

Exorcism in the Time of Jesus

Sample Level 5 essay by Jonathan Robinson (March 2023)

Introduction

This essay will discuss the historical background of exorcism in the time of Jesus. Exorcism is the act of driving out an evil spirit that is afflicting someone. I will discuss the presence of other exorcists in the ancient world, the meaning of exorcism in the Gospel of Mark, and the uniqueness of Jesus as an exorcist.

Jesus is not the only exorcist

It is clear from the Synoptic Gospel accounts and from other ancient sources that exorcism was a normal part of life in the ancient world and not necessarily “miraculous”.¹ In Mark 9:38-39 we are told of another exorcist who uses Jesus’ name to drive out demons. In Matthew 12:27 Jesus’ rhetorical question implies that the Pharisees have effective exorcists. Acts 19:11-20 records “seven sons of Sceva” who were exorcists. There are also stories from Greek literature of philosopher-healer figures who can drive out evil spirits.²

This is important for biblical interpretation because exorcism is a prominent feature of Jesus’ ministry, often paired alongside healing. If exorcism and exorcists are a relatively ordinary phenomenon, then that raises the question as to whether there was anything unique or special about Jesus’ exorcisms?

Jesus’ exorcisms are part of his battle against Satan

The Gospel of Mark presents Jesus’ exorcisms as part of a larger battle with Satan (Mark 1:13).³ Jesus describes his own ministry of exorcism as “plundering the house of Satan” who he has

¹ Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green. 2009. *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament Within Its Cultural Context*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 2009), 101; Richard A. Horsley, [chapter: “The Concept of Miracle and Jesus’s Healings and Exorcisms” in] *Jesus and Magic: Freeing the Gospel Stories from Modern Misconceptions* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 20.

² Graham H Twelftree, “Demon, Devil Satan,” in Joel Green, Scot McKnight, Howard Marshall (eds.) *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 163-172 at 165.

³ Gregory, M. Barnhill, “Jesus as Spirit-Filled Warrior and Mark’s Functional Pneumatology”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 82.4 (2020), 605-627 at 608; Burge, Cohick and Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity*, 157.

“first tied up” (Mark 3:22-30).⁴ So, Jesus’ exorcisms are not just individual deliverances but shown to be battles in a larger war.⁵ Jesus’ opposition to Satan’s kingdom of evil spirits identifies him as the Son of God and a bearer of the Holy Spirit.⁶

Jesus’ exorcisms were unique

Although there were other exorcists in the ancient world, if we compare the way Jesus exorcised demons with other exorcists his particular technique stands out. Jesus did not use any incense, tools or magic words, only his plain speech;⁷ he did not pray to God like the Rabbis or in the expanded story of Abraham in the Qumran scrolls; and he did not use a name of authority (like the sons of Sceva tried to do with Jesus’ name).⁸ This difference in exorcism technique presents Jesus as a special exorcist who relies on his own personal power and authority to command evil spirits and rescue the afflicted. This explains the reaction of people in the Gospel accounts. Exorcism may be a normal part of life, but Jesus does it in a way that demonstrates his extraordinary personal authority. That is probably why, in the first exorcism account in Mark, the crowd are amazed at Jesus’ “authority” (Mark 1:27).⁹

Conclusion

Understanding the historical context of Jesus’ exorcisms is very important. Jesus was not the only exorcist operating in his time. However, Jesus’ exorcisms are significant because of what they say about his opposition to Satan and how they demonstrate his personal authority.

[485 Words]

⁴ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Magic : Freeing the Gospel Stories From Modern Misconceptions* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014) 19. Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green. 2009. *The New Testament in Antiquity : A Survey of the New Testament Within Its Cultural Context*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic.

⁵ Barnhill, “Jesus as Spirit-Filled Warrior”, 613.

⁶ Twelftree, “Demon, Devil Satan,” 170; Barnhill, “Jesus as Spirit-Filled Warrior”, 610.

⁷ Horsley, *Jesus and Magic*, 19.

⁸ Twelftree, “Demon, Devil Satan,” 167-68.

⁹ Horsley, *Jesus and Magic*, 18.

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