

# Jesus and the Demoniac

In the Gospels, opposition to the work of Christ is starkly exemplified by the demons, the most terrifying example being the Gerasene demoniac ("Gaderene" in Matthew's account). The name of the demoniac himself (that is, the *man's* name) is never mentioned; but the demon has a name, and his name is, famously, *Legion*. The profound significance of this name will become clear as we proceed. But first, the story as told in Mark 5:1- 20. (See also Luke 8:26 ff; Matt. 8:28 ff.)

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Ger'asenes. And when he had come out of the boat, there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who lived among the tombs; and no one could bind him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been bound with fetters and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the fetters 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 crying out, and bruising himself with stones. And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped him; and crying out with a loud voice, he said, "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!" And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." And he begged him eagerly not to send them out of the country. Now a great herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside; and they begged him, "Send us to the swine, let us enter them." So he gave them leave. And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. The herdsmen fled, and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. And they came to Jesus, and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. And those who had seen it told what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their neighborhood. And as he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. But he refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decap'olis how much Jesus had done for him; and all men marveled.

This essay is closely based upon Rene Girard's exposition of the Gerasene story in his

book, *The Scapegoat*.<sup>i</sup> Those unfamiliar with the work of Girard may question some of my assumptions, especially the idea that scapegoating is nothing less than society's fundamental organizing principle, but I cannot take the time here to argue the point. I can only show how the biblical story supports the assumption, and how much meaning the biblical text yields when approached from a "Girardian" point of view. The interested reader should refer to the numerous books by Girard, and/or one of the several excellent introductory surveys of his work currently available.<sup>ii</sup> At any rate, the reader should certainly not suppose that Girard would agree with everything I have to say here: the responsibility for what is written here is all mine.

It will be in order first to say a few words about demons in the New Testament in general. I have a vivid imagination, and envisioning the possibility of evil, supernatural personalities is not much of a stretch for me, but I am also aware of the fact that we are reading a text that would have been written quite differently, if it could have been written at all, had Jesus lived a few centuries earlier. The reason is that the demonology revealed in the New Testament reflects what was at that time a relatively recent development within Judaism, stemming most likely from the influence of the highly dualistic religion of Persia (where the Jews spent time in exile). One looks long to find references to Satan and his hoards in the Old Testament. We don't, for example, find Moses or Elijah casting demons out of people. We do find Satan in the book of Job, which actually proves the point since this is a book of late origin, written about the time when these kinds of beliefs were disseminating within Jewish culture. But in the period between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New – the so-called "inter-testamental" period – we suddenly find volumes of Jewish material brimming with references to demons and stories about them.

It seems obvious, therefore, that we are dealing here with a set of beliefs that is relative to the period in which Jesus lived. It is very easy to "freeze" revelation within a particular cultural form, a *relative* form, which is what Jesus was referring to when he accused the Pharisees of confusing God's truth with "the traditions of men." It happens all the time: Hasidic groups, for example, who in everything from theology to manner of dress have welded God to life in 18<sup>th</sup> century eastern Europe; or fundamentalist Christian groups theologically stuck not only in the answers but in the questions that were being asked in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; and so on. In their

thinking about the implications and meaning of demon possession, many Christians today can see no further than the first century.

It is also relevant to take notice of how very *natural* the instances of demon possession in the New Testament appear compared to examples found in other literatures of the period, and even to ideas circulating in the popular imagination today. The people that Jesus exorcizes, for example, have convulsions, lacerate themselves, or throw themselves into fire; but no one levitates, no one transmogrifies into a wild beast, no one causes heavy objects to sail across the room like arrows, no one undergoes a “demonic facial” (ala *The Exorcist*), and so on. The gospel writers show amazing restraint, which perhaps reflects honest fidelity to the actual pathologies Jesus was encountering. In addition, it is clear that demons held not the least bit of fascination for Jesus, who had no desire for theatrics of any sort, quite unlike the general public both then and now. In the case at hand, the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac was over in a matter of moments, unlike the battles fought in feature length motion pictures about possession. Fascination with the demonic, as with the miraculous in general, quickly detracts from the value of the story as *sign*. Jesus’ miracles, as John especially makes clear, were meant as signs. They signified meanings that transcended mere spectacle. Whatever we believe about the reality of demons, we must look for the meaning of the story, I believe, not in the demonology as such, but in the significance of the story as *sign*.

