

The healing of the possessed man of the Gadarenes.

Introduction

The account of Jesus' healing of the demon-possessed man in Mark 5:1–20 is one of the most vivid demonstrations of Christ's authority in the New Testament. In this narrative, Mark presents the destructive effects of demonic oppression, the transformative power of Jesus' intervention, and the commissioning of the healed man to proclaim the Good News. This essay will examine the key theological and narrative elements of the passage, including Jesus' authority over evil, the restoration of human identity, and the missional implications embedded in the text. In addition, it will compare and critically engage with the interpretations offered by two scholarly Biblical commentaries. By doing so, the essay will demonstrate the continuing relevance of this passage for understanding discipleship, spiritual conflict, and the nature of Christ's liberating work in contemporary society.

Body of essay

The narrative leading into Mark 5 begins with the episode of the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35–41), which functions as a literary bridge to the account of the Gadarene demoniac. As Jesus and the disciples cross the lake, a violent storm arises, producing fear and disorientation among the disciples. Mark uses this scene to emphasise Jesus' authoritative command, demonstrated when he rebukes the wind and the sea with the words, "Peace! Be still!" (4:39). The disciples' response "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:41) raises an important question about Jesus' identity, a theme that continues into the next section of the narrative.

Matthew Henry notes the tension between fear and faith exhibited by the disciples, a theme that Mark often employs to contrast human frailty with Jesus' authority. Although Henry's commentary approaches the text pastorally, his observation highlights an important narrative pattern in Mark: the disciples frequently fail to understand the identity and power of Jesus, even when confronted with miraculous events. This pattern prepares the reader for the dramatic display of authority that follows in the encounter with the demoniac in Mark 5:1–20.

Jamieson, Fausset and Brown observe that Jesus issues a rebuke to both the wind and the sea, noting that the cessation of wind alone would not immediately calm the turbulent waters. Their commentary suggests that Mark's description of Jesus addressing both elements underscores the completeness of his authority over nature. They further note that the narrative presents a deliberate sequence: Jesus first removes the immediate danger and then questions the disciples' response. According to JFB, the disciples do have faith, but it is limited or underdeveloped, which ties in with Matthew's parallel account where Jesus asks, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" (Matt. 8:26). This observation fits with a common pattern in Mark, where the disciples often struggle to understand who Jesus is, even after witnessing his miracles.

In the following narrative, Mark presents a striking contrast: the only figure who recognises Jesus' identity upon His arrival is the demon-possessed man (Mark 5:1–6). Mark describes the man as living among the tombs, isolated from society and exhibiting

behaviour that expresses deep inner distress. The reference to him crying out “night and day” and harming himself with stones highlights the extent of his suffering. Although these behaviours may resemble what would now be described as self-harm, Mark’s focus is primarily theological and narrative rather than psychological. His description emphasises the destructive impact of the evil spirit and prepares the reader for the restorative work that Jesus will perform.

Most commentators refer to this passage as the healing of the demoniac, which reflects Mark’s emphasis on the man’s condition rather than the mechanics of exorcism. Matthew Henry, writing from a pastoral perspective, interprets the man’s inability to be restrained as symbolic of the sinner’s resistance to moral restraint, though this interpretation reflects Henry’s theological framework more than Mark’s narrative intent.

Jamieson, Fausset and Brown similarly note the man’s extreme isolation, describing him as a “terror of the whole locality,” and they highlight both the danger he posed to others and the profound misery he experienced. Their observations draw attention to Mark’s portrayal of a figure who is simultaneously feared by society and deeply afflicted internally. This prepares the ground for Jesus’ encounter with him, in which themes of authority, restoration, and recognition are brought to the forefront of the narrative.

In this part of the narrative, Mark shifts the focus from the man himself to the supernatural reality behind his condition. Instead of the man addressing Jesus directly, the unclean spirit speaks through him, immediately recognising Jesus’ identity and authority: “What have I to do with thee, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure thee by God, torment me not” (Mark 5:7). This declaration contrasts sharply with the disciples’ earlier uncertainty and highlights that the spiritual realm perceives Jesus’ identity more clearly than human observers.

Jamieson, Fausset and Brown emphasise the demonic reaction, noting that the spirit anticipates judgment and pleads to be spared from torment. They relate this to James 2:19, which refers to demons believing and trembling, suggesting a consistent biblical portrayal of demonic recognition of divine authority.

Matthew Henry comments on the term “legion,” traditionally associated with a Roman military unit numbering around six thousand, and uses this to reflect on the potential magnitude of demonic forces. While Henry’s observation draws on symbolic and pastoral interpretation, it helps underscore the severity of the man’s oppression as presented in the text. He asks rhetorically what the presence of such a “legion” might imply about the number and nature of hostile spiritual forces. Henry’s interpretation is pastoral and speculative, but it highlights the extreme degree of oppression Mark intends to convey in his narrative.

Mark continues the narrative by describing the plea of the unclean spirits to be sent into a nearby herd of swine rather than expelled from the region. Jesus permits this, and the spirits enter the animals, causing the herd, about two thousand in number, to rush down the steep bank into the sea and drown (Mark 5:11–13). This illustrates once again the extent of Jesus’ authority over hostile spiritual forces.

Jamieson, Fausset and Brown remark on the significance of the swine, suggesting that if their owners were Jews, they were engaged in an unlawful trade, and if Gentiles, they were disregarding Jewish religious sensitivities. In either case, they argue, the outcome serves a moral purpose. They also describe the event as encompassing two miracles: the

healing of the man and the destruction of the swine. Matthew Henry, writing from a pastoral perspective, observes that the loss of the herd led the local people to respond negatively to Jesus, emphasising their concern for economic loss rather than the man's restoration.

Mark records that the herdsmen immediately fled and reported the incident in the surrounding city and countryside (Mark 5:14). Consequently, the people came to see what had happened. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown note that Matthew's account similarly states that "the whole city came out" to meet Jesus (Matt. 8:34). Mark highlights the contrast between Jesus' arrival, when only the possessed man approached Him and this moment, when the entire community gathers. Yet their reaction is marked by fear when they see the formerly possessed man "sitting, clothed, and in his right mind" (Mark 5:15).

JFB observe that Mark does not mention that the man had previously worn no clothes, information supplied by Luke the physician (Luke 8:27). They describe this as an example of an "undesigned coincidence," where details in one Gospel illuminate statements in another. The restored man's clothing may have been provided by Jesus' disciples, reinforcing the completeness of his recovery.

Mark then presents another contrast: despite witnessing these events, the people "began to pray him to depart out of their coasts" (Mark 5:17). JFB again compare this with Luke's account, which explains that "the whole multitude" asked Jesus to leave because they were overcome with fear (Luke 8:37). Their response suggests that the demonstration of Jesus' authority provoked both awe and apprehension, leading them to reject His presence.

Conclusion

The narrative concludes with the healed man's request to accompany Jesus, but Jesus instead commissions him to return home and report "how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee" (Mark 5:19). Mark states that the man obeyed and proclaimed this message throughout the region of Decapolis (Mark 5:20). Jamieson, Fausset and Brown highlight that Jesus effectively appoints him as a missionary within the very area where he had been widely known and feared. They also note that the scope of this mission expands from the local setting of the Gadarenes to the wider Decapolis, a federation of ten cities. This indicates that the man's restoration serves not only as an act of healing but also as a means of extending the proclamation of Jesus' identity and compassion.

References

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