

# The Gerasene Demoniac and the Sexually Violated

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The account of the “Gerasene Demoniac” as presented in Mark 5:1–20 is one of the most dramatic exorcisms and encounters by Jesus described in the Gospels. Mark’s account is more direct than either Matthew’s or Luke’s and incorporates descriptions of the man’s strength and frightfulness into the body of the story rather than as parenthesis. Indeed, were the Gospel of Mark a contemporary writing, the presence and style of the story of the Gerasene Demoniac would surely prompt scholarly speculation that Stephen King was involved in authorship of the Gospel in some way.

A number of critical questions have been raised about the nature and meaning of the story in its contemporary setting.<sup>2</sup> In this article I explore the close parallels between the mythology and dynamics of the demoniac narrative and the mythology and dynamics of the contemporary experience of sexual violence as experienced predominantly by women. In doing so, I think the story of the demoniac gives us some valuable and necessary insights into how we may be called to respond to those many women and children today for whom the “invasion” or “possession” of sexual assault is a reality. In turn, because the mythologic and dynamic parallels are so close, doing so may also prompt reflection and speculation on aspects of the original story.

The reason given for the demoniac’s wild and uncontrollable behavior is that he was “with an unclean spirit,” though there is a constant and subtle play within the story between the one unclean spirit being many, of having many forms.<sup>3</sup> As the story unfolds, we see details of particular (and popular) beliefs about spiritual inhabitation and spirit exorcism, such as:

- unclean spirits or demons preferred to live in unclean places, hence “a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit” (v. 2);
- the demons would recognize the Messiah, hence “what have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” (v. 7);
- knowing the demon’s name gave the exorcist power, hence Jesus asks the demon’s name and the demon refuses, saying only “we are many” (v. 9);

- demons were identified with a particular region and were terrified of leaving that location, hence "he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country" (v. 10);
- demons were terrified of being without a dwelling place, hence their request to Jesus to "send us into the swine" (v. 12).

F. C. Grant suggests there is even a touch of humor in the story. Sending unclean spirits into a herd (?) of unclean pigs would seem a fair destination to a Jewish audience. There are inconsistencies in the spirit mythology also. Where did the spirits go when the pigs drowned, for example?

The mythology of the story *per se* would have raised few problems for its contemporary hearers. However, it raises significant hermeneutical questions for most readers today living in western societies, certainly for those educated in the behavioral sciences and the humanities. (This is not necessarily the case for that significant proportion of today's youth population whose cosmology has been shaped not only by scientific thought but also by the equally influential corpus of horror movies and science fiction.)

Behavioral science today would tend to view such "demoniacal" behavior in psychopathological terms. If presented with such a "case," probable physical or psychological causes would be identified and treated either chemically or psychodynamically—certainly not by spirit exorcism. This modern "psychologising" of events and encounters would tend to avoid or deal skeptically with the non-empirical elements and dimensions within biblical narratives, rendering them as curious archaisms rather than phenomena of contemporary relevance.

I consider it is this sense of loss of regard for the integrity of the text in modern practice that frequently motivates many Christian groups to hold fast to a literal interpretation of such events. Many see in the story of the demoniac, for example, a justification for contemporary spirit exorcism. Restricting an understanding of the story to such a literal view, however, fails to take sufficiently seriously the significant difference that now exists between the cultural mythology of the New Testament and the mythology of contemporary Western culture. A naïve literal approach to the text also provides no real basis for an engagement of the two different mythologies.

An alternative approach that takes seriously both the biblical and the modern scientific world view is one that acknowledges that both world views utilize constructed mythologies and then explores those mythologies for their strengths and weaknesses, their insights and their oversights.

