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THE DAEMONIC IMAGINATION
Biblical Text and Secular Story

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THE LANGUAGE OF DEMONIC POSSESSION:  
A KEY-WORD ANALYSIS  
Ken Frieden

MARK 5:1-20

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had come out of the boat, there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit (*pneumatik akathartos*) 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 (*to pneuma to akatharton*).” 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 [all the demons, *pantes oi daimones*—manuscript variant], “Send us to the swine, let us enter them.” So he gave them leave. And the unclean spirits (*ta pneumatata ta akatharta*) 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.
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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 (daimonizomenon) 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 (daimonizomeno) 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 (ho daimonisteis) 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 Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and all men marveled. 1

DEMONIC POSSESSION AND LINGUISTIC HISTORY

The story of the demoniac in Mark 5:1-20, with its mystery and drama, invites close literary analysis. This extensive New Testament account of demonic possession and exorcism first startles us with its depiction of a wild man who cannot be bound; then it describes an extraordinary encounter between the man and Jesus. Subsequently the passage shows the casting out of unclean spirits, and concludes with the demoniac’s recovery. These verses convey a supernatural aura, suggesting a direct meeting of evil spirits, humanity, and the divine. When Jesus performs a miracle that appears to span heaven and earth, it substantiates the claim that he is “the Lord,” and the demoniac even addresses Jesus as “Son of the Most High God”—granting a kind of authorization from outside the mundane realm. Nevertheless, the meanings of the narrative extend far beyond this passage and the parallel accounts in Matthew 8:28-34 and Luke 8:26-39, because the story partakes of a wide-ranging linguistic, literary, historical, and theological milieu.

The present remarks focus on the linguistic dimension, examining the language used to describe demonic possession. What language does the demoniac speak? In what language is he cured? How should we understand the phenomenon and history of possession by demons? Prior Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin traditions provide the background against which the text introduces its theological innovations.

In order to analyze the demoniac story from a linguistic perspective, one must know more about the language of the characters represented in the Greek Testament. As is well known, Aramaic phrases occur at critical moments in the gospels; for example, Jesus is quoted as saying Talitha cumi (Mark 5:41) and Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani (Mark 15:34). One scholar sums up the linguistic situation by asserting that Aramaic was then “the most commonly used language, but the defense of this thesis must reckon with the growing mass of evidence that both Greek and Hebrew were being used as well.” 2 Following the advent of the Roman legions a century earlier, moreover, Latin became increasingly prevalent. 3 Although the New Testament is written in Greek, it reflects immense cross-linguistic influence; in some instances, a Greek phrase (such as “the Most High”) is essentially a translation from Hebrew, which places it in a specific conceptual context. In other cases, the New Testament strives to free itself of influences, purging ancient Greek of part of its pagan heritage.

We need to examine the language of Mark 5:1-20, paying special attention to its key words or Leitwörter. 4 As the demoniac is possessed by spirits, so the text is inhabited by foreign presences. Even if we cannot exorcise these linguistic demons, at least we should be able to identify them and determine whence they come. Specifically at issue are the words variously translated by “spirit,” “demon,” “demons,” “devils,” “demoniac,” and “possessed.” Returning to the New Testament Greek, we find that “spirit” is roughly equivalent to pneuma; in different contexts pneuma may refer to wind, to the human spirit, to an evil spirit, or to the Holy Spirit of God. 5 The other words cited ultimately derive from the Greek noun daimōn: the plural “demons” or “devils” are daimones (or daimonia in Luke 8:27-38),
while the “demonic” is, more literally, one who is demon-possessed (daimonizomenon or daimonisteis). Thus the demoniac’s “legion” of demons may at first be reduced to a more manageable pair: demons (daimones) and spirit (pneuma).

Having ascertained that daimones and pneuma are key words in the story of the demoniac, we should delimit their range of meanings. Yet it is impossible to rely exclusively on dictionary definitions, because these words underwent semantic drift over the course of time. Dictionaries best convey the systematic meanings of language at a given time, and have little place for unconventional usage. Every language is subject to flux, however, and has a diachronic aspect that constantly develops; its syntax and semantics are variable. Hence a key-word analysis may function either synchronically or diachronically. It may examine the recurrence of a particular expression during a specific period, in a given body of literature, or it may trace the shifting significance of the phrase through linguistic and literary history.

