

‘When an unclean spirit goes out of a person’:<sup>1</sup>



An Assessment of the Accommodation Theory of Demon Possession  
and Exorcism in the Synoptic Gospels

Thomas J. Farrar

January 2015

<http://www.dianoigo.com>

---

<sup>1</sup> Title is taken from the NET rendering of Luke 11:24

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Understanding the accommodation theory .....	3
2.1. Defining accommodation as a theological term .....	3
2.2. A brief history of the accommodation theory of demon possession.....	4
2.3. Defining the accommodation theory of demon possession.....	7
2.4. Benign accommodation and subversive accommodation .....	8
3. Beliefs about demons in first century Palestine .....	10
4. The consensus of modern critical scholarship.....	11
5. Exegetical arguments for accommodation .....	16
5.1. Lack of demonological teaching .....	16
5.2. Distinction between demon and demon-possessed person.....	19
5.3. Geographical distribution of Jesus' exorcisms .....	20
5.4. Lack of exorcisms in the Gospel of John .....	25
5.4.1. The audiences and purposes of the Gospels and Acts.....	25
5.4.2. Descriptions of physical afflictions in John.....	28
5.4.3. Explanations for John's silence .....	29
6. Exegetical arguments against accommodation .....	31
6.1. Lack of clues indicating verbal irony.....	31
6.2. Distinction between demonic and non-demonic cases .....	34
6.3. Continuity of the Gospel accounts with other demonologies .....	35
6.3.1. Continuity with contemporary demonology .....	35
6.3.2. Continuity of exorcism techniques .....	36
6.4. Theological significance of Jesus' exorcisms .....	38
6.5. Supernatural elements in exorcism accounts .....	39
6.6. A general saying about unclean spirits .....	41
6.7. Training and allowing others to exorcise.....	43
7. Conclusion.....	44
7.1. Summarising the argument.....	44
7.2. Theological implications .....	46
References.....	50

## Abstract

In this exegetical study of the references to demons and exorcism in the Synoptic Gospels, we aim to evaluate the accommodation theory which claims that Jesus and the Synoptic writers did not share the belief in demons which was common among their contemporaries, but accommodated themselves to it. We first define three competing theories. We give a brief history of the accommodation theory and distinguish two sub-theories: benign accommodation and subversive accommodation (the latter of which seems to be restricted to Christadelphians). These are 'benign accommodation theory', in which Jesus and the Synoptic writers behaved just as though demons were real, and the 'subversive accommodation theory', in which Jesus and the Synoptic writers intended to subvert the popular belief in demons and show indirectly that no such beings exist. A survey of the literature shows that biblical scholars are in wide agreement that Jesus and the Synoptic writers did in fact believe in demons. Exegetical arguments for the accommodation are considered and seen to be mostly arguments from silence with very little merit. Seven exegetical arguments are then raised against the accommodation theory. The conclusion drawn is that the accommodation theory represents revisionist eisegesis of the relevant texts and not sound, grammatical-historical exegesis. Finally, the theological implications of the various theories are explored.

# 1. Introduction

Any reader of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) is struck by the frequent reference that is made to people being possessed or afflicted by demons or unclean spirits, and to Jesus healing such people by means of exorcism. This creates a significant problem for the modern Western reader, inasmuch as the Western intellectual establishment, including biologists, medical practitioners, psychologists, and the majority of theologians, has long since abandoned belief in demons and spirits.

The objective of this study is to analyse the Synoptic Gospels exegetically in order to answer the following question:

*Q1. Did Jesus, his earliest disciples, and the authors of the Synoptic Gospels believe that demons or evil spirits really existed, possessed people and could be exorcised? <sup>2</sup>*

If we answer Q1 in the affirmative, the following further question arises:

*Q1Y. Were they correct in this belief or were they mistaken?*

If we answer Q1 in the negative, the following further question arises:

*Q1N. Why does a cursory reading of the Synoptic Gospels give the impression that the answer to Q1 is ‘yes’?*

The answers given to the three questions above can be categorised, broadly speaking, into three hermeneutical theories, which for clarity we shall name as follows:

- (1) The reality theory
- (2) The error theory
- (3) The accommodation theory<sup>3</sup>

Proponents of what we have called the **reality theory** answer ‘yes’ to Q1, and ‘they were correct’ to Q1Y. Such interpreters hold that Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists believed in the objective reality of demons and exorcism, and rightly so.

Proponents of what has been called the **error theory** answer ‘yes’ to Q1, and ‘they were mistaken’ to Q1Y. Such interpreters hold that Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists believed in the objective reality of demons and exorcism, but were in error in this respect.

Proponents of what we have called the **accommodation theory** answer ‘no’ to our original question. Their answer to Q1N will be variously nuanced but the gist of it is this: neither Jesus himself nor the Synoptic Evangelists believed in the objective reality of demon possession or

---

<sup>2</sup> This question assumes that Jesus, his earliest disciples, and the Synoptic writers were of one mind on the issue. Some might dispute this, but we will assume it to be the case for purposes of framing the objectives of the study.

<sup>3</sup> These three views are described in van der Loos 1965: 204-206. He names the ‘error theory’ and uses the term accommodation but does not name the third view. We have chosen the term ‘reality theory’ to convey its basic premise, namely that Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists truthfully described reality when they referred to demons, demon possession and exorcism. Slaten 1920: 375-376 also outlines essentially the same division of views, although he also mentions those who affirm that the Gospel writers believed in demons but deny that the historical Jesus did.

exorcism; however, *they accommodated their words and deeds to the ignorance of their contemporaries.*

It should be noted that there is some overlap between the error and accommodation theories. For instance, it is possible to argue that *Jesus himself* accommodated belief in demons whereas his *followers*, including the Synoptic Evangelists, held this erroneous belief. The attractiveness of this view lies in the fact that some Christians who are prepared to challenge the accuracy of the Gospel accounts would nevertheless be more reluctant to impute error to the Saviour himself. Furthermore, those who hold the error theory and yet maintain a high view of Scripture may hold that there has been accommodation on the part of God Himself. That is, the Almighty accommodated Himself to first-century beliefs about demon possession and exorcism and thus permitted His faithful servants and indeed His Son to make errors in this respect.

In spite of this overlap, in what follows the term ‘accommodation’ will be reserved for the view that *Jesus and* the Synoptic writers correctly denied the existence of demons but accommodated the then-prevalent belief in their reality. Any notion that *Jesus or* the Synoptic writers wrongly believed in demon possession and exorcism will be deemed to fall under the error view.

It should be noted that the error theory and the accommodation theory agree against the reality theory concerning the *metaphysical question* of the existence of demons. On the other hand, the reality theory and the error theory agree against the accommodation theory on the *exegetical question* of the beliefs of Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists concerning demons.

Indeed, as we shall see, the very popularity of the error theory poses a problem for those who hold the accommodation theory. Proponents of the reality theory and the accommodation theory lie open to the charge of forcing the Jesus of the Gospels into conformity with their own worldview, and thereby recreating Jesus in their own image. The risk of bias is particularly high with the accommodation theory inasmuch as it imposes upon Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists a worldview which it acknowledges was at odds with the prevailing worldview of their day. By contrast, the reality theory allows Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists to be men of their times, but reintroduces features of a primitive, pre-scientific worldview in the modern, scientific age. The error theory seems to achieve the ‘best of both worlds’ inasmuch as it allows Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists to be ancients and the contemporary interpreter to be modern (see Figure 1 below). It is noteworthy that Christian proponents of the error theory seem to hold it against their bias. That is, they feel compelled by the evidence of Scripture, on the one hand, and the evidence of science on the other, to knowingly endorse a worldview at odds with that of their Lord. There must be little ideological incentive to choose such a position over the accommodation theory apart from the desire for objectivity, and proponents of the accommodation theory should take note of this.

Our main task in this paper is to assess the plausibility of the accommodation theory as an explanation of the biblical testimony. As such, we must be clear about exactly what this theory entails.

One assumption held by the author should be stated up front, namely, that there is little or no distance between what the Synoptic Gospels *say* Jesus said and did, and what the historical Jesus *actually* said and did. Allowance must be made for the effects of sources, forms and redaction, but in general it is assumed that the Synoptic Evangelists were reliable historians.

**Figure 1:**

	Jesus and Synoptic writers in agreement with prevailing view concerning real existence of demons in 1 <sup>st</sup> century Palestinian society	Modern exegete in agreement with prevailing view concerning real existence of demons in 21 <sup>st</sup> century Western society
Reality theory	☑	☒
Error theory	☑	☑
Accommodation theory	☒	☑

## 2. Understanding the accommodation theory

### 2.1. Defining accommodation as a theological term

Before turning to the issue of accommodation as concerns demonology specifically, we first offer definitions of accommodation in a broader biblical context:

The first additional term to consider is accommodation. If the transcendent, personal God is to communicate with us, His finite and sinful creatures, He must in some measure accommodate Himself to and condescend to our capacity to receive that revelation.”<sup>4</sup>

[Accommodation is] God’s adoption in inscripturation of the human audience’s finite and fallen perspective<sup>5</sup>

I am suggesting that accommodation is necessary on two related levels. First, accommodation is necessary because the utter transcendence of God can only be expressed to the finitude of humanity through condescension to our perspective. And second, accommodation is a necessary product of revelation when this revelation comes to us through the finiteness and fallenness of a human author...Although the biblical authors were privy to special revelation in a way that we are not, and although the texts that they wrote are God’s inspired Word, the authors were nonetheless subject, like all of us, to their own finite and fallen interpretive horizons<sup>6</sup>

An example of the kind of accommodation alluded to by Sparks is described thus by Seely:

The ancients did not just refer to the appearance of the sky as being solid. They concluded from the appearance that the sky really was solid, and they then employed this conclusion in their thinking about astronomy, geography, and natural science. The *raqia’* was for them a literal physical part of the universe, just as solid as the earth itself. Solidity is an integral part of its historical meaning. When the original readers of Genesis 1 read the word *raqia’* they thought of a solid sky. And so did virtually everyone else up to the time of the Renaissance! After the time of Christ there were occasional dissenters,

<sup>4</sup> Carson 2005: 26.

<sup>5</sup> Sparks 2004: 112.

<sup>6</sup> Sparks 2004: 126.

but by and large Jews and Christians, Greeks and barbarians all believed the firmament was solid... it is not the purpose of Gen 1:7 to teach us the physical nature of the sky, but to reveal the creator of the sky. Consequently, the reference to the solid firmament 'lies outside the scope of the writer's teachings' and the verse is still infallibly true.<sup>7</sup>

By reworking the last part of Seely's explanation we can see how this conception relates to the accommodation theory of demon possession:

It is not the purpose of the Synoptic Gospels to teach us the nature of 'demon possession', but to reveal the power of God over all such maladies. Consequently, while the writers may have regarded these phenomena as caused by demons, references to demons lie outside the scope of their teachings and the Gospel accounts are still infallibly true.

It should be clear that what is described here is not in fact the accommodation theory, but the error theory. This is because in the above statement, God is the one who accommodates, while human beings, including the biblical writers (and perhaps even Jesus), are the ones with limited or incorrect knowledge. However, proponents of the accommodation theory of demon possession in the Synoptic Gospels regard not only God but Jesus and his followers, including the Gospel writers, as accommodating themselves to others. In this case the idea is that Jesus and his followers had the correct, divine knowledge on the subject of demon possession, but owing to some higher motive they declined to plainly teach it to others.

## **2.2.A brief history of the accommodation theory of demon possession**

The dominant view and indeed the assumption of the church for most of its history was the reality theory: that Jesus and the New Testament writers affirmed the real existence of demons, and moreover that they were correct in this belief. It is only within the past four centuries that the reality theory has been challenged and pushed to the margins.

Ossa-Richardson traces the 'insanity thesis of demonic possession' as far back as Pomponazzi in 1556.<sup>8</sup> It is not known to this writer how Pomponazzi and other early proponents of this view interpreted the Synoptic Gospels, but they likely resorted to some sort of accommodation theory, since criticism of biblical history would not have been permitted at this time. In the English-speaking world, the accommodation theory appears to have first come to prominence through the anonymous publication of a tract entitled 'An Enquiry Into the Meaning of Demoniacks in the New Testament' in 1737 (the author was later revealed to be Arthur A. Sykes). Having reached the conclusion that all known instances of demoniacs can be explained in terms of epilepsy or madness,<sup>9</sup> Sykes went on to pose this question:

Why would Jesus countenance such a Notion as this, if there were really no such things as Demons, nor Persons possessed by them? Why would he not rid Men of such pernicious Opinions, and plainly tell them, that these Possessions were nothing else but Lunacy or Epilepsy, or whatever other Name the Disorder had?<sup>10</sup>

Sykes answers his questions thus:

---

<sup>7</sup> Seely 1991: 236, 240.

<sup>8</sup> Ossa-Richardson 2013: 574.

<sup>9</sup> Sykes 1737: 53.

<sup>10</sup> Sykes 1737: 76-77.

To this I answer, that no Man conceives the Design of the Sacred Writings to be to correct the Mistakes of Men in Physick, more than it is in Astronomy, or any other Art: No nor is it its Design to guard against wrong Notions of God himself. It speaks of God in the Language of the Vulgar, in a figurative manner, and supposes all Men to have such common reasonable Notions of him, as not to understand literally what is said of his Hands and Ears and Eyes. It speaks of the Motion of the Sun, and the Rest of the Earth; and yet it is now universally known that that is all Mistake. And so here; It was the miraculous Cure which our Saviour did, the Cure of all Sorts of Distempers, whatever they were, and how long soever they had continued, which was the thing by which he evinced what he was: But as to the Cause of such Disorders, it was of no Consequence to his Design to explain them. This was what indeed the Philosophers of old expected: They seek after Wisdom, says St. Paul, I Cor. i.22. But what was foreign to our Saviour's Purpose he very wisely avoided, content with what would prove him to be the Christ the Power and the Wisdom of God.<sup>11</sup>

Sykes did not overtly use the language of accommodation, but the idea is there: Jesus neglected to rid men of their belief in demons, because his focus was elsewhere.

In Sykes' writing one can observe a typical cause-and-effect relationship between disbelief in demons and the accommodation theory as a biblical hermeneutic. Unsurprisingly, the idea that Jesus disbelieved in demons seems to have arisen only after students of the Gospels began to disbelieve in demons *themselves* and so gain a powerful incentive to redefine their hermeneutic.

Sykes' tract set off an intense hermeneutical debate in England that lasted for many decades, as documented by Midelfort.<sup>12</sup> Over a century later, as Ossa-Richardson relates, a similar exchange took place between Souter and May. Souter portrayed the Evangelists

as accommodating their language to the people of ancient Judaea: they spoke of direct and literal demonic possession, so as to make themselves understood, when all they really meant was the remote influence of the Devil.<sup>13</sup>

Ossa-Richardson notes that "By the early nineteenth century, the debate had long become stereotyped; it could be endlessly repeated with little innovation".<sup>14</sup> Change came with the arrival on the scene of biblical critics, who were prepared to make the audacious suggestion that "Christ, as a human being, might actually be ignorant of the scientific truth on the matter." The error theory was born, which challenged traditional dogma on the grounds of scientific rationalism and challenged accommodationists on the grounds of biblical exegesis.

In his 1835 work on the historical Jesus which pioneered historical criticism of the Gospels, David Friedrich Strauss deployed the same arguments which Sykes' critics had used a century earlier. Although he himself did not believe in demons, he wrote:

Jesus, even in his private conversations with his disciples, not only says nothing calculated to undermine the notion of demoniacal possession, but rather speaks repeatedly on a supposition of its truth; as e.g. in Matt. x. 8, where he gives the

---

<sup>11</sup> Sykes 1737: 77-78.

<sup>12</sup> See Midelfort 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Ossa-Richardson 2013: 558.

<sup>14</sup> Ossa-Richardson 2013: 563.

commission, Cast out devils; in Luke x. 18ff; and especially in Matt. xvii.21, parall., where he says, *This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting*. Again, in a purely theoretical discourse, perhaps also in the more intimate circle of his disciples, Jesus gives a description quite accordant with the idea of his contemporaries of the departure of the unclean spirit, his wandering in the wilderness, and his return with a reinforcement (Matt. xii. 43ff). With these facts before us, the attempt made by generally unprejudiced inquirers, such as Winer, to show that Jesus did not share the popular opinion on demoniacal possession, but merely accommodated his language to their understanding, appears to us a mere adjustment of his ideas by our own.<sup>15</sup>

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed and the tide of higher criticism rose, the accommodation theory gradually waned in influence (to the point where, as we will see below, it has virtually no standing among New Testament scholars today). Those who were inclined to reject the existence of demons on rationalistic grounds no longer needed such a nuanced approach; they could take the more obvious route of interpreting the New Testament at face value but rejecting its witness as pre-scientific and/or unhistorical.