The modern "scientific" view, for example, has certainly opened up whole new areas of insight and has contributed significantly to overcoming the destructiveness of many of the superstitions which have surrounded mental illness in the past. What is frequently lost in this modern mechanistic view, however—and this is encouraged by the increased specialization of the scientific disciplines—is that sickness has dimensions other than the mere disruption of "natural" physiological processes. Sickness has an impact on our lives far beyond the actual physical process of "getting sick." The "experience" of

"sickness" has not only practical physiological characteristics, but also symbolic ones. At its root the experience of sickness, or violation of the integrity of our person, introduces into our lives a dimension of something beyond ourselves coming to affect us, something over which we have had no control. This experience not only affects us individually, but threatens the very foundations of secularity, viz., human instrumentation and autonomy.

Understanding this "spiritual" dimension of sickness or personal violation provides one way of understanding the contemporary significance of the "spirits" in the story of the demoniac. The demoniac was a person "possessed"—literally "owned" and "used"—by something beyond himself which ignored or refused to respect his sense of personal boundary and worth and which used him for its own purposes—in this case, as a place to live and as a personal gymnasium.

That sense of being used or taken over beyond one's ability to control, which is mythologized in the Markan story by the occupation of the demon(s), is central to understanding the existential truth of the story for us today. There are or will be times in all human lives when we are faced with situations or drives which ignore our autonomy and gifted self-worth, invade our space, one way or the other, and use us.

This dimension becomes most obtrusive in pastoral situations of violation or sickness: an active, competitive businessman who has just had a heart attack; someone faced with the prospect of losing a limb; a woman about to undergo a mastectomy; an independent elderly person who has become hospitalized and is wondering if this is the sickness that will make it impossible for them to continue to live in their own home; a person who has just been told they have cancer; or a woman who has just been beaten by her husband or raped. One cannot encounter closely people dealing with such experiences without realizing that there is more than just a physical process going on—the person becomes engaged also in a struggle with the spiritual dimension of everyday life.

Another close parallel to the biblical mythology is that when we deal with major crises (and even minor ones) such as these, we frequently conceive of them in terms of having been invaded by something outside ourselves. We ask questions like: "Will I be able to beat *this thing*?" and "Why has this *happened* to me?" It is not unusual also to find that within the experience of sickness or being violated, the unified concept of the self, the sense of well being, is broken up.

While our mythologizing (naming) of such situations may be quite different from the mythology being used in the biblical accounts, the impact and the reality being addressed is little different.

It is within this hermeneutical context that the narrative of the demoniac bears a remarkably close parallel to the dynamics found in the experience of those people (mainly women and girls) who have been victims of childhood sexual abuse or who have suffered sexual violence at the hands of men they have trusted.

The experience of sexual violence is a more common experience than is generally recognized. While precise data are difficult to establish, Australian

and international research indicates that sexual assault is a major social phenomenon. One out of ten women will be raped in their lifetime.<sup>4</sup> Rape of women occurs in 7 percent to 12 percent of all marriages.<sup>5</sup> Thirty-eight percent of girls (9 percent of boys) will be sexually assaulted in some way by the time they are eighteen years of age.<sup>6</sup> Incest takes place in one out of ten homes.<sup>7</sup> Ninety-three percent of victims of sexual assault are female.<sup>8</sup> Ninety-eight percent of offenders are male.<sup>9</sup> There is no "typical" female victim: women victims come from all ages, classes, cultures, races, and creeds. Likewise there is no "typical" male attacker: male attackers commonly look and act like ordinary men and come from all social classes, income levels, races, and age groups.

Several particular characteristics of sexual violence compound the effects of such "invasion" and increase the victim/survivor's vulnerability. One is prior relationship to the assaulter. Eighty percent of women victims and 76 percent of female child victims know the man who assaulted them.<sup>10</sup> A child sexual offender in the overwhelming majority of instances is the father, stepfather, mother's de facto partner, brother, uncle or grandfather of the child victim.<sup>11</sup>

A second is that most sexual assaults are not random incidents against which a woman or child can take precautionary action, or avoid if she were only more careful. Most sexual assaults are calculated exploitations of trust relationships. They are generally premeditated and well planned and in many cases are carried out by men whom the woman or girl and society have looked on and trusted as a protector. This compounds the effect of the violence by undermining the woman's sense of confidence in trust relationships, in social institutions, and in her own judgment. It also undermines her sense of security and safety even in familiar environments. When the woman or girl is assaulted by a clergyman or male church leader, which is not infrequent, it has even more profound implications, frequently affecting deeply her sense of spiritual trust, her spiritual sense of self, and leaving her with the feeling of having been ravaged or abandoned by God.<sup>12</sup>