The language of demonic possession stands in an intricate relationship to linguistic history. The demoniac’s “demons” (daimones; elsewhere daimonia) have their earliest origins in Homeric and Hesiodic traditions; in Homer’s epics, daimon sometimes names a divine agency or mysterious higher power.8 Hesiod and Heraclitus both refer to plural daimones as guardian spirits that watch over mortal beings.7 The word daimones—not yet demons, and closer to divine spirits—also occurs in Plato’s dialogues. Even more significant is Plato’s use of the related word daimonion. Socrates was accused of “not believing in the gods whom the state supports, but in other new divinities” (kaina daimonia).8 One possible reason for this accusation was Socrates’ repeated reference to a daimonion, a divine voice or sign that prevented him from taking false steps (see, for example, Euthydemus 272e, Phaedrus 242b, Theaetetus 151a and Euthyphro 3b). There has been much debate over the exact nature of this daimonion. In the present context it is relevant that nineteenth-century Christian interpreters generally understood Socrates’ daimonion as a guardian spirit; for them it represented Plato’s rationalistic advance beyond the earlier daimôn and daimones, giving Socrates a singular divine guide that is both similar to the Latin concept of a guardian genius and compatible with the notion of conscience.

Philo states that prior Greek philosophers called daimon what the Septuagint refers to as “angels” (angelous).9 The Septuagint itself employs the word angelos to translate from the Hebrew malakî. The Pentateuch originally refers to angels (malakhim) as divine messengers; no individual possesses a constant personal guide in the form of an angel. In contrast, Greek and Latin traditions developed a notion of the guardian angel or spirit, called an angelos or a genius.10 While the Hebrew Bible, in accordance with strict monotheism, emphasizes that angels are always subordinate to God, later Greek and Latin writers retain polytheistic tendencies, indicating that the multiplicity of angels may not be reducible to a single divine force. Moreover, possibly under the influence of Persian dualism, writers in late antiquity increasingly suggest that good and evil angels act autonomously.11 Demonic powers of darkness led by Satan, in particular, constitute a threat to divine providence.

The Septuagint was the decisive link in the linguistic process of cultural transfer. Since the early Christians relied on this translation, it necessarily influenced their religious terminology. For example, in translating the Hebrew word satan from the Book of Job, the Septuagint often employs diabolus, which formerly had a limited usage in the Greek language. Less frequently, the Septuagint directly transliterates the Hebrew words, producing the loanwords satan and satanas.12 In other contexts, to designate foreign gods or spirits with a negative connotation, the Septuagint utilizes the pre-existing Greek substantivatives daimon and daimonion.13 Daimones and daimonia in the New Testament depend on the negative meaning assumed by daimonion in the Septuagint. This illustrates one way in which Christianity brought together Hebrew and Greek precedents. By transforming Hebrew words into approximate Greek equivalents, the Septuagint exerts direct influence on religious history. The gospels then institute a substantial linguistic and theological novelty by employing the words daimones and pneuma to denote independent evil spirits, rather than false gods worshiped by idolaters.
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New Testament demons and spirits also derive from prior Hebraic and Aramaic traditions. The Hebrew Bible contains several words that refer to supernatural beings. Foremost is *satan*, God’s prosecuting angel (Job 1:6-2:7 and Zech. 3:1-2); this adversary does not have the autonomous status of Satan in the gospels, but acts only in conjunction with God. In addition, the demonic’s unclean spirit (*pneuma to akatharton*) alludes to the Greek of the Septuagint, which refers to an evil spirit (*pneuma poneron*) in the story of Saul. In the original Hebrew passage, in turn, “spirit” corresponds to Hebrew *ruah*: “the spirit of God (*ruah YHWH*) departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from God (*ruah ra’at YHWH*) troubled him” (1 Samuel 16:14). While this text distinguishes between the divine spirit and an evil spirit, it emphasizes that even the latter comes from God, and is subordinate to Him. Lesser fiends and demons occur under a variety of names including *se’irim* (Isaiah 13:21), *shedim* (Deut. 32:17), and *mazzikin* (Babylonian Talmud). All of the Hebrew and Aramaic background plays some indefinite role in the demonic’s plight. Consequently, when Jesus comes to cure the demoniac, he begins with the question: “What is your name?” Before proceeding, he tries to situate the demon linguistically, and thus gain power over it. The demonic retinue evades his inquiry and emphasizes its elusive multiplicity by answering: “Legion” (Mark 5:9)—that is, as numerous and mighty as the Roman legions that had infiltrated Palestine.