I used the word “pathologies” earlier because that is how modern psychology would attempt to read these texts, and the very fact that the texts lend themselves to that kind of medical interpretation speaks volumes about their veracity. At the same time, however, what modern medicine does not deal with, and often does not even acknowledge, is that there is a spiritual dimension to much human suffering. If these stories present in the language of first century demonology what we have come to understand as psychopathological states, it will be good for us to temper our imaginations – which often *exceed* what the biblical text actually shows us – and bring our reading of these stories a bit more down to earth; at the same time, however, we may allow these stories to correct the modern psychopathology called reductionism, that eliminates any possibility of spiritual issues that transcend the purely natural dimension.

In this essay, then, I want to present an interpretation of the Gerasene demoniac that takes

account of both the natural and the trans-natural dimensions of human suffering. I find the real interest of this story in the symbiotic relationship between natural and supernatural, as will become clear as we proceed; but since the natural dimension is easily overlooked in religious readings of this text, due particularly to the spectacular nature of the exorcism, much space will be devoted to illuminating it.

A man was possessed by a terrible demon, Jesus cast the demon out and set him free – isn't that the basic message of the story? What else is there? Well, there is a *lot* more, but it is only available to us if we come to the text with a different set of questions than those we might be used to asking, and if we are willing to challenge certain common assumptions, the main one being that the Gerasene's demon possession was purely a personal matter: there was a solitary man, that man had a demon, and Jesus freed him. It was purely a matter of a solitary individual's relationship with a supernatural entity. That assumption will be questioned here in view of the *social* nature of the story. We will attempt to read the story in a way quite counter to the typical "Hollywood reading," which essentially turns the story into an episode of *The Exorcist*.

We begin by noting that the demoniac has an intimate and rather strange relationship with the city. The townspeople have bound him many times, and in every circumstance he has broken free and escaped. Many people read this passage the way I myself read it for years, with an exaggerated supernaturalism, picturing the demon turning the man into something like The Incredible Hulk, bursting chains and fetters with his bare hands. But the narrative really doesn't give much warrant for such theatrics. Mark 5:4 says, ". . . the chains he wrenched apart, and the fetters he broke in pieces." Luke says ". . . he was kept under guard, and bound with chains and fetters, but he broke the bonds and was driven by the demon into the desert." (Luke 8:29) All of the descriptions of the man's activities – breaking his bonds, and lacerating himself – sound remarkably natural. "*He* broke the bonds," Luke says. Chains can be wrenched apart, and fetters can be broken by banging on them, especially if they are old and rusted. True enough, he is driven by the demon to do these things, and he may be made strong by wild, adrenalized urges, but the text gives us no justification for imagining deeds of supernatural strength in the manner Hollywood would stage them. But if this is true, why is it that, according to Mark, no one "had the strength to subdue him?"

When I read this passage, I cannot help but be reminded of my own experience as a child. I had terrible eczema, and scratching was a way of life. I would lay awake for hours at night, alone in my bed, tortured by itching. I would scratch my arms and legs, staining the sheets with blood, and awaken the next morning unable to straighten my arms or legs because the sores behind my elbows and knees had healed during the night and formed scabs. I could straighten them only by massaging the wounds with petroleum jelly. I could spell out more gory details, but I'm sure you get the picture. Now there was a period of time when my parents attempted to control my scratching by tying my legs and arms to the bedposts. In theory at least, I went along with the idea; but, driven wild by itching, I always managed to escape. When they tried binding my arms and legs to boards and wrapping them up like a mummy, I, little Houdini, escaped from those as well. They tried tying mittens to my hands, but I chewed off the knots, threw off the mittens, and once again scratched myself bloody. My parents could hardly believe my ingenuity in escaping from every form of restraint they could think of, and after several attempts finally gave up, as Mark implies that the Gerasenes finally gave up and just let the guy wander day and night among the tombs. Although I was in my own bed in our family home, emotionally I was as one driven to wander among tombs, lonely and self-lacerating.