The experience of assault, which is literally an invasion of a woman or girl's bodily boundaries, confuses those boundaries and violates the sense of one's own person. It is traumatizing, confusing and shattering, with deep and long-lasting effects. When this occurs at a young age, in many cases the trauma is so great that the memory of the experience is frequently involuntarily suppressed.

The main way I coped with the incest was deciding not to remember it until it was safe. The main thing that made it safe was finally being in a relationship where I felt I could really count on my partner. We were in couples therapy when I had my first flashback. I remembered the sensation of being molested, and I got a very clear image of the room.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the event(s) may not be remembered, the consequences of it generally continue to effect the girl's or the woman's attitude, perception, and actions. Because the original event(s) causing these reactions is either not generally known or forgotten, these actions appear as seemingly irrational, disruptive, disorienting, or personally destructive behavior that doesn't seem to fit. The

mythology of understanding such behavior as an invasion of something separate from one's own being is a very relevant and powerful one. Women survivors of sexual assault speak frequently of the experience of being sexually assaulted in terms of being invaded, possessed and used.

It felt like my body was inhabited by this thing that happened in my childhood, that there wasn't a cell in my body that wasn't involved in it. The memories felt like they were invading me, in the same way my uncle had invaded my body. I spent a lot of time feeling like I was going to throw up.<sup>14</sup>

Because there is no readily apparent, identifiable, or socially acceptable reason for this behavior, the woman or child survivor generally suffers further. Rather than being praised for the strength involved in surviving a major, uninvited personal trauma, she is frequently blamed and feels personally guilty for being of unstable temperament. The biblical mythology that emerges in Mark's story of the demoniac should not be taken too lightly, even today, that demons live among the tombs of what is dead and stinking. This is well illustrated in the story of Jennierose Lavender, a forty-seven-year-old survivor of child sexual abuse:

People have said to me, "Why are you dragging this up now?" Why? WHY? Because it has controlled every facet of my life. It has damaged me in every possible way. It has destroyed everything in my life that has been of value. It has prevented me from living a comfortable emotional life. It's prevented me from being able to love clearly. It took my children away from me. I haven't been able to succeed in the world. If I had a comfortable childhood, I could be anything today. I know that everything I don't deal with now is one more burden I have to carry for the rest of my life. I don't care if it happened 500 years ago! It's influenced me all that time, and it does matter. It matters very much.<sup>15</sup>

Not only can it tear apart the woman's sense of herself, but it undermines the capacity to trust and love anyone, particularly men. The integrated self is frequently divided into several characters (known as "splitting"), literally making the one person, many—the very words used to describe the character of the demoniac. Bass and Davis indicate that virtually everyone who is diagnosed with multiple personality disorder has been found to be severely abused—sexually, physically, or psychologically—as a young child, a view supported by others.<sup>16</sup> The story of Diane illustrates this process:

From the time I was a very young child, I had experiences which were so traumatic they split my personality wide open. There was no way for my young mind to cope with the brutality and random acts of sadism that I experienced. Instead, I completely forgot the incidents and created a totally new personality. . . . Each of these personalities began without the old scars, without the old terror, without the anger.<sup>17</sup>

The story of Gizelle, a forty-two-year-old survivor of childhood incestuous rape, also illustrates how this process of division was essential for personal survival in a totally uncontrollable assaultive situation:

I split my father into two different people, because there was no other way to sit across the breakfast table from him. The man who came down and sat at the kitchen table was my father. The man who came in the middle of the night and molested me was a shadow . . . and as I split him into two, I split myself into two. There was the little girl whose father taught her to ride a bike, who got A's and became a perfectionist. And then there was the little girl who played in the attic, felt that she was dying, wanted to commit suicide, had nightmares. But I could never speak of her. Her voice had been taken away. I felt caught, trapped in my body. That's continued into adulthood.<sup>18</sup>

These new insights into multiple personality offer new perspectives on the Gerasene multiple personality. Do we have here in the biblical account of Jesus in Gerasa, a description of Jesus' literal encounter with, and healing of, a survivor of severe physical or sexual abuse?