One testimony to the disappearance of the accommodation theory is its absence from the heated debate about exorcism that took place in the Church of England during the 1970s. At the heart of this debate was a collectively written open letter on exorcism addressed to the Church's leadership and general synod. This letter was written to oppose the practice of exorcism in the Church of England. It read, in part, as follows:

On the evidence of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus performed exorcisms. It seems that he shared the beliefs of his own time. But, whatever view must be taken of this, the church has never expected that her members must necessarily share all Jesus' beliefs...It is, we think, mistaken to suppose that loyalty to Christ requires the Church to try to recreate, in late twentieth-century Europe, the outlook and practices of first-century Palestine.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear from this statement that its authors adhered to the error theory. They made no attempt to argue that Jesus' sayings and exorcisms were mere accommodation, but conceded the probability that he believed in demons.

Another contribution to this debate was a paper by Dow entitled *The Case for the Existence of Demons*. Dow laid out a positive case and then offered a point by point critique of the objections that had been raised to belief in demons. Dow's positive arguments simply presuppose that Jesus believed in demons and focus instead on the issue of whether the biblical accounts of demon possession and exorcism have any correspondence to modern-day experience. The objections that he seeks to answer do not include anything resembling the accommodation theory. This suggests that throughout this debate, *opponents of exorcism and belief in demons never raised the accommodation theory*. Both sides assumed throughout that Jesus and the Synoptic writers believed in demons and referred to what they thought were real exorcisms.

---

<sup>15</sup> Strauss 1846: 241.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Buchanan 1975: 8. Note that in Dow's paper *The Case for the Existence of Demons*, which is a contribution to the same debate to which the Open Letter refers, he responds to various arguments against the existence of demons, but makes no mention of the accommodation theory. This suggests that those in the Church of England who were arguing against the existence of demons had made no recourse to such a theory. Both sides of the debate appear to have agreed that Jesus himself and the Synoptic writers believed in demons.

### 2.3. Defining the accommodation theory of demon possession

The following are some definitions from modern literature of the accommodation theory of demon possession in the Synoptic Gospels.

We now come to the famous Accommodation-Theory. Christ and his apostles taught doctrines of such nature and by such method as were compatible with the peculiarities of their condition. They adapted themselves to the barbarism and coexistent prejudices of the people; and hence we can only reconcile much that they taught by their disposition to cater to the corrupt taste of their time. The Jews already possessed many notions which it would not be policy in Christ to annihilate; hence, said Semler, he reclothed them, and gave them a slight admixture of truth. Thus [Semler] reduced Christ's utterances concerning angels, the second coming of the Messiah, the last Judgment, demons, resurrection of the dead, and inspiration of the Scriptures, to so many accommodations to prevailing errors.<sup>17</sup>

Some will say that Jesus did not believe in demons, but accommodated himself to the ignorance and credulity of the people around him. He spoke and acted therefore as though demons were real to him, although they were not.<sup>18</sup>

others have suggested that when Jesus either healed or cast out demons, he was merely seeking to accommodate the 'popular ignorance and superstition' of his day.<sup>19</sup>

No sensible teacher begins by attempting to empty the mind of what he regards as imperfect truths before imparting the higher truth. Rather, he finds a point of contact between the old and the new knowledge, and seeks to modify false and imperfect ideas gradually, and thus lead up to the perfect knowledge... On such grounds it is suggested that Jesus, finding that the minds of men were obsessed with the belief that demons existed and took possession of men, accommodated Himself to this general condition, and spoke and acted as if this were true, even though His profounder insight perceived the real state of the case, and He knew that the supposed demons were in reality merely pathological conditions of body and mind.<sup>20</sup>

Understandably, many shrank from accusing Jesus of error or mistake. And yet it was considered impossible to assume the objective existence of disease-producing demons. A way out was offered by the accommodation theory, i.e. the assumption that Jesus adapted Himself to the prevalent popular belief... Jesus adapted Himself to the Jewish ideas of His day from pedagogic motives. It was not Jesus' intention to give mankind a clearer idea of the essence and laws of nature; He had a higher aim in mind.<sup>21</sup>

The proponents of the accommodation theory say that our Lord and the Evangelists, in making reference to demon possession, spoke only in accommodation to the prevalent ignorance and superstition of their auditors, without making any assertion as to the

---

<sup>17</sup> Hurst 1866: 130.

<sup>18</sup> Slaten 1920: 376.

<sup>19</sup> Pullum 2011: 150.

<sup>20</sup> Langton 1949: 159-160.

<sup>21</sup> van der Loos 1965: 205.

actual existence or non-existence of the phenomena described, or the truth or falsity of current belief.<sup>22</sup>

Modern liberal thought tends to dismiss demonic possession as a manifestation of psychological maladies not understood by the early church. Jesus' dealing with these cases is explained as condescension to first-century limitations of medical knowledge<sup>23</sup>

What is common to the above definitions is that the accommodation theory entails Jesus adapting himself to the prevalent ignorance of his contemporaries concerning the existence of demons. The reason usually given for Jesus' decision to accommodate is that correcting such ideas was not part of his mandate, or would have gotten in the way of his higher teaching objectives.

#### **2.4. Benign accommodation and subversive accommodation**

The Christadelphians are a sect for which the accommodation theory has become something approaching dogma. They withhold fellowship from any professing Christian who believes in the personal existence of Satan, and yet uphold biblical inerrancy. Christadelphians oppose belief in demons very strongly. For them, it is not merely archaic or pre-scientific; it is heretical.

Christadelphians would agree that the correct understanding of Satan and demons is an important issue in the understanding of the gospel – a critical issue, in fact, since a belief in demons contradicts the gospel's message of monotheism.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, if you believe in demons, you are effectively a polytheist. If Jesus or his followers believed in demons, they were effectively polytheists. This position compels Christadelphians to interpret references to Satan and demons allegorically, or to explain them under a theory of accommodation. However, the usual benign accommodation theory will not do, because for Christadelphians it is unthinkable that Christ would tolerate and decline to correct a view of demons which they regard as apostate.

A very influential early Christadelphian writer, Roberts, wrote about demons in a way that is close to the definitions of the accommodation theory given above. While acknowledging that Christ and his disciples give “apparent sanction” to the demonology of their contemporaries, he explained this as follows:

The theory [of demonic possession] necessarily stamped itself upon the common language of the time, and supplied a nomenclature for certain classes of disorders which, without reference to the particular theory in which it originated, would become current and conventional, and used by all classes as a matter of course, without involving an acceptance of the Pagan belief. On the face of it, the nomenclature would carry that belief; but in reality it would only be used from the force of universal custom, without any reference to the superstition which originated it... Christ's conformity to popular language did not commit him to popular delusions... it was a mere accommodation to the language of his opponents.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Unger 1994: 91.

<sup>23</sup> Longman 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Burke 2007: 99.

<sup>25</sup> Roberts 1884: 124-125.

This explanation holds that Christ did not accommodate himself to the ignorance of his contemporaries out of pedagogical motives, but because he was constrained to do so by the limitations of language. He did not accommodate the *concept*; only the *terminology*.

However, a later Christadelphian writer, Watkins, took Roberts' ideas a step further. While Roberts held that Christ's language was purely phenomenological and did not actually refer to the concept of demon possession as popularly understood, Watkins held that Christ's use of this terminology was more profound. He imbued the terminology with new meaning in order to subvert the existing meaning. Christ's approach to the demon issue was not neutral; he was on the attack! As Watkins explains:

The pagan superstition concerning an evil overlord and his minions provided an admirable basis for a parable concerning the real enemy. Instead of denying the existence of an arch-enemy and his demons, the New Testament writers acknowledge their existence, but regard them in an entirely different way. The real arch-enemy lurks within the heart of man himself... the language of demons is the language of parable. This is all part of that great New Testament theme: the devil and his angels.<sup>26</sup>

Burke, responding to a critique of Watkins' conception by Buzzard, explains the idea more thoroughly and ties it into the notion of accommodation:

Accommodation is the policy by which inaccurate beliefs are not directly contradicted or corrected immediately or explicitly, but are shown to be false indirectly. During the time that they are not corrected directly they may be treated as accurate either ironically, or for the sake of proving them false indirectly, or for some higher purpose.<sup>27</sup>

The gospel writers do not deny the existence of these beings, but regard them **in a way which is entirely different** to that of the superstitions of the day. Whilst accommodating the language and terminology of demon beliefs, they use it to present the truth which is in direct contrast to the superstitions of their contemporaries.<sup>28</sup>

The description in the synoptic gospels (and once in James 2:19), of demons crying out, holding conversations with Christ, does not prove that the demon is recognised as a real being separate from the individual possessed by the demon, but that the narrative wishes the audience to understand that the individual with whom Christ is conversing was considered to be an individual possessed by a demon – this is the use of the same phenomenalistic language and 'accommodation' found in the Old Testament, and used elsewhere in the New<sup>29</sup>

Burke, like Roberts, distinguishes between the language and terminology of demons (which are accommodated) and the concept of demons (which is not). Like Watkins, he holds that the terminology is not used neutrally but is used with the intention of indirectly disproving the existing concept. The means of doing this is irony: to use the terminology with a meaning different from that which it usually carries. The motive at the centre of most definitions in section 2.3 – that is, to avoid distraction from Jesus' higher teaching aims – is only a vague afterthought in Burke's definition. Rather, in his view, Jesus (and the Synoptic Evangelists) *said*

---

<sup>26</sup> Watkins 1971: 35, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Burke 2007: 81.

<sup>28</sup> Burke 2007: 94. Emphasis in original.

<sup>29</sup> Burke 2007: 101.

one thing, but *meant* another. The attentive reader of the Gospels was not having his belief in demons accommodated, *but was being taught – albeit indirectly – that there is no such thing as demons*. This is not really the accommodation theory. It is far subtler and might better be described as the ‘irony theory’. However, since Burke has described himself as an accommodationist, we will use the term ‘subversive accommodation’ to refer to his belief that the accommodation was intended to subvert existing beliefs about demons.

For purposes of contrast we will refer to the conventional accommodation theory as ‘benign accommodation’ since, under this view, there is no active agenda but Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists simply humour the popular belief in demons because their pedagogical priorities are elsewhere.

At one point in his treatise, Burke appears to adopt a more conventional view of the Synoptic Evangelists’ rationale for accommodation:

The purpose of this was to demonstrate the power of God and Christ over the supernatural evil beings whom many of the Jews believed to exist.<sup>30</sup>

Here there is no hint of subtly correcting the prevailing belief in demons; this sounds like benign accommodation. However, this motive appears mutually exclusive with the one Burke espouses in his more comprehensive statement. If the reader of the Synoptic Gospels was expected to realize that demons do not really exist (subversive accommodation), there would be no need to demonstrate the power of God over such beings (benign accommodation). Burke’s theory seems to suffer from a lack of internal consistency at this point. However, from this point on, ‘benign accommodation’ will refer to the kind of accommodation described in section 2.3, and ‘subversive accommodation’ will refer to the theory of Watkins and Burke that the references to demons in the Synoptic Gospels are intended to subvert existing beliefs and replace them with a new, non-supernatural demonology.

### **3. Beliefs about demons in first century Palestine**

Our comments on this subject will be brief, since virtually no one denies that a real belief in demons in the sense of evil spirits was prevalent among the Jews of first-century Palestine. We will have more to say about the specifics of their demonology when we come to compare it with the demonology of the Synoptic Gospels. We will also consider below whether there is evidence that belief in demons was widespread in Galilee but relatively rare in Judea and especially Jerusalem (as some have claimed).

Jesus’ ministry was largely confined to Jews within the borders of Palestine, although notably two of his exorcisms occurred in Gentile lands beyond these borders (Mark 5:1-20; 7:24-30).

Commenting on the Talmud, which represents Jewish thought several centuries after Christ but is believed to preserve some earlier traditions, Cohen states:

So firm was the belief in evil spirits, both among the educated and uneducated classes, that the Talmud legislates for it. In their legal decisions the Rabbis prescribed for circumstances which presuppose the actuality of demons.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Burke 2007: 85.

Commenting more specifically on the historical context of Jesus' ministry, Bond states:

The belief in demons was real and widespread in the first-century world, and was accepted in Jewish contexts just as much as pagan.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, Twelftree stresses that

the first-century mind was, at times, not as credulous as has often been thought. Many people believed neither in demons, possession nor in exorcism.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, Stuckenbruck states that

We may conclude from these examples that, even though **unambiguous evidence for the notion of corporeal habitation by demons or evil spirits is relatively sparse**, we are not to conclude that the Synoptic Gospels therefore assume a worldview that cannot be explained on the basis of early Jewish sources.<sup>34</sup>

Aune goes as far as to assert that

Demonic possession as a cause of disease appears to have been a relatively uncommon belief in Palestine during the first century A.D.<sup>35</sup>

Based on the above, we can make the following two plausible claims:

- (1) Because belief in demons was widespread, people would have understood the literal meaning of the words of Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists when they referred to demon or spirit possession and exorcism.
- (2) Because belief in demon possession seems not to have been universal, Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists were not compelled by the ignorance or their contemporaries or the limitations of language to accommodate the terminology or concepts of demon possession and exorcism.

With regard to this second point, it should be noted that Jesus took sides on other hotly debated issues in the Judaism of his day, such as the permissibility of divorce (Mark 10:2-12) or the doctrine of resurrection (Mark 12:18-27). He certainly *could have* plainly voiced his disbelief in demons, but there is no evidence that he did so.

## 4. The consensus of modern critical scholarship

We noted earlier how, as scholars like Strauss began to engage in historical criticism of the Gospels in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the influence of the accommodation theory waned among rationalists. Today, the majority of critical scholars affirm that Jesus and his earliest followers believed in demons. These include scholars who have made no profession of belief in demons

---

<sup>31</sup> Cohen 2007: 276.

<sup>32</sup> Bond 2012: 105.

<sup>33</sup> Twelftree 1985: 17.

<sup>34</sup> Stuckenbruck 2008: 79. Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Aune 1995: 922.

themselves, and indeed those who are avowed rationalists like Strauss was. Take the time to read through the following statements regarding the beliefs of Jesus, the early church, and the Synoptic writers:

It might appear that to a normal mind, faced with such an array of evidence collected from the Gospels themselves, but a single conclusion would be possible, viz., that Jesus did believe in demons. But experience with successive groups of men shows that this is not the case.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus believed that he cast out demons by the power of God.<sup>37</sup>

Jesus believed in demons. He cast out demons, as Voodoo priests still do in Haiti and charismatic healers in Africa. Furthermore, Jesus attached great value to these exorcisms.<sup>38</sup>

Jesus believed in the existence of demons and the devil and is depicted as exorcising demons.<sup>39</sup>

No reading of the Gospels can escape the impression that the earliest disciples of Jesus believed, and believed that Jesus believed in the existence of an Evil One who sought to thwart the purposes of God.<sup>40</sup>

It takes a good deal of courage to say that Jesus was so much a part of his world that he believed in demons and their expulsion. Naturally, today people wish to ‘do something’ with these stories, to get rid of them or interpret them so that Jesus’ belief in demons, which connects him to an ancient world quite different from ours, is not so obvious. In sermons, ‘demons’ can be /// interpreted as the doubts and fears that plague us all, and scholars readily (and possibly correctly) explain exorcism by the theory of psychosomatic cures (mind over body)... This topic deserves inclusion here because it helps to confirm the argument that many modern people would like to free Jesus of his ancient environment. The evidence of the healing stories, however, is that he shared it.<sup>41</sup>

Jesus and his neighbors shared a common understanding of illnesses and disabilities as caused by demon intrusion.<sup>42</sup>

The New Testament itself contains evidence of just such variegated belief. The gospel of John, for example, although containing a number of healings, does not contain any exorcisms at all. Although a number of explanations for this anomaly have been suggested... the most likely explanation is that the author (or those who first brought together the traditions upon which the author was dependent) evidently did not share the same notions about demons **as did the other three gospel writers and, indeed, the historical Jesus himself.**<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Slaten 1920: 375-376.

<sup>37</sup> Dunn 1997: 47.

<sup>38</sup> Thiessen 1991: 33.

<sup>39</sup> Schaper 2005: 124.

<sup>40</sup> Bruner 2004: 28.

<sup>41</sup> Sanders 2002: 41-42.

<sup>42</sup> Baggett 2008: 77.

