
WHERE DOES THE POWER TO HEAL COME FROM?

Jesus Answers Charges of Satanism

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I want in this article to demonstrate how Jesus the healer dealt with charges of being in league with Satanic forces when he carried out exorcisms. In responding to his attackers Jesus made it clear—two thousand years ago—what we should think of such charges and how we should understand where they originate. There is, as well, ample indication in the gospels of Jesus' attitude to the source of his healing power and what his exorcisms signified.

Mark 3:22–27¹ contains a narrative of a dispute that has arisen as a result of the exorcisms Jesus has been performing. His reputation as a healer has grown and it is this reputation that has drawn the attention of the religious-political authorities. These authorities choose to confront him publicly with a charge that has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of everything that Jesus has been doing.

Mark's gospel has already made it plain that there is a direct connection between Jesus' healings and the renewal of the Covenant. This renewal formed the purpose of the movement that was gathering around Jesus. For instance, in 1:40–47 Jesus heals a leper who has already been rejected by the priests as "impure." Jesus subverts the purity code² by touching the ritually impure leprous man. By redrawing the boundary between "clean" and "unclean" in this way Jesus is making a double declaration:

- 1) Every healing serves as an indication that those who have been excluded—rejected and ostracized because of religious rulings about their sickness—are being restored to the community of Israel. In this way the people of the Covenant can be reconstituted as a prelude to the establishment of a renewed Covenant. (Jesus' parable of the "lost sheep" should be read in this light. See Luke 15:3–7.)
- 2) Jesus is breaking the monopoly of the Temple system as the seat of sacramental authority. The Temple is being rejected as the sole source of healing power. No longer can it lay claim to brokering the Covenant love and healing power of God.

In Mark 3 it is not those who have been the recipients of Jesus' healing/exorcism who bring an accusation against him. Rather, this comes from outsiders to the local community, Scribes who have "come down from Jerusalem." So-called Scribes were members of the Pharisees, a faction that at that time was in close association with the ruling high-priestly aristocracy attached to the Jerusalem Temple. This aristocracy, in turn, had been granted political authority by the Roman occupying forces and served as clients of Roman rule. The Temple itself was the central financial institution which collected religious tithes but also through which passed tribute to Rome. The Scribes are confronting Jesus as representatives of this Roman-Hebrew nexus of financial, political and religious power centred in

Jerusalem. They, evidently, have registered the implied threat to their authority in the activity taking place around Jesus.

The charge the Scribes bring is calculated to have maximal impact. Everything is on the line for Jesus in such public disputes. Jesus' movement is entirely lacking in institutional backing. It relies utterly on reputation. If the charge against him can circulate without being definitively answered, there will be little chance for his movement to grow and little to stop the authorities from dispensing with Jesus and his followers.

They accuse Jesus of accessing power to carry out exorcisms which does not originate with the God of Israel. They cannot deny what everyone can see—that Jesus does, in fact, draw on some divine source of power and that he is exercising this power over destructive and dangerous forces that are attacking the community. What they are seeking to do is to impugn the legitimacy of this power by associating it with the name Beelzebul. The Semitic word Beelzebul means something like “Baal the prince.” Baal was the king of gods in Canaanite societies. There had been a long history of contestation between the prophets of Israel and those of Baal (see, for instance, 1 Kings 18 and Jeremiah 23:13) and this history had left strong connotations attached to the name Baal. Jesus employs “Satan,” the more general biblical term for a force opposed to God.

From the perspective of the Scribes—urbanites and outsiders—the local peasantry of Galilee were semi-pagan. Their orthodoxy in matters of religion was always suspect. By attaching the name of Beelzebul to Jesus' exorcisms they are saying that he serves evil, that he is satanic. He is a deviant in their eyes and his authority is to be rejected. By implication his followers and those seeking to benefit from his healings are similarly aligning themselves with the forces of evil and risk the consequences of ruling themselves outside the pale of orthodoxy.

The logic behind their accusation is simple. Jesus has not gained his authority by virtue of allegiance to the Temple system of priests and sacrifices. He does not have official approval or permission for his healings. Therefore, by definition, his healing power derives from forces in opposition to the official religion and he must be countered.

Christian history shows that this sort of logic did not die out with the New Testament. The healing abilities of “witches” in late medieval times were judged to be inauthentic because they originated outside the authority and beyond the control of the Church. Thousands of witches were dealt with in a manner that, ultimately, was similar to the death endured by Jesus.

Jesus must issue an immediate rebuttal to the charge of being aligned with Satan. He does this in two stages.

The first stage is to ridicule the charge of Satanism as logically absurd. To suggest that one must be in league with Satan in order to cast him out is to suggest that Satan can cast himself out. Satan can no more do this than you or I can lift ourselves off the ground. Then what of some sort of division within Satan that would permit him to act against himself? To suggest that exorcisms required a split within Satan's personal agency is to presuppose a lack of perduring identity. Satan as an entity would lack

integrity and internal consistency under these premises. He could not exist, in other words, and the whole debate becomes nonsensical.

However, the analogy of a house or kingdom divided against itself goes beyond mere ridicule. It serves to place the Scribes on the defensive. Kingdoms and houses were recognized as the basic political and economic institutional units of Palestinian society. Jesus' peasant listeners would have an immediate and visceral reaction to the mention of households (*latifundia*) and kingdoms. Their families and communities were being immiserated under Roman rule largely through brutal rulers who taxed them (on top of the tithes and tribute that were also being extracted from them) and of money-lenders (owners of landed estates) who were causing them to lose title to their ancestral lands.