It is common for onlookers to become afraid. When a child tries to tell what has happened; when the trauma of betrayal and violation produces erratic, uncontrollable or obsessive behavior; when a woman begins to remember earlier experiences and tries to speak about them; those who see this behavior or hear these stories generally become afraid of what they are hearing and the implications they have. Onlookers deal with the fear created within themselves in different ways. It is not unusual for people simply not to hear or not believe what the woman or child is saying—to change the subject or pass over it as if nothing significant has been said.

Another common response is to try and suppress the truth or horror of what is being expressed. In terms of the biblical narrative, this is equal to trying control the demon by chaining the person. This is illustrated graphically in Gizelle's story, recounting the incident in which she was awoken when she was three years old by being raped orally and then vaginally by her father:

Within seconds he was gone, and I was alone and the room was empty. And then within seconds after that, my mother came into the room and put on the light. She found me lying in bed covered with blood and vomit all over the sheets. . . . She started screaming at me, "Bad, evil, wicked child." Even at that point, I still had my knowledge that I hadn't done this. . . . And so I screamed back to my mother, "Mommy, I didn't do it. It was Daddy." Then my mother was hitting me, over and over again. "Don't you ever say that again. You lying, evil, dirty, filthy child." She just kept hitting me and hitting me.<sup>19</sup>

Various devices have been used historically to suppress or isolate the impact of women's stories of assault, including physical isolation. Another common device used is to chain the woman through social or psychological labelling—with terms such as crazy, hysterical, exaggerating, lying, permissive, "that time of the month," or accusing her of behaving like a victim. The intention of such labelling is to contain or neutralize the social impact of what is being reported.<sup>20</sup> While this may minimize the fear, anguish, and implications for those who hear,

it simply perpetuates the injustice and trauma of the assault. It complicates the agony of confusion created by the assault and its effects; compounds the damage by shifting blame for the assault and responsibility for managing its effects onto the woman; and frequently results in self-abuse by the victim/survivor. Yet this defensive behavior on the part of onlookers is common, even within the church. This is particularly the case when the assaulter is a clergyman, priest or male leader, with reactions such as—"Do you think you're overreacting or misunderstanding his intentions? It sounds a bit hysterical to me," or "You're allowing this one little experience to dominate your life"—being common.<sup>21</sup>

It is testimony to the persistent love of God and the power of the female spirit, that women so severely bound both personally and socially can still, like the demoniac in Gerasa, persist in breaking those chains and seeking out someone who has the courage not to run away.

According to the Markan narrative, when the demoniac saw Jesus from afar, he ran towards Jesus and met him as Jesus stepped out of the boat. I have occasionally envisaged myself in the same situation and considered my likely response. If I had just stepped out of a boat in a "pagan" territory, when, from a cave in a cemetery in the distance, these wild, filthy, naked people came running towards me, covered with dirt and dried blood from uncleaned cuts and bruises, possibly dragging bits of broken chains on their wrists and ankles, running wildly and screaming at the top of their voice as they ran—how would I respond? I expect I would jump back into the boat and get a safe distance as quickly as possible.

According to the narrative, Jesus didn't. Jesus apparently stood his ground (a quite understated act of courage, given the context). In terms of the spirit mythology of the story, the two people met, the demon was named and banished, recognizing the superior authority of the spirit of Jesus, with the effect that those who came out to see what was going on were surprised to see the former demoniac "sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had the legion" (v. 15—again, a quite understated description).