<sup>43</sup> Meggitt 2011: 21. Emphasis added.

Demon-exorcism is a prominent feature of the synoptic representation of Jesus' ministry. There is no reason for us to suppose that Jesus did not view the demons in the same way as did his contemporaries and the synoptic evangelists: realistically and seriously.<sup>44</sup>

I personally feel under no pressure to believe in 'possession' or 'evil spirits' because Jesus believed in them.<sup>45</sup>

Some historical conclusions are more certain than others. In fact, some facts are so strongly evidenced that they may be said to be beyond doubt. Scholars often refer to these as historical bedrock, since any relevant historical reconstruction must be built upon the foundation of these facts. What are some of the historical bedrock pertaining to Jesus? **That Jesus performed feats that both he and his followers interpreted as miracles and exorcisms is a fact strongly evidenced and supported by the majority of scholars.**<sup>46</sup>

We know of no other miracle worker in antiquity who conducted so many exorcisms and for whom exorcism was as important as it was for Jesus.<sup>47</sup>

we shall discover that the first-century mind was, at times, not as credulous as has often been thought. Many people believed neither in demons, possession nor in exorcism, yet the early Church and, previously, Jesus did... His ministry is reported by the Synoptic Evangelists to have been almost, if not actually, dominated by performing exorcisms.<sup>48</sup>

The ancient Jewish worldview entailed belief in Satan and the demonic forces. Many contemporaries of Jesus therefore saw evidence of the arrival of the kingdom in his exorcisms. 'Hence, however disconcerting it may be to modern sensibilities, it is fairly certain that **Jesus was, among other things, a 1st-century Jewish exorcist** and probably won not a little of his fame and following by practicing exorcisms (along with the claim of performing other types of miracles).'<sup>49</sup>

Many scholars are convinced that Jesus regarded his expulsion of demons, along with the healing miracles, as demonstrations of God's rule breaking into this world... The view assumed in both the narratives and sayings is that humans are victimized by demons when the latter inhabit their bodies. **There is no reason to think that Jesus' understanding was any different.**<sup>50</sup>

In continuity with intertestamental Judaism, Jesus and early Christians regarded demons as very real and very powerful adversaries of man.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Hiers 1974: 47.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson 1975: 293.

<sup>46</sup> Licona 2013: 107.

<sup>47</sup> Twelftree 2010: 151.

<sup>48</sup> Twelftree 1985: 17-18.

<sup>49</sup> McKnight 1999: 107-108. Quotation is from Meier 1994: 406.

<sup>50</sup> Stuckenbruck 2008: 73, 75.

<sup>51</sup> Aune 1995: 922.

one absolutely certain fact about Jesus [is that] he conducted an extensive, vigorous and successful ministry of exorcism.<sup>52</sup>

The existence of demons or evil spirits is clearly assumed throughout the Synoptic Gospels, though their origin is never discussed.<sup>53</sup>

**Mark believed in the existence of demons.** Many people today do not, at least not in the form of fallen spirits who have invaded and infested the human world. Demons provided Mark with a category for accounting for some unfortunate conditions that we today would explain in biological, psychological, or even social terms.<sup>54</sup>

As I've pointed out, the historian cannot say that demons - real live supernatural spirits that invade human bodies - were actually cast out of people, because to do so would be to transcend the boundaries imposed on the historian by the historical method, in that it would require a religious belief system involving a supernatural realm outside of the historian's province. But we can say that Jesus was widely recognized by people of his own time - who did believe that demons existed and could be exorcized - to have the powers to do just this. In fact, Jesus' exorcisms are among the best-attested deeds of the Gospel traditions... Moreover, the sources themselves consistently summarize Jesus' activities as involving exorcisms... and the theme that Jesus could and did cast out demons is documented in multiply attested forms throughout the sayings materials... In sum, without making a faith claim, historians can't say that Jesus actually cast evil spirits out of people. But we can say that he probably did have some pretty amazing encounters with people believed to be demon-possessed, and that his ability to cast the demons out was seen as a characteristic aspect of his ministry. Moreover, the controversy over him was not about whether he had this ability but whether he had this power from God or the devil... [quotes Beelzebul controversy] **Note that everyone - Jesus and his opponents together - admits not only that Jesus can cast out demons, but that other Jewish exorcists do so as well.**<sup>55</sup>

When reading in a narrative way, one is not hindered by, for instance, the question whether demons exist. The unprejudiced reader simply accepts that demons are a part of the narrative reality of the story. At first sight, this is not an easy attitude to adopt for rationalistic readers of the twenty-first century, because they may intuitively prefer not to reckon with the existence of demons and may hence like to eliminate demons from reality. This, however, would be in complete disagreement with the Markan perspective... the evangelist himself wanted to emphasize the theme of demons and exorcisms in his gospel... We already mentioned the fact that the presence of demons is never a problem for the narrator. Their existence is self-evident... **The presence of demons is accepted and is part of the narrator's worldview that is different from ours.**<sup>56</sup>

What we have tried to show in these paragraphs is that not only did Luke wish to portray exorcism as an important aspect of Jesus' ministry of 'preaching the Kingdom of God' but that in following the model of Jesus the early Church had a warrant to include

---

<sup>52</sup> Casey 2010: 256.

<sup>53</sup> Langton 1949: 147.

<sup>54</sup> Reiser 2000: 43.

<sup>55</sup> Ehrman 1999: 197-198.

<sup>56</sup> Van Oyen 2011: 103, 105, 112.

exorcism in its ministry of 'preaching the Kingdom of God.' ... most importantly from our perspective **the stories of Jesus as an exorcist were intended, by Luke, as a pattern for the early Church's ministry**<sup>57</sup>

It will be appropriate to consider at this point the deeper question whether Jesus so far accepted the beliefs of His time as to believe in the existence of demons and in their power to take possession of men and women; or whether His whole attitude in respect to demoniacs – His words and actions – is not to be explained rather on the theory of accommodation. If as I have suggested above, the Gospels do exhibit on the part of Jesus some measure of accommodation to the beliefs of His time, is it not reasonable to go farther and to explain the whole attitude of Jesus on the same hypothesis? ... there is a very considerable difference between an acknowledgement of a measure of accommodation on the part of Jesus, in relation to modes of exorcism, such as I have indicated, and the wholesale affirmation by Jesus, by word and deed, of the existence of evil spirits, and their activities in human affairs when, as the theory in question supposes, He knew that no such creatures existed. It cannot be doubted that the disciples of Jesus, and those who have reported and preserved His teaching, were firmly convinced that their own beliefs upon this subject were shared in all sincerity by Jesus. Not only did Jesus fail to correct or deny those beliefs; throughout His ministry, by word and deed, He also emphasized them, and solemnly conferred upon His disciples the power to cast out evil spirits. All that we know of Jesus as a teacher of spiritual truth makes it impossible for us to believe that He acted as suggested by this theory, and knowingly forged about the minds of men the chains of a false theory which has remained unchallenged until the modern period. **We are therefore compelled to accept the view that Jesus shared with the people of His time the beliefs in the existence and operations of evil spirits.**<sup>58</sup>

Several of the quotations above betray the writers' own disagreement with what they regard as Jesus' and his followers' belief in demons. Others, such as Langton and Sanders, state their own view explicitly:

So far as the subject of demonology is concerned, most of the phenomena of possession, as indicated in the Gospels, can probably be sufficiently accounted for on the assumption that emotional psychic states became identified with 'demons' on account of the strong popular belief then prevailing in the existence of such creatures, and in their power to take possession of men and women... We conclude therefore that **the main factors accounting for demon possession as portrayed in the Gospels are pathological conditions of body and mind**, such as those that are associated with hysteria and epilepsy; a strong popular belief in the power of demons to take possession of persons; subconscious activity of the mind; and the existence of psychic states which can assume the appearance of individuality; together with some measure of hallucination and auto-suggestion.<sup>59</sup>

Ancient people attributed to supernatural powers (good or evil spirits) what modern people explain in other ways. It is perfectly reasonable for us to explain ancient events in

---

<sup>57</sup> Twelftree 1985: 100, 106.

<sup>58</sup> Langton 1949: 159-161.

<sup>59</sup> Langton 1949: 155.

our own terms. In my opinion, **it is plausible to explain an exorcism as a psychosomatic cure.**<sup>60</sup>

We could summarise the above evidence by saying that there is a strong consensus among biblical scholars and historians, including subject experts on demons such as Langton and Twelftree, that Jesus himself believed in demons and was an exorcist, and that his earliest followers (including the Synoptic Evangelists) shared this belief. It can be noted at this point that to this writer's knowledge, *no non-Christadelphian writer has ever suggested in print the idea that the Synoptic Gospel exorcism accounts are intended to subvert the popular belief in demons.*

It is always possible that the majority could be wrong. However, one hopes that accommodationists will pause and reflect on how it is that so many scholars, including those who don't believe in demons themselves, could be convinced that Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists did actually hold such a belief.

## 5. Exegetical arguments for accommodation

We will now examine some of the arguments advanced in support of the accommodation theory. We will focus primarily on the arguments advanced by Burke, since his subversive accommodation theory bears a heavier burden of proof than the benign accommodation theory. While the benign accommodationist needs to show that Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists did not actively promote or emphasise the metaphysical reality of demon possession, the subversive accommodationist needs to show that they actively subverted such an idea.

### 5.1. Lack of demonological teaching

Burke quotes at length from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia,<sup>61</sup> to the effect that the New Testament tells us “practically nothing about the origin, nature, characteristics or habits of demons” and that

no theoretical discussion of demons occurs. The center of interest in the Gospels is the person of Jesus, the sufferers and the cures. Interest in the demons as such is absent.

This leads Burke to the following conclusion:

It is significant that the New Testament descriptions of demons and unclean spirits are radically different to that of contemporary Jewish writings (see Appendix J, ‘Bible Teaching On Demons Different To Jewish Fables’), which **demonstrates that the New Testament writers were not drawing on existing beliefs regarding demons.** Why was this? Why, given the extensive demonology which was already well established among the Jewish religious community, do the New Testament writers not adopt it? Why do they construct their own? **The answer is that they simply did not hold to the demonology current in 1st century Judaism.** Their beliefs were not the beliefs of those around them, but an entirely different set of beliefs drawn not from apostate apocryphal writings, but from the Old Testament.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Sanders 1995: 159.

<sup>61</sup> Sweet 1915. Quoted in Burke 2007: 151ff.

<sup>62</sup> Burke 2007: 85. Emphasis added.

Burke's source overstates the point insofar as demons' 'characteristics or habits' are concerned. However, Langton, whose book *Essentials of Demonology* remains a classic treatment of the subject six decades on, makes the same observation as Burke's source regarding the Gospels' silence on the origin of demons.<sup>63</sup> Dunn and Twelftree also make a similar observation:

A clear conceptuality of demons, therefore, does not emerge from the Gospel evidence, and evidently there was no real concern with 'demons as such'; or to answer the question, 'What are demons?'<sup>64</sup>

However, the conclusion these scholars draw is very different from that which Burke draws. While Burke concludes that Jesus did not share existing beliefs about demons, all three of these scholars conclude that he did (see quotations above). While Burke concludes that Jesus' views on demons were not drawn from apocryphal Jewish writings, Dunn & Twelftree (after giving a survey of the demonology of such writings), state:

It is against this background of Jewish thought that the teaching and exorcisms of Jesus and the first Christians is best understood.<sup>65</sup>

Langton similarly notes,

In passing from the apocryphal and apocalyptic writings to the literature of the New Testament the student cannot fail to be impressed by the **clear evidence of continuity in the conceptions which prevail concerning the existence and operations of evil spirits**. In some respects the two groups of writings present fundamental differences; in relation to our subject, though there are indeed some points of difference, **the likenesses and identities of thought and expression are the most impressive fact**.<sup>66</sup>

Sorensen, in his monograph on possession and exorcism in the New Testament and early Christianity, flatly contradicts Burke's assessment:

The New Testament writings presuppose the Jewish demonology of the intertestamental period.<sup>67</sup>

In short, expert scholars look at the Gospels and come to a completely different conclusion than Burke. We will consider some examples of the continuity between Jewish demonology and the Synoptic Gospels below.

Burke makes a further argument from the silence of the Synoptic Gospels:

Firstly, it is an example of an important fact which Buzzard has overlooked that it is only the apostate Jews (not Christ), who refer to satan as 'Beelzebub'. It is significant that there was a 'prince of the demons' already well established in 1st century Judaism, complete with his own unmistakable personal name, and yet he receives no mention

---

<sup>63</sup> Langton 1949: 147.

<sup>64</sup> Dunn & Twelftree 1980: 217.

<sup>65</sup> Dunn & Twelftree 1980: 216.

<sup>66</sup> Langton 1949: 145. Emphasis added.

<sup>67</sup> Sorensen 2002: 119.

whatever from Christ or the apostles. Why is this? A complete systematic doctrine of demons existed, but it is never mentioned by Christ or the apostles. A 'prince of the demons' with his own personal name ('Baalzebul', not 'Satan'), was already widely recognised in Jewish theology, and yet he is ignored completely in the teachings of Christ and the apostles.<sup>68</sup>

This argument is puzzling to say the least. Jesus' opponents referred to Beelzeboul, prince of demons, and accused Jesus of being in league with him. The term Beelzeboul as the ruler of demons is virtually unknown from pre-Gospel literature,<sup>69</sup> but evidently was in use by the Jews. Second Temple and rabbinic Jewish literature has many names for the leader(s) of cosmic evil, including Melkiresa, Mastema, Belial, Shemihazah, Azazel, Samael, Satanael, and Satan.<sup>70</sup> However, Jesus used only one name: Satan, or its Greek translation, *diabolos* (devil). *The context makes it clear that he identifies Beelzeboul with Satan,*<sup>71</sup> although he prefers the term Satan. He does not do this merely for the sake of argument, since in the parable of the strong man (Mark 3:27; Matt. 12:29; Luke 11:21) he "introduces a contrary explanation of why demons are being exorcised in the ministry of Jesus"<sup>72</sup> Specifically, Jesus counters the suggestion that he exorcizes in league with the ruler of demons (Beelzeboul or Satan) by confirming that "Satan's realm, though not at war with itself, is indeed under attack".<sup>73</sup>

Since Jesus refers to Satan – whom he identifies with Beelzeboul – explicitly in at least ten distinct sayings in the Gospels (Matt. 4:10; 12:26; 13:39; 25:41; Mark 3:26; 4:15; Luke 10:19; 13:16; 22:31; John 8:44),<sup>74</sup> it is impossible to say that he is completely ignored in Jesus' teachings.<sup>75</sup>

In short, this attempt to support accommodation is an argument from silence, and an extraordinarily weak one. The explanation for the silence is included in Burke's source, quoted above: the Synoptic Gospels' focus is on the person, life and work of Jesus, not on the demons. The latter arise in the narrative only as they relate to Jesus' ministry. The Gospels are not systematic apocalyptic treatises; they presuppose familiarity with the apocalyptic themes and ideas of Second Temple Judaism.

In fact, the silence on 'demons as such' is much more problematic for Burke's 'subversive accommodation' theory than the reality, benign accommodation and error theories. If Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels more or less held (or at least accommodated) the demonology of their Jewish contemporaries, there was no need to explain their demonology in detail. Burke, however, claims that the New Testament writers "constructed their own" demonology which was

---

<sup>68</sup> Burke 2007: 68.

<sup>69</sup> The Aramaic כַּעֲלִזְבּוּב is possibly used for a powerful spirit in 4Q560, as argued by Penney & Wise 1994, although the entire name has not survived in the text.

<sup>70</sup> See, for instance, Laato 2013: 5; Stuckenbruck 2013: 62ff.

<sup>71</sup> This is unmistakable from the *inclusio* of Mark 3:23-26, whereby Jesus begins and ends his rebuttal of the *Beelzeboul* charge by challenging the idea that *Satan* is at war with himself. There is no other plausible explanation for Jesus' introduction of Satan into the dialogue.

<sup>72</sup> Stein 2008: 184.

<sup>73</sup> Wessel & Strauss 2010: 747.

<sup>74</sup> This is a very conservative estimate since it does not include references which probably refer to Satan by other titles (the evil one, the ruler of this world), and also excludes the references to Satan or *diabolos* in Jesus' letters to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2-3.

<sup>75</sup> Note also that Satan is described as a 'ruler' elsewhere in the NT (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph. 2:2). Arnold (1989: 60) provides historical evidence that the term 'ruler of the power of the air' is semantically synonymous with 'ruler of the demons'.