In their reference to the key words *daimones* and *pneuma*, then, early Christian writers necessarily rely on Greek and Hebraic expressions concerning divinity. Because of their commitment to monotheism, they dismiss the earlier notion that daimones could be separate divine guides. Such plural divinities would pose a serious threat, potentially undermining God’s oneness. Hence Christianity excludes the positive connotations of Greek *daimôn*, *daimonion*, and *daimones*, instead turning them into evil demons. This occurs in the gospels and, afterward, in the writings of Chariton and Augustine. What had formerly been a minor divinity became a demon or evil spirit. In order to secure the monotheistic foundations of their new religion, ancient Christian writers had to transform the language in which they wrote.

FROM DAIMONES TO DEMONS

We should now interpret the language of Mark 5:1-20 in its linguistic context. At first sight, in the country of the Gerasenes, the demoniac appears as “a man with an unclean spirit (*pneumati akathartō*)” (Mark 5:2). The Gospel of Mark is, at this stage, more cautious in its language than are Matthew and Luke. Matthew 8:28 refers to “two demoniacs *(daimonizomenoi)*,” whereas Luke 8:27 mentions a man who “had demons *(daimones)*.” In the original Greek of Mark 5:15-18, the demoniac is called demonically-possessed; only a textual variant to Mark 5:12 indicates that he had demons *(daimones)*. At issue is the status of these supernatural spirits, which are otherwise mentioned and exorcised in Mark 1:32-34, 1:39, 7:26-40, and elsewhere. When Jesus cures the demoniac, he calls: “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit” (Mark 5:8; compare Luke 8:29).

Thus the Gospel of Mark reveals a terminological wavering between “unclean spirits” and “demons.” In addition, the story of the demoniac contains a discrepancy in number: at one point he has a single unclean spirit, while at another stage thousands of unclean spirits leave him. It may be that the initial description in the singular applies to the man’s damaged psyche, while the following narrative explains his condition by referring to demonic possession by innumerable spirits. In any event, the parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke unify the language by referring more uniformly to plural demons as *daimones* or *daimonia*.

Another seminal passage concerning demons in the synoptic gospels sheds light on the theological system that was linked to demonic possession, exorcism, and Satan. Mark 3:22-30 hints at both the political strife and the metaphysical battles associated with the rise of the Christian sect. Some Jerusalem scribes criticize Jesus, saying “He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of the demons he casts out demons” (3:22). In other words, since they do not recognize him as the Messiah, they identify him with an evil force that opposes God. If he successfully casts out demons, they charge, this is only because he is their leader. In response, Jesus speaks in parables:
How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ... And if Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house. Truly I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin—for they [the scribes] had said, “He has an unclean spirit.” (Mark 3:23-30)

Demons and demoniacs participate in a theological drama. The text fully accepts the dualism between good and evil, God and Satan; it sets up a direct opposition between the Holy Spirit and unclean spirits. Jesus stakes his claim as a divine representative on his ability to counter evil beings.

“Demons” and “unclean spirits” have multiple significance in the synoptic gospels. First and foremost in the Gospel of Mark, they serve to identify Jesus. One unclean spirit in the Capernaum synagogue cries out: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24; compare Luke 4:41). Second, they show Jesus’ ability to control forces of the world and beyond it. In the previous scene, during a storm on the Sea of Galilee Jesus commands the forces of nature, calming a physical wind (pneuma). Now he expels supernatural forces of evil, thus allying him with the power of good. Third, his casting out of unclean spirits underscores the dichotomy between unclean spirits and the Holy Spirit. Fourth, Satan or Beelzebul as head of the demons acts as the tempter of Jesus, further sharpening the metaphysical opposition (Mark 1:12-13, Matthew 4:1-11, and Luke 4:1-14). Here Satan has become the quintessential figure of evil rather than one of many evil spirits.

This background gives new meaning to the demoniac story. In fact, its placement immediately following a chapter of parables

Contrary to the common opinion that language and literature give expression to underlying cultural and historical trends, keyword analysis of the kind exemplified here shows that the opposite is sometimes the case: linguistic drift influences and
contributes to intellectual history. Christianity could not have arisen as it did without the Greek language and, more specifically, without the late Greek of the Septuagint. From this standpoint, the gospels both inherit and embody a radical linguistic innovation in relation to prior Greek literature. Through the plagin medium of Greek, a polytheistic system of thought was transformed into a dualism that emphasized God’s perpetual conquest over Satan.