It is difficult to know, in more contemporary mythological terms, what passed between Jesus and the demoniac when they met on the beach. What non-verbal communication occurred between the two? Was the one with the demon struck by the fact that here was someone who didn't run away, who could face him as he was? Was there the perception that here was someone whose integration was stronger than his disintegration? Was there a sense of spiritual presence in Jesus that commanded authority? Whatever it was, it was apparently communicated in such a way, with such compassion and confidence, that the one with the demons was restored to wholeness—the deep divisions, conflicts and wildness were removed.

That same possibility and reality is spoken of frequently by victim/survivors when they encounter someone who embodies those qualities that appear to have been embodied by Jesus.

It was (Frank's) belief in my strength that kept me moving forward. He'd say, "Look at what you've done. You're an incredibly strong woman." Time and time again when I lost belief in my healing, Frank

would say: "Trust your process, allow it to lead you. Trust yourself, listen to yourself." The greatest gift Frank gave me was his unwavering faith in the wisdom and power of my own healing spirit.<sup>22</sup>

Judith was like this barnacle. She just hung on through all my acting out, all my fear, all my resistance. First I thought I was crazy. Then I thought they were crazy. My fears and doubts just got flushed right out of me. . . . I burst into tears, and I hung onto her, and I started weeping, and I said, "I'm not crazy anymore." I realized at that moment how far I had come. I felt the integration happening right then. And Judith burst into tears, and she rocked me. And at that point, for the first time, I knew that I had a future.<sup>23</sup>

Christians would identify that wisdom and redemptive power within the human spirit and between human spirits as the wisdom and power of God incarnate in human life, signalled and embodied in Jesus Christ. In relation to victim/survivors of sexual abuse, that embodiment of the spirit of Christ is found in someone having the caring and courage to hear the horror of abuse, to face the personal threat and challenge it poses to their perception of particular people or institutions, and to deal with it by naming the personal and social demons of sexual abuse rather than chaining the woman or running away.

One would expect that people who came out of the town would be glad to see the man who was once possessed by demons sitting peacefully and composed with a totally different self-understanding. But they weren't. The biblical narrative says they were afraid and begged Jesus to leave the neighborhood. This fearful and angry reaction is frequently condemned in pulpits whenever the text is preached on. But it is a reaction that is well known to those who work in women's refuges and sexual assault centers, and it is a reaction that frequently comes from the church. Breaking the silence around sexual violence and challenging the abusive treatment of women calls into question entrenched social attitudes and advantages, institutional self-interest, and comfortable social illusions. We do not always celebrate when a woman who was once thought to be crazy regains "her right mind" and then says the reason she was crazy was because she was assaulted by a man we generally hold in high regard.<sup>24</sup> The talk, behavior and challenges of a "crazy" person can be pitied, ignored, and rationalized; a right mind cannot so easily be dismissed.

Every society appears to accept that there will be a few human sacrifices in the maintenance of social order. We are, after all, as individuals and as a society, not perfect. There is even the expectation that those unfortunate enough to receive unfair measure because of the way our society is structured should remain quiet for the sake of the broader social good. It is okay if women who have been violated deal with the demonic effects personally—in their own groups or even in the privacy of therapy. But if all the women who have experienced sexual violence at the hands of men in trust relationships start naming the demon publicly, they could disrupt the very structures of our social institutions and the good those institutions achieve. For the good of the

whole, it is better that those who are dealing with the demons of violence fight those demons in the cemetery on their own and not disrupt the rest of us.

Someone should have told Jesus that!