“entirely different” to that of their contemporaries. If that were the case, we have every reason to expect that they would lay out their demonology systematically to avoid misleading their readers. However, they do not.

## 5.2. Distinction between demon and demon-possessed person

In Burke’s treatise he is responding to arguments raised against the Christadelphian position by Buzzard. The latter had apparently argued that

The synoptic gospels always distinguish the demon and its actions from the individual possessed by the demon, so the actions which the gospels attribute to the demons cannot be attributed to the sufferer and Christ is described as conversing with the demon, not the sufferer, proving once again that the demon is recognised as a real being separate from the individual possessed by the demon<sup>76</sup>

Countering this point, Burke argues as follows:

The synoptic gospels do not always distinguish the demon and its actions from the individual possessed by the demon and sometimes clearly attribute the action of the sufferer to the demon, so the actions which the gospels attribute to the demons can be attributed to the sufferer<sup>77</sup>

And again:

These passages are sufficient to invalidate Buzzard's claim that gospels always distinguish the demon and its actions from the individual possessed by the demon. It is undeniable that the gospels do not 'make an absolute distinction between the victim who is "demonized" and the demon who has possessed him', for in some instances they make no such distinction.

Indeed, in passages such as these it is clear that the actions and words of the afflicted man are attributed to the demons. The demons themselves say nothing and do nothing - it is those who are afflicted by them who 'fall down', 'cry out', and converse with Christ.

This is not what we would expect if Scripture was intending to convince us that the demons have an existence separate and distinct from those they afflict. Buzzard is invited to explain this flaw in his argument.<sup>78</sup>

This phenomenon in the exorcism narratives can largely be explained by the limitations of language. If a person was understood to have been possessed by a demon, and consequently engaged in abnormal behaviour, then a narrator would have two possible ways of describing the behaviour. In one sense, it is still the person who is doing it: the words come from *his* mouth, *his* body falls to the ground, etc. In another sense, because the person is possessed, it is the demon who is doing it: *the demon* is causing him to speak, fall to the ground, etc. Thus, the language used in the Synoptic exorcism accounts is entirely consistent with a description of actual demon possession.

---

<sup>76</sup> Buzzard’s point is so paraphrased by Burke in Burke 2007: 79.

<sup>77</sup> Burke 2007: 80.

<sup>78</sup> Burke 2007: 87.

Indeed, Dochhorn highlights a concept which he says is “widespread in early Christianity and early Judaism”, whereby “A person ‘is’ the spirit which dwells in the person concerned.”<sup>79</sup> Dochhorn believes that this notion explains the references to people as being “Satan” (Mark 8:33 / Matt. 16:23) or “devil” (John 6:70). Another good example of this phenomenon is found in Matt. 10:25, where Jesus states that his opponents have called him Beelzeboul. It sounds as though they think he literally *is* Beelzeboul. However, as the other references to this accusation (Matt. 9:34; 12:24 cp. Mark 3:22) clarify, it was not believed that Jesus literally *was* Beelzeboul but that he ‘had’ Beelzeboul (i.e. was possessed by Beelzeboul, Mark 3:22) and thus performed exorcisms by his power. Similarly, concerning the exorcism in Mark 1:24, Dochhorn writes:

The subject speaking here is not the man but the spirit which possesses him. Therefore the words of that man do not refer to himself as a human being but to the spirit which obviously has replaced his personal centre.<sup>80</sup>

Of course, it could be claimed, *contra* Dochhorn, that the attribution of actions and words to the demons is merely phenomenological language. However, the questions we need to ask are (a) would a first century reader have understood the language as merely phenomenological, and (b) do other clues in the context support this claim?

Given the worldview which accommodationists acknowledge was prevalent in first century Palestine, we can answer question (a) emphatically as “No.” The answer to question (b) will have to wait. However, it is clear that the occasional merging of the actions of the demon and the actions of the possessed individual do not, *ipso facto*, provide evidence for accommodation, and may in fact provide evidence against it.

### **5.3. Geographical distribution of Jesus’ exorcisms**

Burke quotes from Snobelen, another Christadelphian writer who argues that all of the exorcisms recorded in the Synoptic Gospels occur in the northern part of Palestine (Galilee and surrounding areas), and none in Judea. He refers to a scholarly source which asserts that

Galilee was the centre of Palestinian demonology, and it will almost invariably be found that Galilean teachers accepted, while Judaeans teachers rejected, the existence of spirits<sup>81</sup>

Snobelen further asserts that

Illnesses mentioned in the south are always treated as purely organic conditions, while in the north they are sometimes treated as afflictions caused by demons. Thus we see some cases of blindness, deafness and muteness in the north attributed to demons.<sup>82</sup>

Because demon belief was much less common in the south (the above-cited scholarly source implies that it was virtually nonexistent among Judaeans rabbis), then the demons did not exist either.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Dochhorn 2013: 99.

<sup>80</sup> Dochhorn 2013: 99.

<sup>81</sup> Loewe 1911: 612-613. Quoted in Burke 2007: 168f.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Burke 2007: 165.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Burke 2007: 169.

The overall conclusion is as follows:

This pattern strongly infers that putative cases of demon possession in the Gospel and other New Testament accounts are positively related to local belief. In other words, where local folk belief encouraged or allowed for belief in demons, cases of possession exist—often in large groupings. Where such belief was either not taught or even actively discouraged, cases of demon possession are severely reduced or non-existent.<sup>84</sup>

The idea seems to be that Jesus performed exorcisms in the north because belief in demons, and thus *apparently* (but not really) demonic afflictions were common there, and so there was a need to accommodate in the north. In the south, Jesus abandoned the practice of accommodation because the Judeans already knew that demons did not exist.

It should first be stated that this is, once again, an argument from silence. Furthermore, it is, once again, an extraordinarily weak argument from silence. A large number of objections can be raised to this line of argument.

### **(1) The vast majority of Jesus' healing ministry was in Galilee.**

Snobelen anticipates this objection, asking:

Could it be that there are no accounts of demon possession in Judea because no miracles of healing are recorded there at all?... Could this pattern be the simple result of the fact that the synoptics spend so much time focusing on the Galilean and northern ministry?<sup>85</sup>

His answer to both questions is “No, there are miracles of healing recorded in both Judea and Jerusalem.”

However, it remains true that the *vast majority* of healing miracles in the Synoptic Gospels, and especially in the Synoptic Gospels, take place in Galilee and surrounding areas. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus heals one or two blind men at Jericho (Matt. 20:29-34 / Mark 10:46-52 / Luke 18:35-43), heals an unspecified number of blind and lame in the temple (Matt. 21:14), and heals the high priest's servant's ear during his arrest (Luke 22:50-52). In John's Gospel there are three additional healing miracles in Judea: the paralytic (John 5), the blind man (John 9), and the raising of Lazarus (John 11). Thus we have five individual episodes and one summary statement (in which the word 'many' is not used, as it is in some of the Galilean summary statements).

Compare this to the Galilean ministry, where we have an exorcism in the synagogue (Mark 1:23-27 / Luke 4:33-36), Peter's mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14-15 / Mark 1:29-31 / Luke 4:38-39), a leper (Matt. 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16), a paralytic (Matt. 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:18-26), a man with a withered hand (Matt. 12:9-14 / Mark 3:1-6 / Luke 6:6-11), the centurion's servant (Matt. 8:5-13 / Luke 7:1-10), the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), an exorcism in Capernaum (Matt. 12:22), the Gerasene demoniac(s) (Matt. 8:28-34 / Mark 5:1-15 / Luke 8:27-35), the women with an issue of blood (Matt. 9:20-22 / Mark 5:22 / Luke 8:41), Jairus' daughter (Matt. 9:18, 23-25) / Mark 5:22 / Luke 8:41), two blind men in Capernaum (Matt. 9:27-30), a mute demon (Matt. 9:32-33), the Syrophenician woman's daughter (Matt. 15:21-29 / Mark 7:24-30), the deaf and dumb man in Phoenicia (Mark 7:32), the blind man in Bethsaida (Mark 8:23-27), the epileptic child (Matt. 17:14-21 / Mark 9:14-27 / Luke 9:37-42), the ten lepers of

---

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Burke 2007: 169.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Burke 2007: 166.

Samaria (Luke 17:12-19), and the official's son in Capernaum (John 4:46-54). In addition to this are miracles of uncertain location (Matt. 12:22-23 / Luke 11:14, Luke 13:10-17, Luke 14:1-6) (see below). There are also summary statements which refer to many other healings and exorcisms in Galilee (Matt. 4:23-24, 8:16, Matt. 9:35, Matt. 12:15-16, Matt. 14:14, Matt. 14:35-36, Matt. 15:30-31, Matt. 19:2, Mark 1:32-34, Mark 3:10-11, Luke 4:40-41, Luke 6:17-18, Luke 7:21, Luke 9:11).

In summary, the Gospel evidence makes it obvious that Jesus was extremely prolific in his Galilean healing ministry compared with only a handful of healings in Judea. This severely weakens any argument from silence that might be made concerning the absence of a particular type of healing in Judea. For instance, there is no record of Jesus healing any lepers in Judea. Should we thereby conclude that there were no lepers in Judea? Of course not.

The only reference to healing in the Judean context where we might expect a reference to exorcism is the summary statement about the blind and lame in the Temple (Matt. 21:14). Indeed, it may be that those openly presenting evidence of having an 'unclean spirit' would, like lepers, not be allowed into the Temple due to ritual purity laws.<sup>86</sup> This is a conjecture, but a more plausible conjecture than that demoniacs (or lepers) did not come for healing in the Temple because there were few to none of them in Judea.

## **(2) Distinction is made between demonic and non-demonic affliction in the Galilean context**

The second argument from silence here is that afflictions which are described as demonic in the north are described as purely organic in the south. In fact, there is only one kind of condition which may be described as demonic in the north and organic in the south: blindness. There is only one case where blindness is associated with the demonic (Matt. 12:22-23), and the location of this miracle is actually uncertain. Moreover, there are several other healings of blindness in Galilee which are *not* associated with the demonic (see list of miracles above). It is apparent that the Gospels do not ordinarily regard blindness as demonic, but in one exceptional case Matthew does. There is no basis for a geographical distinction here.

While on three occasions muteness and/or deafness are associated with the demonic (Matt. 9:32-33; Matt. 12:22-23; Mark 9:17f), there is also a reference to a deaf and mute man where no demonic affliction is present (Mark 7:32-37), as well as a summary statement which lists muteness with other afflictions and does not mention demons. Moreover, the Gospels record no healings of the deaf or mute in Judea, so there is no point of reference from which to make the claim that muteness is regarded as demonic in Galilee and organic in Judea.

Furthermore, there are types of healing miracles, such as those involving lameness/paralysis and raising the dead, which are never associated with the demonic either in Galilee or Judea.

Finally, among the Judean healings there are none in which the symptoms are comparable to the typical cases of demon possession in the north, e.g. thrashing, shouting, etc. Thus, even if the argument from silence did hold and there were no cases of demon possession in Judea, this would represent an actual metaphysical phenomenon and would not tell us anything about Jesus' accommodation of demons or lack thereof.

In short, there is no evidence that Jesus approached the issue of demon possession differently in Judea because there was no need to accommodate such a belief there.

---

<sup>86</sup> See comment by Twelftree 1993: 144.

### (3) Exorcisms did occur involving Judeans

A summary statement about Jesus' Galilean ministry says,

And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all. (Luke 6:17-19; cf. Matt. 4:24-25, Mark 3:7-11)

In order to maintain even the argument from silence, Snobelen and Burke would have to assume that none of the exorcisms involved the great multitude from Judea and Jerusalem. Such an assumption, however, would be special pleading.

Furthermore, we learn from Acts 5:16 that the apostles engaged in a major exorcism ministry for the benefit of Judeans ("people...from the towns around Jerusalem"). The church only began to spread beyond Jerusalem in Acts 8, so it is evident that this took place in Jerusalem.

Snobelen acknowledges this text but attempts to marginalise it:

The Greek is not overly precise, so it is hard to say from how far away these demon-possessed people came, but the language does show that wherever they were from, they were not from Jerusalem itself—the main centre for Jewish religious teaching in Judea.<sup>87</sup>

The 'towns around Jerusalem' could only refer to Judea, and while they may not have been from Jerusalem, *they came to Jerusalem for exorcism and received it there*.

Furthermore, Snobelen acknowledges that the Epistle of James makes reference to demons in a way that recalls Jesus' exorcisms (James 2:19; cf. 3:15). He attributes the letter to "James, the brother of the Lord" (as I do) and explains the references to demons in terms of his Galilean upbringing.<sup>88</sup> However, it is likely that at the time of writing this letter, James was the *de facto* leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21)! This makes it very likely that the Jerusalem church was comfortable with references to demons and exorcism.

Finally, it is possible that the disciples' missions recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, in which exorcism featured prominently, included Judea (Matt. 10:5ff; Mark 3:14-15; 6:7-13, 30-31; Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-20). Matthew 10:5-6 records that Jesus sent out the twelve 'to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' and instructed them not to go to the Gentiles or any Samaritan village. Conceivably this mission could have included Judea; however, LaGrand<sup>89</sup> argues that the instructions implied they should not cross the Samaritan border, and therefore "Judea as well as Samaria was out of bounds in the first mission". Indeed, while the Galilee-based Herod Antipas heard of the mission (Mark 6:14; Luke 9:7), there is no record that it created any waves in Judea.

However, LaGrand goes on to argue that the subsequent mission of the seventy-two (or seventy) did include "the Judean territory between Jericho and Jerusalem". In support of this he

---

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Burke 2007: 166.

<sup>88</sup> See Burke 2007: 170.

<sup>89</sup> LaGrand 1999: 140.

observes that at the time of this mission, Jesus had just “set his face to go to Jerusalem” and sent messengers ahead of him to a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-52). In Luke 10:1 Jesus sent the seventy (two) ahead of him “into every town and place where he himself was about to go”, i.e. as he journeyed toward Jerusalem. Indeed, by the end of chapter 10, Jesus has told a parable which best fits a Judean context (Luke 10:30), and arrived in the village of Mary and Martha, which we know from John 11 was Bethany, near Jerusalem.

Indeed, it is even possible to locate the Lukan Beelzeboul controversy in Judea (Luke 11:14ff), which includes an exorcism and an extended discussion about it. Mark clearly situates the controversy in Galilee (Mark 3:20ff), but this is no contradiction since we know from Matthew that this accusation was raised against Jesus repeatedly (Matt. 9:34; 10:25; 12:24ff). Note that the material in Luke 11:39-52 (which is not separated from the Beelzeboul controversy by any clear temporal break) is clearly located in Jerusalem in the Matthean parallel (Matt. 23:13ff).

Thus, we can be certain that an exorcism ministry existed in the early days of the Jerusalem church, and that one of the leaders of this church was comfortable making reference to demons in his writing. Besides this, it is plausible if not indeed likely that Jesus and/or his disciples cast out demons from Judeans and/or in Judea during his ministry.

Therefore, even the premise of the argument from silence is fundamentally flawed.

#### **(4) Judeans and Jewish religious leaders believed in demons**

While Snobelen is almost certainly correct that the Sadducees did not believe in demons, which were regarded as a kind of spirit (cf. Acts 23:8), the assertion of his source and himself that Judean teachers invariably rejected the existence of demons is seen to be false even on the evidence of the Gospels.

In Mark 3:22 we read that it was the scribes who came down from Jerusalem who accused Jesus of “having Beelzeboul” and “casting out demons by the prince of demons.” This accusation presupposes their belief in demons. Similarly, in the Gospel of John, the Jewish religious leaders *in Jerusalem* repeatedly accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed (John 7:20; 8:48; 8:52; 10:20). Snobelen tries to dismiss this accusation as “a standard form of slander and abuse among Jews,” but this is special pleading. It is much more plausible that “You have a demon” represents an actual accusation of demon possession, parallel to the Beelzeboul controversy in the Synoptics.

Furthermore, in Luke 13:32 we read that Jesus told the Pharisees to report to Herod, “Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures...” Herod Antipas’ seat of authority was in Galilee, so it is possible that these were Galilean Pharisees, but it still demonstrates that Jesus did not dispense with his (alleged) accommodation when speaking with elites.

Finally, in Acts 19:12-18 we read of itinerant Jewish exorcists in Asia who were “sons of a Jewish high priest.” Snobelen dismisses this evidence, saying, “although Jews were involved, these examples occur in the Gentile region of Ephesus.”<sup>90</sup> However, the fact that they were sons of a Jewish high priest demonstrates their close connection with the Jewish religious elites.

Hence, without even turning to extrabiblical sources, the notion that Judean teachers almost invariably rejected the existence of spirits is shown to be false.