The Gerasene demoniac's escapes have a similar feel. The people tie him down to restrain him from harming himself and others, and to keep him localized and controlled, but he escapes. They go out after him, or perhaps he wanders back into town, and they bind him again. And yet again he escapes. And this cycle had evidently been repeating itself for years. How easy it would have been for the Gospel writers at this point to embellish the narrative with tales of supernatural strength in which the demon smashes through the door or walls of a prison with his bare hands and, like Samson, beats off half the town with the jawbone of an ass! Instead, we are simply told that he wrenches the chains apart and breaks his fetters. This makes it hard to believe that the townsfolk could not have found some way to subdue the maniac. Could it be that the strength they lacked to subdue him was strength of *will*. But why?

We must consider the possibility that the Gospel writers have told us about this difficulty in subduing the demoniac not in order to build up the spectacular nature of Jesus' exorcism by magnifying the demon's strength, for if that was their purpose, they stopped far short of the

imaginative possibilities available to them based on the demonological beliefs of the time. Let us consider, rather, that they wanted to indicate the *social* nature of the man's predicament. In a talk given in January, 2004, at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.,<sup>iii</sup> writer and theologian James Alison drew a comparison between the Gerasene demoniac and the classic "town drunk." Although maligned by the community, the town drunk serves the community's interests by enabling its citizens to feel good about themselves. Citizens are able to occupy the high ground of conscience by having a scapegoat to blame, to mock, to gossip about, and, at times, even attempt to help, or at least restrain. Without their town drunk the people would lose their mutual bond based on disgust, blame, and abuse of the scapegoat. In fact, if the town drunk ever really recovered, they would feel strangely uncomfortable.

This is similar to the discomfort experienced by many spouses of alcoholics once the alcoholic, who has been the constant target of their efforts to fix and save, finally begins to recover. This discomfort happens because so often the spouse's good feelings about herself (or himself) are bound up with the contrast that she sees between herself and her crazy partner. The alcoholic serves wonderfully as a distraction, enabling the spouse to avoid dealing with her (or his) own shortcomings. If at one level she wants her partner to recover, and even makes efforts to control or squelch her partner's drinking, she also gets a secret gain from his sickness, for it provides her with the comforting knowledge of her own sanity, and gives her a cause and a battle to fight that doesn't require bringing her own shortcomings to light. It's also a battle that, conveniently, she cannot win. If the alcoholic ever does stop his wild binges, it won't be because the spouse finally found a way to "bind" him more securely; it won't be because the spouse was able to empty enough liquor bottles, or call the police enough times to make it happen. With counseling or 12-step help, what these spouses come to learn is that they have unconsciously chosen to engage a losing battle, one in which the spouse ends up becoming an almost mirror image of the alcoholic she claims to judge. She becomes as addicted to him as he is to booze, and both lock themselves into a reciprocal battle for control, deploying mutual blame, guilt, and abuse. Whereas the alcoholic's violence is often public and shameful, the partner's violence is often hidden behind what looks like a constructive effort to help. But not only is such help impotent to assist the alcoholic to stop bingeing, it actually *enables* the behavior to continue.

That's why Alcoholics Anonymous has a companion program called Al-Anon, a 12-step path designed specifically to help spouses recognize and come to grips with their own role and function within the relationship.

Can we see something like this going on in the continual tug of war between the Gerasene demoniac and his fellow townspeople? Although the focus for them was exclusively upon the crazy demoniac (as it has usually been for us as well, as readers of the text!) might the Gerasene community be, in its own way, just as demonic, just as possessed? Does the demoniac's behavior reflect the violence of the Gerasene community itself? Does the community's behavior reflect the demonism of the demoniac? Is what we're seeing here actually a mutual, *reciprocal* dance of violence that Jesus interrupts?