## Notes

1. The author acknowledges the significant contribution made by the women in SHIVERS to the ideas and understanding presented in this article.
2. See, for example, F. C. Grant in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII (New York: Abingdon Press, 1951), 712; C. S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (The Anchor Bible)* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1986), 278; E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark: A Commentary on the Gospel* (London: S.P.C.K., 1970), 113; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).
3. Mann departs from the more common contemporary psychological understanding of this in noting that the word "legion" was often used as a term to describe a large number (279). Myers sees it as being used specifically to describe a division of Roman soldiers (191). The T.E.V. graphically uses a term more familiar to Australians, the term "mob."
4. C. Offir, "Don't Take It Lying Down," *Psychology Today* (January 1975); H. Haines, *The Extensiveness of Sexual Abuse: A Brief Literature Review* (Mental Health Foundation, U.S.A., 1985), quoted in *Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Supporting Victims/Survivors of Sexual Assault* (Melbourne: The Centre Against Sexual Assault, Royal Women's Hospital, 1989), 5.
5. D. Finkelhor and K. Yllo, *License to Rape: Sexual Abuse of Wives* (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1985), and D. Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), quoted in *Breaking the Silence*, 5.
6. D. Finkelhor, *Sexually Victimized Children* (New York: Free Press, 1979); D. Russell, "The Incidence and Prevalence of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Female Children," in *Child Abuse and Neglect* 7 (1983); and R. Goldman, Study Presented to the Congress on Child Abuse, Sydney, 1986; quoted in *Breaking the Silence*, 5. Studies by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that in Australia fewer than one in ten sexual assault victims report the assault to the police. See E. Klimkiewicz et al. *Care for Victims of Sexual Assault: A Manual*. Law Foundation of New South Wales, 1984; and Haines, 1985 quoted in *Breaking the Silence*, 5.
7. National Coalition against Sexual Assault Conference, 1987 quoted in *Breaking the Silence*, 5.
8. Finkelhor, 1979, quoted in *Breaking the Silence*, 5.
9. *Project Anna: CASA House with the Churches Against Violence to Women* (Melbourne: CASA House, Royal Women's Hospital, 1990).
10. M. Amir, *Patterns in Forcible Rape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); R. Hall, *Ask Any Woman: A London Inquiry into Rape and Sexual*

- Assault* (London: Falling Wall Press, 1985), quoted in *Breaking the Silence*, 5. One Australian study found that in more than 20 percent of cases of incest, the assault took place while the girl was in her own bed or sleeping. See *Breaking the Silence: A Report Based upon the Findings of the Women Against Incest Phone-in Survey* (Haberfield NSW: Dymphna House, 1987), 32.
11. Finkelhor, 1979, quoted in *Breaking the Silence*, 5.
  12. See Ann-Janine Morey, "Blaming Women for the Sexually Abusive Male Pastor," *The Christian Century* (October 5, 1988): 866-69; Pamela Cooper-White, "Soul Stealing: Power Relations in Pastoral Sexual Abuse," *The Christian Century* (February 20, 1991): 196-99; Marie Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); *A Pastoral Report to the Churches on Sexual Violence against Women and Children of the Church Community* (CASA House, Royal Women's Hospital, 1990).
  13. Quoted in Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 411.
  14. *Ibid.*
  15. *Ibid.*, 33.
  16. *Ibid.*, 423. See also, for example, psychiatrist Robert Phillips Jr. in his introduction to *The Troops for Trudi Chase*, *When Rabbit Howls* (London: Pan Books, 1987): "The majority of reported cases of multiple personality occur in men and women who have experienced severe and repeated sexual and physical abuse over a significant period of time" (xi).
  17. *Ibid.*, 422.
  18. *Ibid.*, 448.
  19. *Ibid.*
  20. Marilyn Born provides an extensive description of this labelling in relation to complaints by women of sexual harassment and assault by clergy in "Sexual Harassment in the Church: The Kiss of Betrayal" *Compass* 25 (1991): 29-32.
  21. *Ibid.*
  22. Giselle in Bass and Davis, *The Courage to Heal*, 451. That the same sort of experience can be mythologized quite differently is suggested in one of the verses of the missionary hymn, "Rescue the perishing," which says:
 

Deep in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,  
 Feelings lie buried which grace can restore.  
 Touched by a loving hand, wakened by kindness,  
 Chords that were broken will vibrate once more.
  23. Quoted in Bass and Davis, *The Courage to Heal*, 428-29.
  24. D. Rowan found that in a South Australia refuge, 80 percent of the men who beat their wives were reported as being charming to everyone else. The result was that the women tended not to be believed when reporting the violence done to them. ("Syndrome of Battered Women," Unpublished paper, National Conference on Domestic Violence, November, 1985, 3.)