---

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Burke 2007: 170.

To summarise, Snobelen's argument is shown to be flawed on several levels. First, the lack of Judean exorcisms in the Synoptic Gospels can plausibly be explained by the paucity of Judean healings in general. Second, it is not generally true that afflictions are described as demonic in Galilee and organic in Judea. Rather, the Evangelists distinguish between demonic and non-demonic affliction in a Galilean context, and there are no instances in which an affliction with typically demonic symptoms is described in Judea as non-demonic. Third, the Synoptic Gospels probably do imply Judean exorcisms, and Acts certainly does. Fourth, there is evidence of scribes from Jerusalem, Pharisees, and people linked to the priesthood who believed in demons.

Of course, if Snobelen's argument from silence did hold, and demon possession was a local Galilean phenomenon driven by false folk beliefs, Jesus' behaviour would be very difficult to explain. Snobelen states that, "Where such belief was either not taught or even actively discouraged, cases of demon possession are severely reduced or non-existent." Surely, then, the appropriate response would have been for Jesus to actively discourage belief in demons, and thus severely reduce incidence of this affliction. By accommodating this belief and engaging in what appeared to be exorcisms, he would be perpetuating this type of affliction!

The argument from geographical distribution of exorcisms is completely without merit.

#### **5.4. Lack of exorcisms in Gospel of John**

A further argument relates to the silence on demon possession and exorcism in the Gospel of John. Burke makes much of this.

##### **5.4.1. The audiences and purposes of the Gospels and Acts**

Burke holds that the Synoptic Gospels and Acts were written to convert non-Christians and are thus "addressing the uninformed and spiritually immature, who require accommodation of this nature."<sup>91</sup> By contrast, he holds that the Gospel of John was written to "mature Christians with a profound knowledge of the faith", who consequently need no accommodation concerning demons.<sup>92</sup>

It should be noted that Burke cites no evidence for this sharp distinction in purpose between the Synoptic Gospels and Acts on the one hand, and the Gospel of John on the other. Moreover, there is good reason to question this distinction. Twelftree, for instance, writes concerning Matthew:

Of all the Gospel writers it is Matthew who most obviously has a Church in mind when he writes, so it has been called the 'ecclesiastical' Gospel. Thus for example the word 'Church' (ekklesia) occurs only three times in the Gospels, all in Matthew (16:18; 18:17 (twice)). 'No other Gospel is so shaped by the thought of the Church as Matthew's, so

---

<sup>91</sup> Burke 2007: 95.

<sup>92</sup> The argument from silence is extended from John's Gospel to the rest of the New Testament. Since our focus here is on Jesus and the Gospels, we will not address in detail the argument in relation to the rest of the New Testament. However, Twelftree's statement about Paul's epistles can probably be extended to most of these writings: "As Paul's letters are written to the Church primarily about matters of internal concern it is then not so surprising that he has not mentioned exorcism or exorcists. Exorcism would be needed only as the Church confronted those outside the Christian community still in a particularly severe grip of Satan." (Twelftree 1985: 92)

constructed for use by the Church; for this reason it has exercised, as no other, a normative influence in the later Church.<sup>93</sup>

Carson writes concerning Matthew that “it is unwise to specify only one purpose; reductionism cannot do justice to the diversity of Matthew’s themes.”<sup>94</sup> He lists four needs which he believes Matthew sought to meet, which are (1) catechetical, (2) apologetic/evangelistic, (3) encouragement of believers in their witness before a hostile world, and (4) “to inspire deeper faith in Jesus the Messiah, along with a maturing understanding of his person, work, and unique place in the unfolding history of redemption.”<sup>95</sup>

Turner writes that

The occasion of the Gospel’s writing and its purposes can only be approximated in hypotheses inferred from the text. Assuming that the audience is a Christian Jewish community (or multiple communities in various locations), it is evidently a community that needs to understand how the life of Jesus the Messiah ‘fulfilled’ the Hebrew Bible and how Jesus’ teaching interpreted the Torah of Moses (Matt. 5:17-48). The community also needed to know why the entrenched non-Christian religious leaders were no longer to be emulated (Matt. 23). And the community evidently needed to expand its horizons toward gentile mission.<sup>96</sup>

Concerning Mark, Wessel and Strauss write:

Concerning the occasion and purpose of Mark’s gospel, scholars have tended toward three general directions, seeing the gospel’s purpose as primarily catechetical, pastoral, or theological.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, it is at very least an oversimplification to assume that these books were written purely for preaching or catechetical purposes. Wessel and Strauss see credence in all three, noting that “it is likely that Mark wrote for a variety of reasons.”<sup>98</sup>

On the audience of Mark, Stein comments:

From within Mark we learn a great deal about the audience for whom it was written. We know it was a Greek-speaking audience that did not know Aramaic, as Mark’s explanations of Aramaic expressions indicate... We also know that it was a Christian audience familiar with the gospel traditions... It is also apparent Mark’s readers were familiar with various OT characters and possessed considerable knowledge of the Jewish religion... With respect to the geographical location of Mark’s intended readers, the tradition states that Mark wrote his Gospel for the church at Rome [a view which Stein defends]<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> Twelftree 1985: 123. He cites a number of sources in support of these statements.

<sup>94</sup> Carson 2010: 46.

<sup>95</sup> Carson 2010: 49.

<sup>96</sup> Turner 2008: 15.

<sup>97</sup> Wessel & Strauss 2010: 685.

<sup>98</sup> Wessel & Strauss 2010: 688.

<sup>99</sup> Stein 2008: 9-10.

Concerning Luke, Bock mentions eleven different purposes for Luke-Acts that have been proposed by scholars, some outward-looking or evangelistic and some inward looking. He himself states:

It is unlikely that Theophilus is just interested in becoming a Christian or is a Roman official who needs to have Christianity explained in order to accept it as a legitimate religion... Theophilus appears to be a man of rank (Luke 1:3) who has associated himself with the church, but doubts whether in fact he really belongs in this racially mixed and heavily persecuted community. In the Gospel, Luke takes Theophilus through Jesus' career in order to review how God worked to legitimize Jesus and how Jesus proclaimed hope... Luke did not write, however, just for this one person, but for any who felt this tension. Any Gentile feeling out of place in an originally Jewish movement could benefit from the reassurance Luke offers. Any Jew (or Jewish Christian) troubled by the lack of Jewish response to the gospel or by the Gentile openness to the gospel could see that God directed the affair and that he gave the nation multiple invitations to join in God's renewed work.<sup>100</sup>

Finally, concerning John, Köstenberger notes,

On a surface reading, 'that you may believe' [John 20:30-31] suggests an evangelistic purpose, that is, leading John's readers to first-time faith in Jesus as Messiah. At the same time, John's gospel seems to presuppose an audience that is already familiar with Scripture and contains detailed instructions for believers, especially in the second half of the gospel. What is more, there are only a few examples of directly evangelistic first-century documents. For reasons such as these it seems perhaps most likely that John's purpose encompassed both aspects, evangelism of unbelievers and edification of believers, and that John pursued an indirect evangelistic purpose, aiming to reach an unbelieving audience through the Christian readers of his gospel. John's purpose, then, according to 20:31, is to set forth the evidence that Jesus is the Messiah, so that people might believe in him and as a result have life in his name.<sup>101</sup>

Kruse opines that the Gospel of John "was intended primarily for unbelieving Greek-speaking Jews."<sup>102</sup> In support of the "evangelistic purpose for the Gospel", he points out the contrast between the purpose statement for the Gospel in John 20:31 and that for John's first epistle in 1 John 5:13:

"But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31)

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13)

He comments further that, "If the evangelist intended his Gospel to be primarily edificatory, he could have made his intention a lot clearer by expressing himself along the lines of 1 John 5:13." Besides this, "the emphasis of the Fourth Gospel upon the need to believe in Jesus and the stories of people who did so...suggest [that] its primary purpose is evangelistic."

---

<sup>100</sup> Bock 1994a: 14-15.

<sup>101</sup> Köstenberger 2009; 85.

<sup>102</sup> Kruse 2004: 21.

While we cannot here undertake a detailed analysis of the audiences and purposes of each of the Gospels, the above quotations suffice to cast considerable doubt upon Burke's reductionist view of the Gospels' respective audiences and purposes. This is highly significant because it is this alleged clear distinction in audience and purpose between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John that underpins Burke's entire theory of accommodation.

#### 5.4.2. Descriptions of physical afflictions in John

Burke writes:

Nor is any sickness attributed to satanic or demonic activity. Instead, those who are physically afflicted are described simply as:

- The blind (John 5:3)
- The lame (John 5:3)
- The withered (John 5:3)
- Sick (John 4:47; 11:1-4, 6)
- Impotent (John 5:3-4, 7)
- Suffering from 'infirmity' (John 5:4)
- Suffering from 'disease' (John 5:4; 6:2)

It is clear that John's gospel refers to an entire range of afflictions and illnesses (including some attributed to demons in the synoptics), but not once does John's gospel identify these afflictions as having been caused by supernatural evil beings.<sup>103</sup>

Both the statement itself and the inference from it are exaggerated. One would surmise from the bullet points that there are seven distinct types of affliction described in John. In fact, the general term 'sick' (*astheneo* and equivalent noun) occurs a number of times (John 4:46; 5:3; 5:5; 5:7; 6:2; 11:1-6). More specific terms for illness include 'fever' (John 4:52), 'blind' (John 5:3; 9:1ff), 'lame' (John 5:3) and 'paralyzed' (John 5:3). The additional term used in John 5:4 is irrelevant since this verse is regarded by textual critics as certainly a later interpolation.<sup>104</sup> Hence in John's Gospel we have one general term for sickness and four more specific categories of affliction. Is this 'an entire range of afflictions and illnesses (including some attributed to demons in the synoptics)'? In addition to the terms found in John (all of which occur in the Synoptic Gospels), the following terms occur in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts which do not occur in John:

- Deafness (Mark 7:32)
- Speech impediment (Mark 7:32)
- Muteness (Matt. 15:30)
- Leprosy (Mark 1:40)
- Dropsy (Luke 14:2)
- Paralysis (Matt. 8:6; different term from John 5:3)
- Crippled (Matt. 15:30; different term from John 5:3)
- Epilepsy (Matt. 4:24)
- Discharge of blood (Luke 8:43)
- Dysentery (Acts 28:8)
- 'Various diseases and pains' (Matt. 4:24; terms not used in John)
- 'Plagues' (Luke 7:21)

---

<sup>103</sup> Burke 2007: 96.

<sup>104</sup> Metzger 1994: 179.

- ‘Bent over’ (Luke 13:11)
- Demon-possessed (Matt. 4:24)
- Unclean spirit (Mark 1:23)

I am not sure whether this list is exhaustive, but it is clear that the range of afflictions and illnesses mentioned in John is far from ‘entire’ when compared with the Synoptic Gospels and Acts. Moreover, of the four types of affliction mentioned by John, only one (not ‘some’), namely blindness, is ever attributed to demons in the Synoptics, and that only once out of numerous cases! There is no instance of an affliction which is described as non-demonic in John but which is characteristically be described as demonic in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts. Thus, there is no evidence that John has reinterpreted ‘demon possession’ as non-demonic; rather he has, for whatever reason, omitted to mention such phenomena altogether.

Before advancing grand arguments from silence, though, we ought to remember that there are a grand total of *four* healing miracles recorded in the Gospel of John. These are: a feverish son (John 4:46-54), a lame man (John 5), a blind man (John 9), and the raising of Lazarus (John 11). There are no summary statements in John which mention different types of healings, only general references to other ‘signs’ that Jesus did, including ‘on the sick’ (John 6:2; 20:30). While it is noteworthy that John did not include an exorcism among these four healing miracles, and demands consideration, it is not exactly earth-shattering – certainly not grounds for a theological paradigm shift.

#### 5.4.3. Explanations for John’s silence

We quoted earlier from Meggitt, who inferred from the Gospel of John that its author

did not share the same notions about demons as did the other three gospel writers and, indeed, the historical Jesus himself.<sup>105</sup>

This is quite different from the position of Burke, which is that John *did* share the same notions about demons as did the other Gospel writers and Jesus – namely that they do not exist! The difference Burke sees is that the other Evangelists engaged in subversive accommodation while John acted more forthrightly by simply ignoring demon possession altogether.

Moreover, it should be obvious that Meggitt’s view is a conjecture, since John nowhere tells us that he does not believe in demons. Other scholars have offered different conjectures for John’s silence on Jesus’ exorcisms.

Smith, for instance, suggests that

Avoiding demon exorcism stories may have been John’s way of avoiding the charge that Jesus effected exorcisms by the power of Satan (Mark 3:22; cf. John 8:48-49). It is less obvious why there are no cleansings of lepers, except that they involve questions of ritual purity according to the law, in which John does not seem to be overtly interested (cf. Mark 1:40-45, especially 44).<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Meggitt 2011: 21.

<sup>106</sup> Smith 1995: 108.

It is noteworthy that Smith feels compelled to offer an explanation for the absence of leprosy cleansings in addition to exorcisms. (Perhaps John ignored leprosy cleansings because he didn't believe in leprosy?)

Piper explicitly rejects the idea that John omitted exorcisms from his Gospel because he did not believe in demons:

it is unlikely that one can claim that [John] recorded no exorcism simply because he gives a low priority to the sphere of Satan and the demonic. The fourth gospel on the contrary shows some significant interest in this area.<sup>107</sup>

Twelftree similarly rejects the view that John avoided exorcisms because he was “embarrassed about portraying Jesus as a man of his time”, noting that he attributes to Jesus techniques used by other healers of the period such as the use of spittle.<sup>108</sup> Twelftree proceeds to offer at least four possible explanations for John's silence on exorcism:

- (1) Noting the spectacular nature of Jesus' miracles recorded in John, “Compared with these spectacular miracles, which were chosen to show Jesus' glory and his divine nature, the relatively common exorcisms performed by Jesus' contemporaries would have appeared banal.”
- (2) A second reason may be because John “chose to give little attention to the Kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching. We have seen that Jesus – and the Synoptic Gospels – closely associated exorcism and the Kingdom of God...for John to exclude one probably meant that he felt obligated to preclude the other.”
- (3) Third, whereas in the Synoptic Gospels an aspect of Satan's defeat is directly linked with Jesus' exorcisms, “in John the defeat of Satan is linked with the cross”, which “probably meant that the exorcisms did not have the same importance for him.”<sup>109</sup>

In a more recent book he adds,

[4] Johannine theology saw no place for exorcism, not because there was no category of demonic or demonic possession but because the demonic was overcome by truth rather than by the power-encounter of an exorcism.<sup>110</sup>

All of these are plausible, and as Piper notes, the explanation that John omitted exorcisms because he did not believe in demons can be discounted on the grounds that he believed in Satan and gave him considerable attention in his Gospel and first epistle (John 6:70; 8:44; 12:31; 13:2; 13:27; 14:30; 16:11; 17:15; 1 John 2:13; 2:14; 3:8; 3:10; 3:12; 4:4; 5:18; 5:19). Of course, accommodationists are likely to regard John's references to Satan as accommodation as well, but one needs to show that John didn't actually believe in Satan before one can argue that he didn't believe in demons. I have written previously on the continuity scholars have observed between the cosmic dualism found in the Qumran scrolls and that found in John's writings.<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Piper 2000: 256.

<sup>108</sup> Twelftree 1985: 88-89.

<sup>109</sup> Twelftree 1985: 90.

<sup>110</sup> Twelftree 2007: 207. The [4] has been added for ease of reference.

<sup>111</sup> Farrar 2014b: 2-6; Farrar 2014a: 3-6.

In this writer's view, Twelftree's first and third explanations are the most likely. The Gospels and Acts acknowledge that others besides Jesus and his followers were carrying out exorcisms at this time (Luke 9:49; 11:19; Acts 19:13), as is also known from other sources. Thus, an exorcism story would not, *ipso facto*, serve John's stated purpose of convincing the reader that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God (John 20:31). By contrast, John seems to have chosen miracles that he regarded as exceptional and likely to convince people of Jesus' Messiahship: "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind" (John 9:32; cf. John 11:45).