That we are justified in interpreting their relationship in this way is made clear when the text tells us what it is that possesses this unfortunate lunatic. What exactly was driven out of the demoniac? A population of individual supernatural entities called demons? Yes, but Mark's version makes very clear that they are no mere aggregation: they are a *collective* that calls itself Legion, a population of many that is at same time a single entity that answers with one voice when addressed – “My name is Legion . . . ” In Mark 5:9 the amazing transition from singular to plural happens in the very same sentence: “ My name is Legion, for *we* are many.” Legion is *many-in-one*. The man is possessed by *many-in-one*. Luke tells us specifically that the man was “*from the city,*” and the reference is more than incidental: it points like a sign to Legion's significance, for the Gerasene city is also “many,” yet acts with one mind and purpose. Legion mirrors the structure of the city itself. But Legion is *demonic* because Legion represents that particular kind of unity that Satan, the Prince of demons, has used from of old to establish his kingdoms on this earth – the kind of oneness that exists *over against* scapegoats who have been “sacrificed” in one way or another for the sake of the collective. Seeing the Gerasene demoniac as the town's scapegoat is something most commentators miss when interpreting this story, but what Rene Girard expounded so brilliantly in *The Scapegoat*. We have to situate the demoniac in his social relationship with the community, realizing him as one who occupies the same category as, for example, lunatics in the middle ages: people who existed on the margins, and functioned as society's whipping boys.

The demoniac has become the foil over against which the Gerasenes forge their group identity. Over against their scapegoat, they have become a righteous *we*, the same *we* that constitutes the basis of all cultures and civilizations, standing as they do over against some “*they*” – those people not good enough to be accepted by the community, the defective people, the sinners, the possessed, the damned. This Gerasene *we* is brought out particularly well by Matthew, who stresses that when the people came out after the miracle to see what had happened, “behold, *all the city* came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighborhood.” Mark and Luke also give the impression that it was no mere random crowd that asked Jesus to leave, nor was it simply a matter of hysterical hatred for Jesus. We are given the impression of a reasoned, structured resistance. The *we* is unanimous: *all the city* comes out. This is important precisely because this unified, structured resistance is the demonic element that Legion represents.

This interpretation adds special poignancy to Legion's earnest request, recorded by Mark, that Jesus not “send them out of the *country*.” (Mark 5:10; Luke's version has Legion ask Jesus not to send them into the “abyss.”) As a demon (or demons), Legion needs a body to possess, and it doesn't matter whose body that is. Legion can tolerate being kicked out of one body and taking up residence in another, even the body of a pig; but to be banished from its *country* would mean the demon's real end, it would mean the abyss – for Legion *is* the Gerasene *we*, the spiritual bond of the community which holds together thanks to, and over against, its scapegoat. As the man is abused by the demon(s), so he has been abused by the people.

But are the Gerasenes really this bad? Is it fair to paint this or any other human community in the dark, Satanic tones I have indicated? What needs to be understood first of all is that this not a conscious scheme, but part of the deep foundational structure of all societies. “*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers . . . against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*” (Eph. 6:12) This is to say that the victimizers, the *we*, are also in a sense victims, who believe wholeheartedly in the sacred lies that perpetuate their system. In sacrificing victims for the sake of cultural unity they earnestly believe in the guilt of the victim, and even that through their violence they are serving God, as Jesus said in John 16:2: “. . . *the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering*

