancient Jewish literature), Jesus and his disciples arrive in the *vicinity* of the Gerasenes. Geographically speaking, the text-segment is problematic because Gerasa is approximately 30 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee, into which the pigs supposedly fled and subsequently drowned; therefore, *vicinity* is probably a more accurate way to describe their location. Again, it is immediately clear in the text-segment that Jesus and the disciples have arrived in Gentile territory due to the presence of thousands of swine. Gerasa was also one of the ten predominantly Gentile cities comprising the Decapolis mentioned in verse 20. "Jewish ritual

practices separate the world into categories of clean and unclean. When heard within that context, the elements of impurity in this story are piled one upon another: unclean spirit, dwelling among tombs, and a large herd of swine.”<sup>[9]</sup>

### Unclean Spirits and the Messianic Secret

Mark uses the description of “unclean spirit” four times in this text segment. The demon identifies itself as Legion in verse nine. Some interpreters believe this name is reflective of the Roman occupation, which had devastated and oppressed many people groups during this time period. The New Interpreter’s Bible reports that a legion “consisted of 6,000 infantry, 120 cavalry, and associated auxiliaries.” Demons and unclean spirits have an interesting connection with the Messianic Secret. It is actually an unclean spirit who first “outs” Jesus as the “Holy One of God” in Mark (1:24). Immediately following in 1:25, we have the commencement of the Messianic Secret theme when Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit and commands it to “Be silent, and come out of him!” This echoes Legion’s recognition and acknowledgment of Jesus as “Son of the Most High God” (v. 7) in the Gerasene demoniac text segment. Later in the first chapter of Mark, when Jesus is healing at Simon’s house, he cured many illnesses and “cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him” (v. 34). These verses are the textual beginnings of the Messianic Secret theme in Mark and they involve demons and unclean spirits. It is not until chapter 1 verses 43-44 (healing of the leper) that we see the Messianic Secret without demonic involvement. Again in Mark 3:11-12, we see evidence of the unclean spirits recognizing and acknowledging Jesus and Jesus sternly ordering them not to make him know. Similar to Legion, the unclean spirits in this story also fall to the ground in the presence of Jesus. There is also evidence that Jesus is particularly concerned with the removal of unclean spirits as he gives authority to the Twelve Disciples to “cast out demons” (3:15). Eventually Jesus is actually accused of being in the employ of Satan due to his ability to cast out demons (3:20-30). This segues into the text segment on the unforgivable sin (3:29), which essentially boils down to accusing Jesus of having an “unclean spirit” (3:30). All of this activity precedes and contextualizes the text segment under examination.

Unclean spirits continue to make an appearance following the text segment at hand. In chapter 7 of Mark we encounter the Syrophenician—a Gentile woman—who requests that Jesus free her daughter of an unclean spirit (v. 26). After some back and forth with the woman, Jesus agrees to exorcise the unclean spirit in verse 29. The very next chapter heading (NRSV) of the text concerns Jesus curing a deaf man (v. 31-37). This text segment has Jesus again returning to Gentile territory in the Decapolis, performing a healing miracle, and admonishing the recipient to “tell no one” (v. 36).

### Synthesis

The casting out of the “unclean spirit” from the demoniac into the swine was one of the many ways Jesus systematically dismantled the erroneous or “unclean” idea of the Messiah as a conquering, militaristic hero intended only for the Jews, instead of a suffering servant Messiah sent for all of humankind. Mark’s use of the Gentile setting and the Gentile demoniac main character is important. As soon as Jesus stepped onto the soil, the Gentile demoniac was drawn to him. This is illustrative of Jesus’ mission beyond the Jews, so much so that Jesus even strays from the pattern of the “tell no one” Messianic Secret and actually commands the demoniac to, as Ryan Culpepper points out, “go tell his own people in the Decapolis” <sup>[10]</sup> (5:19). Perhaps Jesus knew that the Gentiles were not searching for nor longing for a Jewish militaristic Messiah, so their knowledge of the miraculous exorcism was not such a pressing threat. To be specific, though, Jesus told the demoniac to go and tell *what* the Lord did, not *who* the Lord was. As detailed above with evidence from the text, Gentiles and unclean spirits/demons (both considered unclean and the latter evil) were able to recognize Jesus. The unclean spirits recognized his identity and the Gentiles recognized his restorative power, while the religious elite and his own community members did not.