The view that John omitted exorcisms to focus the cosmic conflict on the defeat of Satan through the cross also has merit. In John 12:31, Jesus says that the 'ruler of this world' (undoubtedly a reference to Satan<sup>112</sup>) will now be 'cast out' – the same verb (*ekballō*) used in the Gospels to describe exorcisms. Twelftree therefore describes the Johannine cross event as "the grand cosmic exorcism".<sup>113</sup> Sorensen agrees that "in John 12:31 Jesus uses the vocabulary of exorcism to describe the overthrow of the demonic ruler of this world".<sup>114</sup>

Hence, two of the foremost experts on exorcism in the New Testament actually agree that exorcism is *not* absent from the Fourth Gospel; rather the terminology of exorcism is used to focus on the wresting of Satan's control over the world. With this motif in view, the exorcism of demons from individuals would seem insignificant by comparison.

Hence, there are plausible explanations for John's omission of demon possession accounts from his Gospel. They all remain conjectures, but they are far more probable than the conjecture that the John who gave Satan such a prominent role in his writing did not believe in demons.

## 6. Exegetical arguments against accommodation

We have now considered the main arguments that have been put forward by Burke in favour of the accommodation theory, or more specifically the subversive accommodation theory. Most of the arguments were arguments from silence, and all of them, upon close examination, were seen to be fundamentally flawed.

We will now take the initiative and construct arguments as to why it is implausible that Jesus or the Synoptic writers merely accommodated belief in demons (or tried to subvert it!) without espousing it themselves. Some of the arguments will apply to the benign accommodation theory, some to the subversive accommodation theory, and some to both.

### 6.1. Lack of clues indicating verbal irony

Since Burke is evidently fond of arguments from silence, we will begin with one of our own. If the Synoptic writers were merely accommodating belief in demons rather than presupposing and endorsing such a belief, we would expect them to have left clues to this effect. This is less true in the case of benign accommodation. If the writers were totally content to allow their

---

<sup>112</sup> This can be inferred by comparison with 1 John 5:19, where it is 'the evil one' in whose power the whole world lies. That 'the evil one' is the devil can be seen from 1 John 3:8-12. See Kovacs 1995 for a detailed study of 'the ruler of this world' in John.

<sup>113</sup> Twelftree 2007: 196.

<sup>114</sup> Sorensen 2002: 134-135.

readers to continue believing in demons, they may not have intentionally expressed any distance between their own views and the views accommodated in the story.

However, in the case of subversive accommodation, it is virtually certain that the Synoptic writers would have signaled their intent that the reader not take the statements about demon possession and exorcism at face value.

To see this, it is necessary to give a brief background on the literary technique of irony and, in particular, verbal irony. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines irony as follows:

A subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance... At its simplest, in verbal irony, it involves a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant<sup>115</sup>

A further definition of verbal irony is given by New Testament narrative critic Resseguie:

In verbal irony a contradiction occurs between what is expressed and what is implied. The writer or speaker makes explicit one attitude or evaluation but implies a different attitude or evaluation that is often the opposite of what is expressed. Appreciation of verbal irony depends upon recognizing a sharp disparity between what a writer says and what a writer means. In everyday speech, tone of voice and context provide clues that the speaker is ironical; with tongue-in-cheek the ironist indicates a double significance through intonation. But in written discourse irony relies upon techniques of indirection such as understatement, pun, paradox, hyperbole, sarcasm, or other forms of incongruities and reversals for its success... **Verbal irony can be very subtle and requires close attention to clues.**<sup>116</sup>

Burke has explicitly stated that he regards the statements about demons in the Synoptic Gospels as ironic, and that the “language and terminology of demon beliefs” are used to “present the truth which is in direct contrast to the superstitions of their contemporaries.” This is clearly a description of verbal irony.

Notice that both of the above definitions mention *subtlety* as one of the features of irony. There is no question that if irony is present in the Synoptic statements about demons and exorcism, it is extraordinarily subtle, since it has eluded the majority of readers, ancient and modern. This immediately raises a problem in Burke’s argument, because he says the Synoptic Gospels were written for the uninformed and spiritually immature – *the very sort of people who would be least likely to detect subtle irony*. Moreover, as Resseguie has indicated, *a writer must provide his readers with clues to enable them to detect the irony in his written discourse*. If no clues can be found in the Synoptic Gospels indicating that the references to demons and exorcism are to be treated ironically, we will have quite a compelling argument from silence against the subversive accommodation theory.

We will briefly look at three instances of verbal irony in the New Testament (the last two of which are given as examples by Resseguie) in order to appreciate the kind of clues we might expect to find.

---

<sup>115</sup> Baldick 2008.

<sup>116</sup> Resseguie 2005: 68-69. Emphasis added.

**(1) Luke 3:23:** “Jesus...being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph”

This is such a simple instance that it may be overstatement to call it irony. Luke does not regard Jesus as ultimately or biologically the son of Joseph. Hence, to indicate to the reader that when he says ‘son’ he does not mean son in the usual sense – the sense used in the rest of the genealogy – he adds a parenthetical phrase, ‘as was supposed’. His true meaning is now unmistakable, whereas without this addition the reader might well be confused and think Luke had contradicted his earlier account of the virgin birth.

**(2) Mark 7:9:** “And he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!’”

Read literally, the word ‘fine’ indicates that Jesus is praising the scribes and Pharisees for rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish their tradition. This statement can be easily identified as ironic for two reasons. Firstly, in the immediate (and wider) context Jesus excoriates the scribes and Pharisees, calling them ‘hypocrites’ (v. 6) and saying in a more straightforward manner that they ‘make void the word of God’ (v. 13). Thus it would be inconsistent for him to praise them in v. 9. Secondly, the Gospel declares Jesus to be the holy Son of God, so he obviously would not compliment anyone for rejecting God’s commandment.

**(3) Mark 15:29-32:** “And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.”

Read literally, ‘save yourself, and come down from the cross’ sounds like an earnest plea, and ‘Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down’ indicates that the chief priests and scribes believed Jesus to be the Messiah. However, there are multiple clues that these statements are ironic. Firstly, Mark explicitly tells us that these people were ‘deriding’, ‘mocking’, and ‘reviling’ him, and these words do not represent mockery if they are meant literally. Secondly, Mark’s description of the body language of passersby (wagging their heads) and the use of the interjection ‘Aha!’ further suggest that the speakers do not mean what they say. Thirdly, it is extremely unlikely that the chief priests would have called for Jesus’ crucifixion, as they had just done (vv. 11-13), if they really believed he was the Messiah.

Hence, in all three of the above instances, the writer has provided clues which make the use of irony unmistakable to the attentive reader. The question is, *do the Synoptic Gospels provide any clues indicating to the reader that the words and deeds of Jesus and the disciples (or their own editorial comments) concerning demons and exorcism should be understood ironically?* They do not, although they certainly possessed the literary skill and resources to do so, as we have seen above.

In none of the stories about exorcism or references to demons and demon possession do the writers drop the alleged façade of straightforward narrative and indicate to the reader that their statements should not be taken at face value. Indeed, Burke has scarcely even claimed that such clues exist. He observed that sometimes the narrative does not clearly distinguish between the demon and the demoniac, but this has been accounted for. Other than that, Burke has offered only arguments from silence. The writers *do not* give a systematic statement of their demonology. The writers *do not* record any exorcisms in Judea. *Another* writer (John) does not

record exorcisms at all. None of these absences is anything close to the kind of clue that the reader would need in order to detect that demon possession language is not being used with its usual meaning.

As a result, as already noted the vast majority of readers of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, both ancient and modern, have concluded that the writers, and indeed Jesus himself, believed in demons. Therefore, *if the Synoptic writers intended their readers to interpret their references to demons and exorcism ironically, they have failed abysmally in their rhetorical purpose.*

Instead of judging the Synoptic Evangelists failed rhetoricians, it is more prudent to conclude that they neglected to state their disbelief in demons because there was no such disbelief.

## **6.2. Distinction between demonic and non-demonic cases**

Langton notes that

the Gospels show traces of a belief that all forms of sickness and disease are the result of spirit operations. In numerous passages, however, a distinction seems to be drawn between the more ordinary cases of sickness, such as are familiar to us today, and other cases which are viewed as the result of a different form or degree of spirit operations. Thus Mark states that early in Christ's ministry 'they brought unto him all that were sick, and them that were possessed with demons' (1.32)... St. Luke also, 'the beloved physician' who, as an educated pagan, might be supposed to be less under the influence of Jewish teaching on the subject, draws the same distinction. The distinction thus made by the evangelists corresponds to a similar distinction found among many different peoples, both ancient and modern. It is an indisputable fact that among peoples situated in widely-separated parts of the world today, and who maintain the spirit-theory of disease in general, there is the same tendency to place cases of supposed demon possession in a class by themselves.<sup>117</sup>

Dow similarly argues that

the writers of the New Testament did not interpret disorder in demonic terms simply because of the prevailing contemporary framework of perception. The New Testament writers show the ability to ascribe similar disorders on some occasions to demonic reality and on other occasions not. For example, a dumb and blind person is cured by exorcism (Matt. 12:22-23, exorcism is implied) and also a dumb person (Matt. 9:32), whereas laying-on of hands with no hint of exorcism is used for a dumb man (Mark 7:32-37) and a blind man (Matt. 8:22-25). It is arguable that such a distinction represents considerable discernment on the part of the early Christian community; it was in fact quite well known in the ancient world that mental disorder could arise from organic or psychological causes.<sup>118</sup>

This discernment between demonic and non-demonic affliction shows that the Synoptic writers were not constrained by their cultural milieu to use the language of demonic oppression and possession to describe physical maladies. This undermines one of the primary alleged motives for accommodation. They obviously did not accommodate a simplistic belief that all illness is demonic and to be treated with exorcism. They show sophistication in their use of demon

---

<sup>117</sup> Langton 1949: 151.

<sup>118</sup> Dow 1980: 200.

possession and medical terminology and they expect sophistication of their readers in appreciating their discernment.

### 6.3. Continuity of the Gospel accounts with other demonologies

#### 6.3.1. Continuity with contemporary demonology

One of the arguments from silence raised by Burke was that the Synoptic writers show no interest in the origin or nature of demons, indeed in demons as such, and that they therefore did not share the demonology of their contemporaries. We have already argued that the genre and purpose of the Gospels accounts for the lack of systematic demonology, and that this silence is expected if the writers more or less shared the demonology of their contemporaries and had nothing to add on the subject. If, on the other hand, the writers sought to construct a new and radically different demonology, then the silence is perplexing indeed.

However, we can go further and show that the conception of demons presupposed in the Gospels has significant continuities with the conception of demons in Second Temple Judaism. Langton identifies four areas where the Synoptic Gospels parallel other ancient literature in its depiction of demons (recall that Langton was a rationalist who did not believe in demons himself):

- (i) The number of evil spirits is indefinitely large<sup>119</sup>
- (ii) Demons are associated with definite localities, particularly with deserts, tombs, and other desolate places such as are the abode of wild beasts (Luke 8:27-29; 11:24; cf. Mark 1:13)<sup>120</sup>
- (iii) Special reference is made to groups of *seven* evil spirits (Luke 8:2; 11:24-26)<sup>121</sup>
- (iv) The demons are destined for a preliminary place of imprisonment and a fiery place of final punishment (Matt. 8:29; Luke 8:31; Mark 1:24; cf. Matt. 25:41)<sup>122</sup>

Ferguson further notes continuity between the Synoptic accounts and contemporary demonology concerning the notion that demon-possessed people had superhuman strength (Luke 8:29). This leads him to state that

The story of the Gerasene demoniac contains elements which reflect the popular demonology of Jesus' day. These elements will find further illustration as we proceed with this study of Jesus' encounters with the demons and especially in succeeding studies of the surrounding world in which Jesus lived.<sup>123</sup>

One limitation of Langton's work on demonology is that it was published before the Dead Sea Scrolls were available to scholars. However, scholars who have studied this literature have found it to be valuable for establishing the background to the Synoptic Gospels. Stuckenbruck, in his study of the demonic world of the Dead Sea Scrolls, finds that one thing in common between the Synoptic exorcism accounts and several of the Dead Sea Scrolls is that they adapt the aetiology of the Enochic traditions.<sup>124</sup> He goes as far as to describe the demonology of the Dead Sea Scrolls

---

<sup>119</sup> Lanton 1949: 147-148.

<sup>120</sup> Langton 1949: 149.

<sup>121</sup> Langton 1949: 150.

<sup>122</sup> Langton 1949: 170-171.

<sup>123</sup> Ferguson 1984: 2.

<sup>124</sup> Stuckenbruck 2013: 54.

as “crucial to understanding and interpreting the demonic world as it is dealt with in the New Testament and in early Christian literature”.<sup>125</sup>

If the Synoptic writers were accommodating a belief in demons which they did not share but didn't care to correct – and *certainly* if they sought to subvert this belief – we would expect their references to demons to be minimalist and to downplay parallels with existing demonological beliefs. Instead, their references demonstrate continuity in incidental details with the demonology of the surrounding world. Either the Synoptic writers were very meticulous in their efforts to accommodate belief in demons, or, more likely, they themselves presupposed a demonology similar to that of their contemporaries.

### 6.3.2. Continuity of Jesus' exorcism techniques with other exorcists

Twelftree made a close study of Jesus' exorcism techniques in comparison to those found in other ancient literature, magical papyri, etc. The question he sought to answer is as follows:

It is often said that what sets Jesus apart from his contemporary exorcists was his simple 'non-magical' healings – he only had to command the demons and they would depart. How correct is such a view in relation to what Jesus said to the demons?<sup>126</sup>

This is an important question for our investigation, because if Jesus' exorcism techniques resembled those of other contemporary exorcists, it will prove difficult to argue that he did not truly regard himself as an exorcist or encourage others to so regard him.

Twelftree finds several elements in the words of exorcism in the Markan exorcism episodes which parallel exorcistic incantations known from other ancient literature. These are:

- (i) **'Be quiet'** (Mark 1:25; which Twelftree argues means something closer to 'be bound' or 'be restricted')
- (ii) **'Come out of him'** (Mark 1:25; 5:8; 9:25; this is “the basic command found in common with all the kinds of exorcists we know in this period”)
- (iii) **'What is your name?'** (Mark 5:9; knowing an enemy's name was regarded in magical texts as an essential element in overpowering him, and it appears Jesus resorted to this strategy after his first attempt was unsuccessful – 5:8)
- (iv) **'No longer enter into him'** (Mark 9:25; this command is closely paralleled in the repertoire of other exorcists)<sup>127</sup>

Twelftree draws the following conclusion from these parallels:

In every case the words, or, as we should now more accurately say, 'incantations' used by Jesus are paralleled in the incantations of other exorcists (see the stories quoted in Chap. II above). It is thus not possible to say that one of the distinctive features of Jesus' method of exorcism was his simple 'non-magical' or 'non-incantational' approach. Like his contemporaries, Jesus made use of a readily recognisable stock of incantational formula.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> Stuckenbruck 2013: 70.

<sup>126</sup> Twelftree 1985: 63.

<sup>127</sup> Twelftree 1985: 64-66.

<sup>128</sup> Twelftree 1985: 66.

### (v) The use of objects to which to transfer the demons

Twelftree further notes that the pigs' episode in the Gerasene exorcism should probably be understood as an integral part of the cure, which parallels the idea that

in antiquity, to effect a cure it was sometimes thought appropriate to transfer the demons from the sufferer to some object like a pebble or piece of wood or a pot or some water. These objects, thought to contain the demons, were thrown away or destroyed to effect and perhaps signify the demon's departure from the situation.<sup>129</sup>

To summarise:

In many ways Jesus seems to have been a man of his time in that he used readily recognisable techniques, and what was reported of other exorcists was also reported of Jesus' exorcisms... [despite the simplicity of his technique] we cannot say either that in this he was unique or that he stood over against the incantational or what we might call a 'magical' tradition. Jesus' use of incantations places him firmly in this 'magical' tradition.<sup>130</sup>

In short, it could be said that Jesus did not merely deal with cases of (allegedly) demon possession; *he behaved like an exorcist*.

Despite this, however, Twelftree finds that there were other aspects of ancient techniques of which Jesus did not avail himself:

- (i) Jesus does not seem to have used any mechanical devices in his exorcisms
- (ii) Jesus did not use any 'proofs' to indicate the success of his cures
- (iii) Unlike even some of the Jewish holy men Jesus is not reported as praying when he performed an exorcism
- (iv) It seems that in his exorcisms Jesus did not call up or invoke any power-authority
- (v) It does not seem that Jesus used the formula 'I bind you'<sup>131</sup>

From this Twelftree draws the following conclusion:

we see that Jesus is an exorcist, like others of his time, who relied not on outside aids but on his own charismatic personal force to subdue and expel the demon... ... in drawing attention to his own authority in his ability to subdue demons, Jesus' technique appears to be unique.<sup>132</sup>

The uniqueness of this aspect of Jesus' technique, that is, commanding the demons on his own authority instead of invoking a higher authority, can be seen in the crowd's response in Mark 1:27. There is great christological significance here, but while these differences show that this exorcist was superior to other exorcists, the continuity between his techniques and those of

---

<sup>129</sup> Twelftree 1985: 67.