*service to God.* "Only the ability to grasp one's victimizers as also victims can prevent victims from repeating the cycle of violence and becoming yet another "us" that exists over against "them." For when that happens, the victims simply imitate the perpetrators in an escalating cycle of blame and violence, until it becomes essentially impossible to distinguish between the two. When Jesus occupied the place of the victim on the cross, he had only this to say: *"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Understanding Legion as the demonic dimension of the *many-in-one* of the Gerasene community throws light upon other details of the story. The demoniac is driven to bruise himself with stones. Victims of collective violence in ancient near eastern societies were typically stoned to death. The Gerasenes kept their scapegoat alive, but the threat of stoning was no doubt always there. Possessed by the town's idea of him – by the violent, abusive voices he has heard, even those voices that claimed to be restraining him "for his own good" – he pathologically bruises himself with stones, imitating the mob's view of him in an attempt to preempt an actual stoning. I know this game well myself, for I used it as a child when I became the "class clown" in second grade, and would sometimes do self-demeaning things. Because of my uncontrollable laughter a second grade teacher once commented that I must be eating chicken feathers for breakfast, so during recess I bragged to the kids that I really did that. A classmate who lived on a farm showed up the next day with a dirty chicken feather and challenged me to eat it. I stuffed it into my mouth and started chewing, saved from swallowing it only by the ringing of the bell. The unconscious strategy was to preempt the mockery I believed was coming by laughing at myself first, thus taking the sting out of the laughter of the crowd. Rather than experience the pain of group ostracism and expulsion, you agree with your tormentors' opinion of you, and act out their violence upon yourself. You do this because the pain of accepting their view of you is less than the pain of being cast out entirely; but, sadly, all you have achieved is a false form of community belonging, at the expense of a major chunk of your soul.

In his take on the Gerasene demoniac (also based on the exposition by Rene Girard) James Alison has written eloquently<sup>iv</sup> about this experience from the standpoint of a gay theologian who grew up knowing what it feels like to be ostracized, persecuted, and excluded. He knows what it means to be demonized by the community, to be disbarred from the gift of

communal belonging; and, even worse, to internalize the damning voices so as to damn oneself, to play along with the group according to its rules, eating the crumbs that fall from society's table at the expense of being a whole person, because in order to fit in one has had to banish a major part of one's true being into the shadows. For Alison, the story of the Gerasene demoniac is:

*“. . . the story of what it looks like when the living God, the utterly vivacious Creator out of nothing, draws near to the ersatz god of group being and belonging, and by gently taking the weakest member of the group, begins to collapse the group's belonging, humanizing the 'bad guy' and thus initiating the possibility of a quite different sort of social formation.”*

There is still another aspect to Legion that we have not yet considered. Legion is given permission by Jesus to come out of the man and enter a large herd of pigs (2,000 according to Mark) feeding on a nearby hill. If Legion is the group in its capacity as *one*, shoring up its identity over against a designated scapegoat, Legion is also simply the *many* that we see in the image of the pigs. Without its scapegoat over against it to give it unity, Legion is simply the agitated *crowd*. Jesus himself used the image of a herd of pigs to refer to human crowds. “Cast not your pearls before swine,” he said, referring to the futility of offering spiritual teachings to the masses as such, “lest they lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you” – exactly what happened to Jesus himself when the crowd finally turned completely against him, making him Jerusalem's scapegoat.

When Legion loses its home in the demoniac's soul and rushes out of the man into the hoard of pigs, they dash down the hill and drown in the sea. Throughout the Bible the sea is an image for chaos. It is as though Legion's *many-in-one* structure has come “unraveled,” and is now simply *many*, since its identity is no longer consolidated over against a victim. The pigs show us an image of chaotic, self-destructive violence: the very thing ancient cultures were so desperate to avoid. As Girard has shown, internal violence was the number one problem that ancient societies had to solve if they were to avoid self-destruction. Violence within honor-based communities that existed without the benefit of a modern judicial system easily and quickly

multiplied as blood feuds. Human beings are essentially imitative creatures; that is, we desire by imitating the desires of others, which leads to no end of trouble when humans gather into groups: *“What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war.”* (James 4:1,2) Desiring what others desire leads to rivalries: people lock horns in envious combat; they become preoccupied with resentment; factions multiply, and grow more and more rancorous towards each other. Claiming utter difference from each other, people locked into such rivalries actually become very much the same, because at bottom they are all desiring the same thing in the same way. Despite their pretense to absolute difference, they become as similar as a herd of pigs. Once violence breaks out, that too is imitated: it’s called *vengeance*. And one party’s vengeance is met with reciprocal vengeance from the other party, and violence spreads throughout the community almost literally like the plague. (Thus the urgency behind Yahweh’s famous words, “Vengeance is *mine*,” saith the Lord, “I will repay,” attempting to curb human reciprocal violence.)