This text-segment immediately precedes—or paves the way for—a long string of events that support the above-mentioned premise of this entire exegesis: Jesus’s rejection in his hometown (Mark 6), his debate with the Pharisees about what constitutes holiness (Mark 7), the encounter with the Syrophenician woman and the deaf and mute man (Mark 7), his predictions of his own death (Mark 8), and his statement in Mark 9 that “whoever is not against us is for us.” Parts of my thesis statement are echoed in each of these

events, for which the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac serves as a springboard of sorts:

The casting out of the “unclean spirit” from the demoniac into the swine was one of the many ways Jesus systematically dismantled the **erroneous or “unclean” idea of the Messiah as a conquering, militaristic hero intended only for the Jews** (demonstrated by rejection in hometown in Mark 6 and debate with Pharisees in Mark 7), instead of a **suffering servant Messiah** (demonstrated by prediction of his own death in Mark 8) **sent for all of humankind** (demonstrated by Syrophenician woman’s faith and healing of the deaf man in Mark 7 and inclusion of all who are willing in Mark 9).

While these examples are not exhaustive, they do provide enough evidence to assert that the text-segment under investigation is largely concerned with issues of clean versus unclean and how those issues unfolded and manifested in Christ’s identity, mission, and ministry.

### Reflection

This particular interpretation of the Gerasene demoniac text puts forth a few questions concerning application. The most obvious involves how those people who seek to imitate Christ discern and respond to “clean and unclean” people and things. To be certain, a more extensive and thorough examination of Jesus’ actions and words is needed, but I do think this text segment offers a starting point. Jesus surrounded by unclean things (e.g. unclean spirits, swine, tombs, Gentiles), Jesus responded with healing and restoration, not adherence to traditional doctrine or law.

A further examination of the repetition of “the other side” in Mark and beyond could provide a worthwhile interpretation, particularly for someone approaching this text segment from a more complete post modernist perspective. I surmise that a case could be made that Jesus shows a pattern of intentionally placing himself among the most marginalized and oppressed people in society, which carries heavy implications for how we interpret and apply the scriptures in the present day.

Any time unclean spirits or demons are mentioned in a biblical text (or any other text for that matter), I believe that present day interpreters have an obstacle to overcome before healthy and informed interpretation can happen. The prevalence of the scientific knowledge of our day and the explanatory power it carries with it, I believe, leads a modern audience to caricature—or make cartoonish—these types of “devil stories.” The demonic becomes superstitious and fantastical. This tendency makes it even more challenging to discern the author’s original intent (if that is actually even the interpretive goal) and makes historical understanding of the culture and time period of the text segment that much more necessary. A thorough examination of the ancient Jewish understanding of demonology would only serve to strengthen any interpretation involving the demonic supernatural.

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### Footnotes

- [1] [1] The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes. Volume VIII (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 583.
- [2] Ryan A. Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. 2007), 15.
- [3] William Franke, "Gospel as Personal Knowing: Theological Reflections on Not Just a Literary Genre." *Theology Today* 68, no. 4 (2012): 413–23. 414.
- [4] Johns Krejberg Haarh, ed., *Christ Chronological* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 49.
- [5] Robert Guelich, Mark 1-8:26 (WBC 34a; Dallas: Word, 1989), 274, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 164.
- [6] Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (2d ed.; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovick, 1974), 143-45, 149 in Culpepper, *Mark*, 15.
- [7] Ryan A. Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. 2007), 16.
- [8] Cyril Hayward Cave, "Obedience of Unclean Spirits," *New Testament Studies* 11 (1): 93–97. p. 94
- [9] The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes. Volume VIII (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 583.
- [10] Ryan A. Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. 2007), 165.