<sup>130</sup> Twelftree 1985: 70-71.

<sup>131</sup> Twelftree 1985: 67-70.

<sup>132</sup> Twelftree 1985: 71.

other exorcists show that *he went out of his way to make his exorcisms look like exorcisms*. It is very unlikely that he would do this unless he himself considered them to be exorcisms.

#### 6.4. Theological significance of Jesus' exorcisms

The references to demon possession are not merely incidental details in Jesus' healing ministry. Rather, Jesus himself, and the Synoptic writers after him, invested his exorcisms with great theological significance. The texts that bear this out are the parable of the strong man (Mark 3:27 and parallels), the response to the successful exorcism mission of the seventy-two disciples (Luke 10:18-20) and the saying in which Jesus linked the arrival of the kingdom of God to his exorcisms (Matt. 12:28 / Luke 11:20).

Jesus seems to have regarded his successful exorcisms as the defeat (or evidence of the defeat) of Satan, as the plundering of Satan's possessions. This must have seemed an extraordinary claim to those who expected the destruction of evil and the defeat of Satan as the climax to God's purpose and the presupposition for a new age of restored paradise...But it is a claim of that order which Jesus' disciples recalled him as making... It was the fact that Jesus achieved his success by the Spirit/finger of God which demonstrated or proved that the kingdom of God had come to them. It was this which distinguished Jesus' exorcistic success from the success of his Jewish contemporaries: he laid claim to a plenitude of power which, by implication, these other exorcists did not experience.<sup>133</sup>

We know of no other miracle worker in antiquity who conducted so many exorcisms and for whom exorcism was as important as it was for Jesus (e.g. Matt 12:28/Luke 11:20)... Since exorcisms were so common, and Jews did not consider exorcism to be eschatologically significant, it is remarkable that Jesus claimed that his particular exorcisms - and those of his followers (Luke 10:17-19) - were not only the first of a two stage battle with Satan (the second stage to take place at the eschaton; cf. Isa 24:21-22; Matt 13:24-30), but were also the actual coming or operation of the kingdom of God itself."<sup>134</sup>

Thus in exorcism Jesus sees himself as binding Satan in order to plunder his property – those hitherto held by Satan. From what we have seen so far we can conclude that Jesus is the first one to make a specific connection between the relatively ordinary events of exorcism and the defeat of Satan, between exorcism and eschatology.<sup>135</sup>

Many scholars are convinced that Jesus regarded his expulsion of demons, along with the healing miracles, as demonstrations of God's rule breaking into this world.<sup>136</sup>

That Jesus saw such theological importance in his exorcisms makes it very unlikely indeed that he was merely accommodating existing beliefs about demons.

---

<sup>133</sup> Dunn 2003: 694.

<sup>134</sup> Twelftree 2010: 151-152.

<sup>135</sup> Twelftree 1985: 79-80.

<sup>136</sup> Stuckenbruck 2008: 73.

## 6.5. Supernatural elements in exorcism accounts

There are at least three supernatural elements in the exorcism stories (that is, apart from the supernatural power wielded by Jesus) that are worth noting. These are problematic not only for accommodationists but also for proponents of the error theory, some of whom are not prepared to allow that there was anything supernatural about Jesus' exorcisms.

The first element is the superhuman strength of the Gerasene demoniac which enabled him to tear chains apart and break shackles in pieces (Mark 5:4). "No one was strong enough to subdue him," Mark tells us.

The second element, already alluded to above, is the transfer of the Gerasene 'legion' of demons to the herd of pigs. Some have tried to construe the pigs' stampede either as an odd coincidence or as triggered by the demoniac's behaviour (the latter view is taken by Langton).<sup>137</sup> Sanders, himself an avowed rationalist, dismisses such explanations:

Some have attempted to explain this [psychosomatic] explanation to the story of the Gerasene demoniac and the swine: by mental suggestion Jesus really did cure a 'demoniac', that is, he brought him back to his right mind. The man went into convulsions, which alarmed and panicked the swine, who charged over a cliff. I find this explanation unconvincing, and I doubt that those who have offered it have ever tried to panic a herd of swine by throwing a fit. The story is not subject to rational explanation.<sup>138</sup>

The Gospels indicate that this surprising turn of events occurred because the demons requested permission to enter the pigs and Jesus granted it (Mark 5:12-13). That is, the demons had the initiative and Jesus granted their request; his role was passive. The accommodationist who affirms the supernatural component of Jesus' miracles is left to explain how a mental illness can unilaterally leave a person and enter into a herd of pigs.

The third supernatural element to note is the demons' (or at least the demoniacs') apparent supernatural knowledge about Jesus' identity. Mark records the unclean spirits or demons habitually recognizing Jesus as the Son of God: "And *whenever* the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.'" (Mark 3:11). The demoniac in Mark 1:24 declares, "I know who you are – the Holy One of God." The Gerasene demoniac cries out, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" (Mark 5:7) Luke similarly records, "And demons came out of many, crying, 'You are the Son of God!' But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ." (Luke 4:41).

It is not just that one or two of the demoniacs recognised Jesus' identity (though that would be significant in itself). *As a rule*, the demoniacs knew that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. This is particularly noteworthy in Mark's Gospel because of his emphasis on the so-called Messianic secret. Jesus discourages people from revealing his identity. Moreover, in the Markan narrative, no human being confesses that Jesus is the Christ until Peter's confession in Mark 8:29. No human being (apart from demoniacs) confesses that Jesus is the Son of God until the centurion at the cross (Mark 15:39; cf. Mark 14:62). Prior to these confessions, it is only God (Mark 1:11; 9:7) and the demoniacs who recognise Jesus as the Son of God. While it may be suggested that the demoniacs surmised from the reports about Jesus that he was the Son of God, *in the Markan narrative context*, their knowledge is unmistakably supernatural. Mark portrays

---

<sup>137</sup> Langton 1949: 158-159.

<sup>138</sup> Sanders 1995: 158.

the demons as having supernatural knowledge. This, position, of course, is not exclusive to Mark: Davies and Allison state, with reference to Matt. 8:29,

The demons, like the devil, (4.3, 6), have supernatural knowledge: they know Jesus' true identity without being told (cf. Mk 3.11; 5.7; Lk 4:41; Acts 16.17). Contrast 9.27, where the disciples still wonder who Jesus is.<sup>139</sup>

As Bock states succinctly with reference to Luke's Gospel, "The world of spirits knows who Jesus is."<sup>140</sup>

This is actually another point of continuity with contemporary demonology, as noted by Keener (commenting on Mark 1:24):

Ancients often recognized that demons had access to supernatural knowledge; it is not surprising that these demons perceive Jesus' true identity, which the people there still do not recognize.<sup>141</sup>

Twelftree, however, argues that the demoniacs did not possess supernatural knowledge. He states:

A case has been made to show that what the demon(iacs) said in their consternation as they confronted Jesus, was not the result of supernatural knowledge but what any demon(iac) might have said when facing a well-known powerful Jewish exorcist. What the demon(iac)s were doing – despite how it was understood later, even by Mark – was not intentionally declaring Jesus' messiahship. Instead they were, through naming and attempting to bind Jesus, trying to defend themselves by disarming their adversary.<sup>142</sup>

Twelftree notes how this technique of the demons parallels other spiritual power encounters in ancient literature, and in this respect it is further confirmation of the continuity between the demonology of the Synoptic Gospels and that of the broader world. It should be noted that Twelftree acknowledges that *Mark* understood the demons to possess supernatural knowledge; however, he does not regard *Mark* as historically accurate at this point. Instead, he thinks that 'Son' in Mark 3:11 and 5:7 is a Markan redaction and that the demoniacs actually addressed Jesus with the less precise 'holy one of God' terminology of Mark 1:24, which he does not consider to be Messianic. In this writer's view, it is more likely that the demon(iac)s did address Jesus in Messianic terms and, in any case, this is what the Synoptic writers portray to the reader.

Watkins, a Christadelphian writer, suggests that the demoniacs were compelled by the Spirit of God to make "elevated utterances."<sup>143</sup> However, aside from stating Christ's true identity there is nothing elevated about these utterances: "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" (Matt. 8:29). Moreover, if Jesus recognised that the demoniac's utterance was inspired by the Spirit of God, it is unlikely that he would have "rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent...'" (Mark 1:25).

---

<sup>139</sup> Davies & Allison 2004: 81.

<sup>140</sup> Bock 1994a: 438.

<sup>141</sup> Keener 1993: 138.

<sup>142</sup> Twelftree 1985: 63.

<sup>143</sup> Watkins 1971: 33.

It is very difficult to account for the Synoptic writers' ascription of supernatural characteristics to the demon(iac)s if they did not regard demon possession as a supernatural phenomenon. Hence this feature of the Synoptic accounts creates a major problem for the accommodation theory.

### 6.6. A general saying about unclean spirits

Matthew and Luke both record the following saying:

24 When an unclean spirit goes out of a person, it passes through waterless places looking for rest but not finding any. Then it says, 'I will return to the home I left.' 25 When it returns, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. 26 Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there, so the last state of that person is worse than the first. (Luke 11:24-26 NET)

The opening line of this saying, "When an unclean spirit goes out of a person..." implies that what follows is the typical behaviour of an unclean spirit. It thus appears to presuppose the reality of demon possession and exorcism. We have already noted that this saying contains two features which show continuity with the demonology of the ancient world: the reference to unclean spirits inhabiting waterless places, and the reference to 'seven' spirits.

Is this saying a parable? Stein includes it in a list of "possible parables."<sup>144</sup> Hultgren does not treat it in his commentary on Jesus' parables, suggesting that he does not regard it as a parable.<sup>145</sup> Bock, commenting on the Lukan version, refers to it as a parable.<sup>146</sup> Turner, commenting on the Matthean version, refers to it as a "parabolic passage."<sup>147</sup>

In truth, however, this saying is problematic for accommodationists whether it is a parable or not. If it is *not* a parable then, as discussed above, it clearly presupposes the existence of unclean spirits. It is then possible that it represents an accommodation, but why would Jesus make an unsolicited statement about unclean spirits when his aim was to merely accommodate, to contain or even to subvert existing beliefs?

What then if the saying is a parable?

Stein states,

**"The parables of Jesus use everyday scenes and experiences,** and although at times they exhibit unusual features, they are understandable in the light of everyday experiences."<sup>148</sup>

Again, Hultgren states,

**The subject of the parables is typically the familiar of everyday life:** men and women working, losing, and finding; fathers and sons in strained and joyous

---

<sup>144</sup> Stein 1981: 25.

<sup>145</sup> Hultgren 2002.

<sup>146</sup> Bock 1994b: 1091.

<sup>147</sup> Turner 2008: 327.

<sup>148</sup> Stein 1981: 41. Emphasis added.

relationships; kings, rich men, and slaves in stereotypical roles; domestic animals, seeds, plants, vineyards, leaven, and the like.<sup>149</sup>

Hence, even if this is an allegorical parable and the unclean spirits symbolize something unrelated to the demonic, the fact that Jesus used a description of the typical behaviour of unclean spirits as a parable show that he regarded this description as familiar and uncontroversial. Certainly he would have given his audience this impression; and it is difficult to see why, if he sought to merely accommodate, or even to subvert, their belief in demons. Jesus was not compelled to use such an illustration; he chose to do so himself.

It does seem probable that, given his positioning of the parable and his inclusion of the words, “So also will it be with this evil generation,” Matthew understands the parable as an allegory in which the ‘person’ represents the nation. Nevertheless, Matthew still regards the departure of the unclean spirit from the ‘person’ as representing Jesus’ exorcism ministry.<sup>150</sup>

Bock lists four views on the referent of the imagery of the restless spirit in Luke’s version:

1. It is a figurative reference to people who do not respond to Jesus. Such a person is symbolically pictured as someone who has received exorcism but has put nothing positive in its place...
2. It is the result of a general exorcism, like that which Jesus and the disciples perform. Jesus is referring to the danger of experiencing an exorcism and then not following it up with faith. There is no symbol in this view...
3. More specifically, Jesus is warning those who expose themselves to the work of Jewish exorcists and do not respond in faith that they leave themselves vulnerable to a worse condition (Grundmann 1963: 239-240). Jesus here reverses the Beelzebub charge (11:15). In a variation, Marshall (1978: 479) argues that the point is to warn Jewish exorcists that to exorcize without offering a positive alternative is a fruitless, even dangerous exercise.
4. Looking to the Matthean reference about the wicked generation, the reference is directed against Israel as a nation. Israel is in danger of coming under demonic control and entering a worse condition<sup>151</sup>

Bock regards view 4 as unlikely since there is no corporate reference in Luke. “This does not mean that Matthew’s reading is different from Luke’s, as much as it suggests that Luke is not as comprehensive as Matthew.” He further argues, “That exorcisms were not regarded only symbolically in ancient times but as real events, speaks against a figurative reference (view 1).” (To this we can add that this saying was preceded by a real exorcism event and a discussion about actual demons – Luke 11:14-22.) Bock regards the choice between views 2 and 3 as difficult, but opts for view 2.

In agreeing with Bock that views 2 and 3 are the most plausible in the Lukan case, we can observe that both of these views entail that the unclean spirits in the saying are not symbolic but literal. In either of these cases, both the illustration and its meaning presuppose a belief in demons.

---

<sup>149</sup> Hultgren 2002: 9. Emphasis added.

<sup>150</sup> Turner 2008: 327.

<sup>151</sup> Bock 1994b: 1091-1092.

Strauss, in the passage quoted earlier in the document, made this text the lynchpin of his argument against accommodation, saying that it sufficed “to remove every thought of a mere accommodation on the part of Jesus.”<sup>152</sup> He noted that Luke’s positioning of the saying immediately after the Beelzebub controversy “is a proof that he at least understood Jesus to speak literally – of real demons.”<sup>153</sup> He further stated that the figurative interpretation advocated by the majority of theologians of his day appeared “to be founded in an aversion to ascribe to Jesus so strongly developed a demonology, as lies in his words literally understood.”<sup>154</sup>

### **6.7. Training and allowing others to exorcise**

It is this last line of evidence which helped persuade Langton that the accommodation theory was untenable. He stated, in words quoted earlier,

Not only did Jesus fail to correct or deny those beliefs; throughout His ministry, by word and deed, He also emphasized them, and solemnly conferred upon His disciples the power to cast out evil spirits.<sup>155</sup>

Indeed, we read in the Gospels of two separate occasions on which Jesus sent out his disciples on a mission which prominently featured exorcism. On the first occasion it was his inner circle of twelve disciples that he sent out:

“And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” (Luke 9:1-2; cp. Mark 6:7-13; Matt. 10:1ff)

Mark confirms that the disciples “cast out many demons” (Mark 6:13).

The second mission included seventy-two (or seventy) others. In this case the instructions did not explicitly contain an instruction to engage in exorcism. However, the account of the disciples’ return from the mission shows that, for them, their exorcisms were the most memorable part of the trip!

The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:17-20 ESV)

Jesus’ response demonstrates that, not only does he fully endorse and celebrate their success in exorcism, but as noted earlier he adds theological significance by linking it to the defeat of Satan (cf. the parable of the strong man).

Clearly, Jesus did not merely tolerate being regarded by others as an exorcist, as he might have done in the interest of accommodation. He actively encouraged his disciples to exorcize demons,

---

<sup>152</sup> Strauss 1846: 241.

<sup>153</sup> Strauss 1846: 242.

<sup>154</sup> Strauss 1846: 243.

<sup>155</sup> Langton 1949: 160.

celebrated when they did so successfully, and even coached them when they failed (Mark 9:28-29).

We further need to draw attention to a surprising exchange between Jesus and John:

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:38-40 ESV)

Here we have reference to someone who was apparently not a disciple of Jesus but who was conducting exorcisms in his name. Even if it is alleged (albeit with no evidence) that Jesus had given his own disciples special instructions to the effect that 'demons' weren't *really* demons and exorcisms weren't *really* exorcisms, it is highly unlikely that this 'someone' had received such instructions. It is virtually certain that this unknown exorcist believed in demons. In spite of this, Jesus not only endorsed the man's practice, but described it as a "mighty work"! This is very difficult to explain if Jesus sought only to accommodate belief in demons, and nigh impossible to explain if he sought to subvert belief in demons.