From time immemorial, the classic solution to this problem of internal reciprocal violence (albeit not a *conscious* solution because it was hidden under layers and layers of religious ritual and mythology) was the *scapegoat mechanism*, whereby a community’s latent violence could be channeled against certain people whose victimization allowed the crowd to achieve and/or maintain unity, having spent its violence in blaming, persecuting, and sacrificing the scapegoat. When Gerasa loses its town demoniac because of Jesus’ exorcism, group rivalries that mutual antagonism towards the scapegoat had temporarily annulled will now begin to reassert themselves. Gerasa will be left with its own internal, unchanneled violence, and is thus threatened with becoming a mere crowd in chaos, prefigured by the pigs’ mad rush to self-destruction.

This is why the Gerasene community is terrified by the demoniac’s cure. It is not, as I used to think, because they feel economically threatened, having just lost a pretty chunk of pig real estate. Rather, it is because loss of their scapegoat threatens their entire society. If it were just that, however, and nothing else – simply the *loss* of a scapegoat – the Gerasenes would have an easy solution: simply find another scapegoat. Scapegoats are essentially interchangeable, since

their persecution is not based on real guilt. (There can be real guilt, but it is not necessary, it is not the essential element in scapegoating, which only seizes upon guilt as an excuse to do its work.) The choice of scapegoat is essentially arbitrary, and it is easy enough to find another (in the ancient world, lots were often drawn to discover the “guilty” one). Someone simply “looks” evil, or they have a deformity, or they stutter – magical thinking easily frames such people as the cause of community misfortunes. The scapegoat is then sacrificed, and more will be found later, as needed. This is business-as-usual for the ancient institution of sacrifice. The threat to the Gerasenes, then, comes from more than the mere loss of their scapegoat, for whom another could easily be substituted; the threat comes from the fact that the victim has been recovered, restored, and *given a voice*. This man who had been possessed by the abusive voices of Legion now has his own voice restored. He is sitting fully clothed, and in his right mind, and about to be given a mission to spread his testimony throughout the land. *That* is the threat. Jesus has done more than taken away a scapegoat: by casting out *Legion*, he has decisively defeated and exposed the whole game – and there sits a sane and grateful witness poised to spread the word.

I have mentioned stoning as the typical form of collective violence against scapegoats in the ancient world, which the demoniac imitates when he uses stones to bruise himself. There was another form of collective violence typical of those towns situated (as many were) on hillsides or mountainsides – backing victims over a cliff. The community would form a ring around the victim, blocking his escape, and throw stones at him while slowly backing him up against the cliff until, finally, the victim plummeted to his death. Jesus himself was almost the victim of this venerable form of collective persecution in his own home town of Nazareth. It is a very important story because it happens, in the Gospel of Luke, right at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, and functions as a kind of intimation of Jesus’ death by collective violence. The text says that Jesus’ teaching was met at first with amazement, then with skepticism, and finally hostility. The people became so enraged that “they rose up and *cast Him out of the city*, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff.” (Luke 4:29) (I am concerned here with the *meaning* of the text, not historical issues about whether there was a cliff in Nazareth.)

Jesus is “*cast out of the city*” – thus assuming the role of the scapegoat, a role he would

play right up to the terrible end. It was a role consciously chosen. Jesus had deliberately provoked the congregation by insinuating that they were no better than the godless Israelites who persecuted the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. He provoked collective violence against himself precisely in order to reveal the mechanism we've been discussing. It seems he was, as it were, baiting Satan to unleash the violence that lurks beneath the surface of even the best societies, even the best religious societies. Satan took the bait, but Jesus escaped the crowd's violence. It wasn't yet time for Jesus to die as scapegoat, but simply to reveal the theme.