With the advent of Christianity, daimones became demons and took on purely negative connotations. Christian writers gradually accepted the notion that Satan, Beelzebul, or the Devil is a metaphysical antithesis to God. Hence, in a related way, Luther’s German rendition of the New Testament often refers to “devils” (Teufel). This linguistic usage assumes a kind of dualism, separating good and evil as two opposing cosmic forces. The synoptic gospels, placing special weight on demonic possession and on Jesus’ ability to exercise demons, introduce a dramatic struggle between good and evil; to cure a demoniac is to expel a threatening presence. Palestine appears overrun by evil beings that emerge at the intersection of psychological, linguistic, political, and theological realms.

Mark 5:1-20 thus presents a scene of dualism—between holy and unclean spirits—and overcomes it, showing the greater power of good. This seminal Christian narrative illustrates the syncretistic impulse to appropriate prior thought, and to create an amalgam that reconciles multilingual sources. Only by transforming daimones into demons and expanding the role of Satan do the gospels achieve their theological swerve away from Judaism and Greek religion.

**NOTES**

1. This and subsequent English translations of the gospels are quoted from the revised standard version in The Oxford Annotated Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962). Parenthetical key words and manuscript variants in the Greek original are drawn from the Griechisches Neues Testament: Text mit kurzem Apparat, Hermann von Soden, ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913).


4. The present discussion of key words and Leitwörter has been influenced by a passage in Martin Buber’s essay “Zu einer neuen Verdeutschung der Schrift,” supplement to the Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Pentateuch (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984). Buber defines the Leitwort as “a word or a word-root ... that significantly recurs in a text, a textual sequence, or textual context” (15; this passage is also contained in Buber’s Werke [Munich: Kösel, 1964], Vol. 2, p. 1131). Compare the discussion by Robert Alter in The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 92-94.


6. This is a simplified, synchronic definition. For a more extensive discussion see my Genius and Monologue (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 33-38.


8. See Plato’s Apology 24b.

9. De sommiis, Book 1, Chapter 22.

10. See my Genius and Monologue, pp. 49-53.


12. See the Septuagint, III Kings 11:14; here satan refers to a human adversary which God raises up against Solomon.
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17. Concerning the battle between Jesus and Satan, see P. André Lefèvre, “Ange ou bête? Le puissance du mal dans l’Ancien Testament,” in the volume *Satan*, in *Etudes Carmélitaines* 27 (1948), 13: “It is difficult to believe in Christ the Redeemer without at the same time believing in his antagonist, the Devil.”


**BIBLICAL EXORCISM AND READER RESPONSE TO RITUAL IN NARRATIVE**

Carol Schersten LaHurd

**A METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION**

In the dialogue between literary critics and biblical scholars there is often disagreement about how much attention to focus upon the “text itself” and how much to consider information, especially historical and theological, outside the text. This discussion of Mark 5:1-20 proposes to join these concerns in a reading that combines the methodologies of rhetorical criticism and reader response criticism with more “traditional” modes of biblical interpretation and models from ritual studies: From literary critics such as Wayne Booth, Walter Ong and Peter Rabinowitz come the notions that signals in the text help the reading audience to constitute itself and that literary features control distance between the narrator and reader, author and narrator, and so on. Reader response critics such as Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss have contributed the theory that meaning results from the interaction between the text and the reader’s experience of it. Finally, ritual studies practitioners such as Victor Turner and Ronald Grimes have provided models from field observations of performed rituals that have application to ritual elements in narrative texts.

Acknowledging that concepts of implied author and implied audience are not objective realities so much as constructs based upon textual evidence, this analysis examines Mark 5:1-20 in light of the audience’s possible “horizon of expectations,” that is, the previous experience with literature and religious life that the first-century readers might have brought to their encounter with the text. The “author” referred to here is the one implied by the text. For the sake of brevity he is referred to as “Mark,” but that designation makes no assumptions about the identity of the actual historical author. The audiences are divided into the actual (the historical readers, about whom we can only speculate), the narrative (the audience addressed by the story tellers of individual