Jesus' audience would be able to think of examples from their own recent history of kingdoms³ that had failed because of internal divisions and of households that came to ruin because of dissension among patriarchs. If exorcisms of Satan can only be understood in terms of a division within Satan himself, then the principle of division must be admitted of all entities. If Satan can be divided, then nothing is permanent. Political realities are insecure and change is inevitable—a fact that would apply to the school of Pharisees, the high priesthood, the Temple itself and, even, the Roman Empire. In fact, Jesus is implying that households and kingdoms are where one should be looking for evidence of the activity of Satan and for those who are in league with Satan.

Jesus could not rest with simply ridiculing the charge of Satanism and placing his attackers on the defensive. He also had to provide a justification for his exorcisms that would coincide with people's understanding of God's just activity in the world. If the explanation of Jesus' healings does not lie in a civil war within the house of Satan, what is the truth underlying this healing power that Jesus possesses?

In this second stage, Jesus makes use of the parable of binding the strong man to declare that his power is stronger than Satan's and that, through his healings, the reign of God is attacking Satan's domain. There is a relevant parallel between our story in Mark and a saying of Jesus that survives in Q: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). Jesus is acting as the broker of the reign of God in all his healings. Each healing acts as a sign of the benevolence that has been at the heart of God's rule since the beginning of creation, benevolence that is embodied in the Covenant between God and the people of Israel. The Covenant can be understood as intending the liberation of all those "possessed" (enslaved) by demonic forces.

We are given further clues as to the identity of these demonic forces. "Strong man" would have sounded to Galilean ears the same way it does to us—illegitimate and brutal dictatorship. It would have been clear to Jesus' audience where they were to look for such a strong man. In Chapter 5 Mark's gospel⁴ provides graphic evidence of the linkage Jesus is drawing between Satanic possession and the Roman empire. "Legion" is a specific term referring to a division of Roman soldiers. This is not the only military term present in this passage. Jesus "dismisses" the spirits who then "charge" to the edge of the lake. The "sea" itself is reminiscent of the Red Sea in which Pharaoh's troops were drowned when the people of Israel were liberated from bondage (slavery, possession) in Egypt.

So, Jesus' healings address more than the physical health of individuals. They have social and political significance. They speak to the hopes of desperate and suffering people, hopes that are founded on the goodness of God's creation and Covenant. Such goodness is directly accessible through the sort of healing power that Jesus exhibits. Already in Mark's gospel (3:14–15⁵) disciples have been sent out to expand Jesus' movement by extending this healing power to a wider and wider audience. The Kingdom of God that is to be built in the highlands of Galilee is to be buttressed by and built around demonstrations of the healing benevolence of God.

Four centuries later, when the political and utopian urgency of Jesus' message had been largely lost as a result of the Constantinian alignment of the interests of the Church with those of empire, St. Augustine of Hippo was still able to draw metaphysical conclusions about the sources of God's grace and goodness from the biblical record. In becoming a Christian Augustine had converted from Manicheism, a religion that posited two balanced and conflicting principles of good (light) and evil (darkness). In his *Confessions* Augustine stated the biblical principle that God had created the world *ex nihilo*, from nothing. All of creation was good and directly attributable to the generous grace of a loving God. There was nothing beyond the purview of God. Evil existed but not as an alien and absolute force, rather as a diminution of the good. Evil is a relative concept. Augustine's solution to the problem of evil may not answer all questions but it has, nevertheless, been basic to most Christian theology ever since.

Jesus was not much concerned with the metaphysics of evil. Satan was a practical reality for him and for those he worked amongst. In fact, life was shaped by the struggle against demonic forces. This is not to say that Jesus accepted the positive existence of absolute evil. Rather, it was an acknowledgement of the degree to which social-political domination constrained and made difficult the lives of ordinary people.

In the face of such constraint Jesus demonstrated brave resistance and counseled his followers to show courage. "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do nothing more" (Luke 12:4). Courage, then, is a crucial element of the struggle against Satan. Fear keeps us subject to a truncated view of reality. It makes us mistrust our bodies and their natural ability to heal themselves. If we are to embrace health—for ourselves on the level of our bodily well-being or for the world in terms of justice—we must be willing to take seriously the goodness that lies at the heart of what God has provided. We must learn to trust our bodies as having been created by God just as we must learn to defend the integrity of creation.

Fear permits us to be ruled by the forces of domination and exclusion. It keeps us isolated and prevents us from organizing to resist. But a life lived with courage is not defined by what others can do to you. The goodness of creation provides a wider framework within which to imagine possible futures for ourselves and for our societies.

¹ Mark 3:22-27 "And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against

himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered." (Revised Standard Version).

² See, for instance, Leviticus 13:2-14:57. The exclusion of lepers was legislated at Lev. 13:45-46 "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." (RSV).

³ Recent Roman history provided examples of two civil wars (Julius Caesar vs. Pompey, Octavian vs. Mark Antony). The latter resulted in Augustus establishing himself as a living god and temples to his worship being erected throughout the Empire. See Mark 6:14-29 for a sarcastic parody of a royal court and its decision making processes.

⁴ Mark 5:1-20 "They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; 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. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; 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.' For he had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.' So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake. 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. 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. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus 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.' And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed." (RSV).

⁵ "And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons." (RSV)