In the story of the Gerasene demoniac, the fate that Jesus managed to avoid in Nazareth is suffered by the pigs. Mark and Luke specifically situate the pigs on a hillside or mountainside. Some translations have the swine rushing down a steep bank or slope into the sea, but Girard has shown that the real meaning of the exorcism is better captured by those translations that take the Greek κρημνος to mean "cliff" rather than slope, and κατα to mean "down and over." In that case the text is showing us the image of a herd of pigs charging over a cliff and falling into the sea – just as had happened countless times to victims of crowd violence in the ancient world (Rome's Tarpeian rock being one of the most famous examples). The real excitement in Jesus' exorcism of the demoniac, therefore, is that for the first time in history it is the *crowd* that is cast over the cliff, while the scapegoat is saved! Rather than the scapegoat being cast out of the city, the city is cast out of the scapegoat, who now sits there "clothed and in his right mind." And as if to make sure we really get the point, Mark emphasizes again that this happened to: ". . . *the man who had had the legion!*" That is, the *crowd*.

Jesus' miracle at Gerasa has threatened a *total system*, which is why the Gerasenes are so afraid. The demons' request not to be sent out of the country implies that typical exorcisms of the sort the Gerasenes were no doubt used to seeing performed by their own local healers were effective, if they were effective at all, only *within* the total system, and did not threaten to collapse the entire system. That is, a demon driven out of one being takes over possession of another – but the overall demonic power structure of the society remains unchanged. Jesus' great triumph at Gerasa is his disruption of the whole, symbiotic system. The pigs' mad stampede into the lake has a feeling of finality about it: the demonic social system unravels and reverts to chaos (the pigs), which then returns to chaos (the sea), and drowns. It is an incredible, other-worldly

triumph, different from typical local exorcisms not just in quantity (a *lot* of demons), but different also in nature and quality, demonstrating the victory of the reign of God over the reign of demonic community systems.

We must also note that Jesus achieved all this without resorting to violence. Although the story reverses the scapegoat/crowd polarity, Jesus' miracle here is not about revenge against the crowd. "Payback" was not what Jesus was about. Amazingly, Jesus accomplishes everything simply by granting the demons own request to be sent into the pigs, *thus permitting evil to take its own course*, destroying itself in the process.

Having accomplished all this in non-Jewish territory (which is why they are raising pigs in the first place), Jesus' mission is nevertheless *not* to pagan society. He has neither time nor desire to linger in the pagan territory of Gerasa, traveling about and effecting cures on behalf of other scapegoats. His mission is specifically to Israel: it is ultimately in Jerusalem that he will directly confront the powers. It is there that triumph over the demonic will become final, because it is there that the scapegoat mechanism will be exposed for all the world to see, and for history to contemplate. Jesus will become a scapegoat that can never be forgotten, publicly displayed on the cross, as Paul said, for all to see. His crucifixion will become the occasion for Pilate and Herod to shake hands, setting aside mutual antagonisms and rivalries while marshaling their violence against an innocent man. (*"And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other."* Luke 23:12) Caiaphas will proclaim that *"... it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish"* (John 11:50), thus acknowledging the scapegoat mechanism in an almost prophetic way. But, ultimately, Jesus and his Father were in control, not Caiaphas. For, as Jesus himself understood very well, *"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. 18: No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."* (John 10:17-18a) Jesus *offered* his life to expose the scapegoat mechanism.

It is from Jerusalem that this message will be spread to the rest of the world, exorcizing the hidden violence of societies far beyond Israel and Gerasa. But for now, it is enough for Jesus simply to send the ex-demoniac back, clothed and in his right mind, to his family and city – despite the man's ardent desire to stay with Jesus – as a witness of the great things God has done

for him. And we are told that the man did in fact do as Jesus had commanded, spreading the word throughout the Decapolis region. This would not have been an easy assignment. For though there may have been a few who loved this man, the society's treatment of Jesus and the whole meaning of the exorcism as we have developed it here indicate that the man's testimony will not be welcomed. His presence, no longer self-flagellating and manic, but fully clothed and in his right mind like everyone else, will unsettle the stayed and "happy" order of things – at least until someone else takes his place, and another spectacular case of possession breaks out within the community so life can get back to normal again for the Gerasene "we." The voice of the healed demoniac, however, will be a vanguard force, an outpost, a thorn in Gerasene flesh, a herald of things to come. In just a few years a tide of good news will wash over this land and change it irrevocably. Then, new kinds of communities will appear in the Decapolis region, communities also based upon the blood of victims, but in a different way: these communities will be *advocates* for victims, and willing victims themselves in order that, like their master, they might expose the cultural lies that expel and blame and murder the other, even in the name of God.

That the story of the Gerasene demoniac needs to be read with a view to the crowd rather than the individualistic interpretation we usually apply to it (as though it were only about a man and his demons) is indicated by the fact that in all three Gospels the story of the demoniac is preceded by accounts of Jesus teaching great crowds: "Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side." (Matt. 8:18; cf. Luke 8:4, Mark 4:36) This sets the stage for the Legion encountered on the other side of the lake. Likewise, right after the Gerasene story Luke has the comment, "Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him." We find Jesus right back in the midst of the crowd again, the human herd. The equivalent passage in Mark even keeps the relation of the crowd to the ominous symbol of the sea that played such an important role in the demoniac's story: "And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him; *and he was beside the sea.*" And, indeed, the crowd is like the sea into which Legion plunged: sometimes appearing calm and welcoming, other times raging, never stable even when it appears to be, because it is essentially chaos. The chaos bonds into forms of relative calm thanks to fundamental scapegoating mechanisms, but the threat of unraveling into violent, self-destructive

chaos is always just beneath the surface. The “bad” news of the gospel for human relations, therefore, is that insofar as community identity is based upon mutual antagonism against a victim, that identity is destined to suffer when the liberating truth of the gospel gives voice to the scapegoat. The healing of the Gerasene demoniac could not but bring disruption to a society that had achieved social balance at the expense of the marginalized victim.

I end with a quote from James Alison, who succinctly states the internal logic of Jesus’ miracle at Gerasa as:

“. . . nothing less than the humanizing and domestication of the man in question, even at the expense of the stability of the social group of which he has been such an important part. This is not the logic of ‘it is better that one man should be cast out than that the whole nation should be disturbed.’ This is the logic of ‘it is good that one man should be made human and that the whole nation should learn to live differently . . . .’”

And doesn’t that logic sound just like Jesus, concerned as he always was about those poor souls whom mainstream community life rejected, those poor souls who served the thankless function of being weird so the rest could be normal, crazy so the rest could be sane, evil so the rest could be good? Jesus’ is the logic of *God’s* kingdom, where there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner recovered, than over 99 righteous.

Situating our interpretation of the story within the all-too-human (and at the same time all-too-demonic) *social* reality enables us to approach this text, I believe, with the same logic and in the same spirit by which Jesus liberated the demoniac – lest we become complicit with Gerasene scapegoating in our very reading of the text, comfortably enjoying our spiritual superiority to the demoniac while he rages, and perhaps smugly welcoming him home as one of “us,” when he recovers, yet comfortably in denial that we rather preferred him wild and raging, providing us, as he did, with drama, entertainment, and a sweet sense of our own domesticated sanity.

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## Endnotes

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i. *The Scapegoat*, Rene Girard, trans. Yvonne Freccero, St. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986.

ii. One that Girard himself endorses highly is *Discovering Girard*, Michael Kirwan, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 2005

iii. The talk is available on the web at <http://www.cathedral.org/cathedral/video/spring04.shtml>

iv. *Faith Beyond Resentment: fragments catholic and gay*, James Alison, The Crossroad Publishing Company, NY, 2001