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1. Summarising the argument

To wrap up the argument we may draw a comparison, which accommodationists themselves sometimes make, between 'demoniacs' and epileptics or, as the KJV renders them, 'lunatick'. The argument that is made from this comparison goes as follows:

English has the word "lunatic" to describe someone who is mentally ill. Literally it means one who is "moon struck". It was once believed that if a person went out walking at night when there was a clear moon, they could get struck by the moon and become mentally ill (cp. Mt. 17:15). We use that word "lunatic" today to describe someone who is ill, but it does not mean that we believe mental illness is caused by the moon. If our words were written down and re-read in 2,000 years' time, people might think we believed that the moon caused illness; but they'd be wrong because we are just using the language of our day, as the Lord Jesus did 2,000 years ago. The New Testament likewise reflects this association between the moon and mental illness. "They brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, and those which were lunatick, and paralytics; and He healed them" (Mt. 4:24 A.V.). The repetition of the word "and..." gives the impression that every kind of illness-physical and mental, understood and not understood- was healed by the Lord Jesus. "Lunatick" translates the Greek selēniazomai- "to be moon struck", derived from the noun selēnē, the moon. It's not true that some mental illnesses come from being moon-struck. But the idea is used, without correction - just as the idea of 'demon possession' is in the preceding phrase.<sup>156</sup>

---

<sup>156</sup> Heaster 2012: 277.

Now, the Greek verbs *selēniazomai* and *daimonizomai* share an etymological similarity: one literally means ‘moon struck’ and the other means ‘demon struck’. However, when we look at the usage of the terms and associated concepts in the New Testament, the similarities cease.

The word *selēniazomai* occurs only twice in the New Testament, both in Matthew. It is used by a man to describe his son’s affliction (Matt. 17:15), and by Matthew in a summary statement about Jesus’ healings (Matt. 4:24). The word is never attributed to Jesus himself. In Matthew 17, Jesus heals the ‘moon-struck’ boy, not by rebuking the moon, but by *rebuking the demon* (Matt. 17:18). This suggests at least the possibility that what this man regarded as having been caused by the moon, Jesus recognised as demonic. No theological significance is attached to being ‘moon-struck’, and no reference whatsoever is made to the moon, or any other astronomical phenomena, in association with this word. It is possible that Matthew himself regarded epilepsy as actually having been caused by the moon, but this is not proven by his mere use of the word *selēniazomai*. It may simply be that he referred to this particular type of affliction using the terminology of the day. Thus, it is plausible that the use of the word *selēniazomai* represents accommodation on Matthew’s part.

By contrast, consider the word *daimonizomai*. This word occurs 13 times in the New Testament. Like *selēniazomai*, it is used predominantly in narration (Matt. 4:24; 8:16; 8:28; 8:33; 9:32; 12:22; Mark 1:32; 5:15; 5:16; 5:18; Luke 8:36), and when spoken by characters in the story, the speaker is not Jesus or one of his disciples (Matt. 15:22; John 10:21). However, on several occasions, when someone is described as ‘demon-struck’, *demons or unclean spirits themselves are explicitly mentioned in the context, and Jesus responds by expelling the demon* (Matt. 8:31-32; 9:33; 12:24; Mark 5:2; 5:8; 5:13; Luke 8:27; 8:29; 8:30; 8:33). This goes far beyond the mere use of terminology or phenomenological language. The context in which the word is used clearly demonstrates that the Synoptic writers did actually regard these people as ‘demon-struck’. Moreover, we can recount the other arguments against accommodation here:

- (i) The Synoptic Gospels clearly distinguish between cases that are demonic and cases that are not
- (ii) The way the demons are described corresponds with the beliefs of the ancient world
- (iii) The exorcism techniques employed by Jesus correspond in several important respects to the incantations known to have been used by other exorcists of the age
- (iv) Jesus attached great theological significance to his exorcisms and those of his disciples
- (v) The demon possession accounts contain details which require supernatural ability on the part of the demon(iac)
- (vi) Jesus gives a general saying or parable about the operations of unclean spirits, which suggests he regarded this as the stuff of everyday life
- (vii) Jesus encourages and coaches his disciples on casting out demons

Finally, in spite of all of the above, the Synoptic writers express not even the slightest doubt about the real existence of demons, nor the slightest hint that their references to demons and exorcism are ironic. They never distinguish the beliefs of Jesus and his disciples from the beliefs of their contemporaries on this subject.

The main arguments which are advanced in favour of the accommodation theory are deeply flawed arguments from silence.

Ultimately, however, it is difficult to disprove the accommodation theory, because a theory of this kind cannot easily be falsified. No matter what Jesus said or did, a resolute accommodationist will say he was simply accommodating the beliefs of those around him, or

was being ironic. However, having reviewed the evidence, the choice before us can be stated like this:

Either Jesus was an exceptional *actor*, or an exceptional *exorcist*.

Anyone who said the things that Jesus said, and did the things that Jesus did, *about* demons, *to* demoniacs, either believed fervently in the reality of demons, or else went to great theatrical lengths to disguise his own true beliefs. The idea that Jesus was essentially putting on an act in order to accommodate, however, is rendered extremely improbable by Jesus' teaching concerning hypocrites. As Batey explains,

The Greek word ὑποκριτής denotes a stage actor... The pervasiveness of ὑποκριτής in the Synoptic tradition and its virtual absence from the LXX imply a firsthand knowledge by Jesus of the dramatic actor, who assumed a role and identity that were not truly his own and performed for the audience's approval... Hypocrites in Jesus' teaching consistently refer to those lacking integrity, whose real motives and actions do not correspond.<sup>157</sup>

Given the harshness with which Jesus excoriated the scribes and Pharisees for 'play-acting' in their religious lives, it is unthinkable that he himself would compromise his integrity and engage in such 'play-acting' in order to avoid stating his position on the reality of demon possession.

Only one conclusion is possible: *Jesus, his disciples, and the Synoptic Evangelists all sincerely believed in the reality of demons, possession, and exorcism.*

What then are we to make of the accommodation theory? It is a classic example of theologically motivated 'eisegesis' (reading one's own ideas into the text). The sentiment that lies behind it is well described by the following two writers:

Thus to attempt to convince men on the basis of the Gospel evidence that Jesus believed in demons is only to offend the sensibilities of some who think it impossible that he should have believed something that they do not believe.<sup>158</sup>

for some time now the idea of demon possession has been alien to the viewpoints of both liberal and conservative interpreters of his ministry. We do not believe in Satan and demons; surely Jesus could not have done so either!<sup>159</sup>

## **7.2. Theological implications**

What are the theological implications of this study? In the first place, since we have answered 'Yes' to Q1 as formulated in the introduction, we are now faced with Q1Y: Were Jesus and his followers correct in their beliefs about demons or were they mistaken? That is, we must now choose between the reality theory and the error theory.

An investigation of the empirical evidence for demon possession and exorcism today ought to play a role in this decision, since it will be of little practical significance if these phenomena do

---

<sup>157</sup> Batey 1984: 563-564.

<sup>158</sup> Slaten 1920: 372.

<sup>159</sup> Hiers 1974: 35.

not exist today. There is academic literature claiming that such empirical evidence does exist, which the reader may wish to consult.<sup>160</sup>

Whatever decision is taken, it will be useful to reflect on the possible theological implications of each theory.

### **(i) The reality theory**

If the reality theory is correct, then the exorcistic practices of Jesus and the early church should continue to be normative for the church even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Spiritual discernment must be exercised to identify cases of demon possession and exorcism should be used conservatively as a last resort when clinical therapies have failed. Exorcism should not be done haphazardly but should be a structured ministry within the church which is carefully monitored to prevent abuse (the Roman Catholic Church's model appears to be sound in this respect). In particular, following the New Testament pattern *no exorcist should ever harm a subject*.

A further implication of the reality theory is that in church missions among peoples for whom belief in evil spirits remains prevalent, stories of possession and oppression by spirits should be taken seriously. The correct and biblical response in such contexts is not to dismiss the stories as nonsense, but to invoke the name and power of Jesus Christ over all such spirits. This in no way conflicts with the good and wholesome objective of promoting science education and practicing Western medicine.

### **(ii) The error theory**

If the error theory is correct, then the exorcistic practices of Jesus and the early church should no longer be normative for the church today. Exorcism may still be called in situations where a psychiatric patient strongly believes that he or she is demon-possessed and where the power of suggestion might prove therapeutic.

Proponents of the error theory may view exorcism in the church with skepticism and suspicion. However, if the proponents are Christians, they would be unwise to pass judgment too harshly on their fellow believers who adhere to the reality theory, since to do so would be by implication to pass judgment on Christ. It may be protested that our Lord was born into a pre-scientific age and could not have known better, while we today have no excuse. That may be true in London or Dallas, but it is not true throughout much of the developing world, where the majority of the population have a belief in spirits deeply ingrained in their worldview. Could anyone blame a pastor in an East African village for responding to a case of apparent possession by emulating the methods he has read about in the Gospel of Mark?

Another profound implication of the error theory is that it calls into question the literal truth value of Jesus' other actions and deeds. If Jesus was mistaken about demon possession, which played such an important role in his ministry, what else might he have been mistaken about? Can we still, for instance, trust his eschatological predictions about the Son of Man coming with the holy angels? Such a critical approach to the teachings of Jesus has led many to gut the historic doctrines of the church in the interest of scientific rationalism.

---

<sup>160</sup> See, for example, Peck (1983), a Harvard-educated psychiatrist who became convinced of the reality of demon possession after witnessing two exorcisms; Betty (2005); Twelftree 1985: 135-170; Appendix B of Keener (2011); Dow (1980).

Finally, the error theory has christological implications. Langton was prepared to ascribe error to Jesus with respect to his demonology because he felt this was consistent with an authentic doctrine of Christ's humanity.<sup>161</sup> He draws a comparison with Christ's ignorance of the date of his Parousia (Matt. 24:36), but the analogy is weak. In that instance Christ *professed* his ignorance, whereas in the matter of evil spirits his behaviour uniformly gave the impression that he possessed profound knowledge and expertise. To Christian proponents of the error theory I would pose the following question: is your faith in the consensus of the modern scientific and medical establishment such that you would sooner impute error to your Lord than to it?

### **(iii) The benign accommodation theory**

The implications of the benign accommodation theory are fairly similar to those of the error theory. If we do not believe in demons and we don't think Jesus did either, we will not see much warrant for an exorcism ministry in the church.

However, if Jesus and his earliest followers were willing to accommodate a belief in demons and behave as though they shared it, then those in the church who are privy to the non-reality of demons also have a clear mandate to be gentle and patient with those who believe in demons. It would be difficult to mount an argument for abolishing exorcism in contexts where belief in evil spirits is prevalent since this would run directly counter to Jesus' approach.

The benign accommodation theory also opens the door to excess, like the error theory does. Just as the errorist may ask, 'What other teachings of Jesus were mistaken?' the benign accommodationist may ask, 'What other teachings of Jesus were mere accommodation to the ignorance of his contemporaries?' As we saw earlier, some scholars such as Semler have answered this question with quite a lengthy list.

### **(iv) The subversive accommodation theory**

It will be useful here to quote once again Burke's view on the significance of belief in demons:

Christadelphians would agree that the correct understanding of satan and demons is an important issue in the understanding of the gospel – a critical issue, in fact, since a belief in demons contradicts the gospel's message of monotheism.<sup>162</sup>

The implications of this statement are sweeping. It implies that those who believe in demons (including the vast majority of Christians down through the ages) have misunderstood a critical component of the gospel and are in effect polytheists. In practice, this means that proponents of the subversive accommodation theory ought to oppose exorcism in any form. What is more, they ought to move vigorously to teach those who believe in demons the error of their ways. How should they do so? If they are to follow the Master's example, they will not make any clear, straightforward statement about their non-belief in demons. Instead, they will act as though they do believe in demons but use irony to insinuate the truth of the matter. Of course, proponents of the subversive accommodation theory do not take the ironic approach but instead declare plainly and emphatically the non-existence of demons! That they themselves are unwilling to use the tactics they impute to Jesus suggests that they are aware it is simply not a viable pedagogical method.

---

<sup>161</sup> Langton 1949: 159.

<sup>162</sup> Burke 2007: 99.

Subversive accommodationists must likewise ask the 'What else?' question. If Jesus' words and deeds in one area are shown to be ironic, whereby he in fact regards as heretical what he appears to endorse, then in what other areas might the church have failed to detect his irony to disastrous effect?

But what if the subversive accommodation theory is wrong, and one of the other theories is correct (i.e. one of the theories espoused by nearly all biblical expositors past and present)? This too would have profound implications. If the benign accommodation theory is correct, then subversive accommodationists have been describing as a critical misunderstanding of the gospel something that Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists were willing to tolerate. If either the reality theory or the error theory is correct, then subversive accommodationists have been describing as a critical misunderstanding of the gospel *something that Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists believed*. This is a sobering thought and one hopes that anyone who has previously been adhering to this theory would reexamine their ideas urgently.

This subject is not an easy or simple one, but it is evident from the above that the theological and practical implications are profound. May the Lord grant us wisdom, insight and mercy as we seek to understand His Word and put it into practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## References

- Arnold, C. E. (1989). *Ephesians, Power and Magic: the concept of power in Ephesians in light of its historical setting*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aune, D.E. (1995). 'Demonology'. In G.W. Bromiley (Ed.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: A-D*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Baggett, J. (2008). *Seeing through the eyes of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Baldick, C. (2008). 'Irony.' *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Batey, R.A. (1984). Jesus and the Theatre. *New Testament Studies*, 30(4), 563-574.
- Betty, S. (2005). The Growing Evidence for 'Demonic Possession': What Should Psychiatry's Response be? *Journal of Religion and Health*, 44(1), 13-30
- Bock, D.L. (1994). *Luke* (Vol. 1). Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Bock, D.L. (1994). *Luke* (Vol. 2). Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Bond, H. (2012). *The Historical Jesus: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: A&C Black.
- Bruner, F.D. (2004). *Matthew: The Churchbook* (Vol. 2). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Buchanan, C. (Ed.). (1975). Open Letter to the Archbishops, the Bishops, and the Members of the General Synod of the Church of England. *News of Liturgy*, 5, 8.
- Burke, J. (2007). Satan and Demons: A Reply to Anthony Buzzard. Retrieved from [http://www.dianoigo.com/writings\\_by\\_others/Satan\\_And\\_Demons.pdf](http://www.dianoigo.com/writings_by_others/Satan_And_Demons.pdf)
- Carson, D.A. (2005). Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture. In D.A. Carson & J. Woodbridge (Eds.), *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (pp. 1-48). Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Carson, D.A. (2010). Matthew. In T. Longman III & D.E. Garland (Eds.), *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Vol. 9) (1-670). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Casey, M. (2010). *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching*. London: A&C Black.
- Cohen, A. (2007). *Everyman's Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages*. Thousand Oaks: BN Publishing. (Originally published 1931).
- Davies, W.D. & Allison, D.C. (2004). *Matthew 8-18*. London: A&C Black.
- Dochhorn, J. (2013). The Devil in the Gospel of Mark. In E. Koskenniemi & I. Fröhlich (Eds.), *Evil and the Devil* (pp. 98-107). London: T&T Clark.
- Dow, G. (1980). The Case for the Existence of Demons. *Churchman*, 94, 199-209.
- Dunn, J.D.G. & Twelftree, G.H. (1980). Demon-Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament. *Churchman*, 94, 210-225.

- Dunn, J.D.G. (1997). *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians As Reflected in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Dunn, J.D.G. (2003). *Jesus Remembered*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Ehrman, B.D. (1999). *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farrar, T.J. (2014). The devil in the general epistles, part 1: Hebrews. Retrieved from [http://www.dianoigo.com/publications/The\\_Devil\\_in\\_the\\_General\\_Epistles\\_Part\\_1\\_Hebrews.pdf](http://www.dianoigo.com/publications/The_Devil_in_the_General_Epistles_Part_1_Hebrews.pdf)
- Farrar, T.J. (2014). The devil in the general epistles, part 3: 1 John. Retrieved from [http://www.dianoigo.com/publications/The\\_Devil\\_in\\_the\\_General\\_Epistles\\_Part\\_3\\_1John.pdf](http://www.dianoigo.com/publications/The_Devil_in_the_General_Epistles_Part_3_1John.pdf)
- Ferguson, E. (1984). *Demonology of the Early Christian World*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Heaster, D. (2012). *The Real Devil* (3rd ed.). Menai: Carelinks Publishing.
- Hiers, R.H. (1974). Satan, Demons, and the Kingdom of God. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 27(1), 35-47.
- Hultgren, A.J. (2002). *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Hurst, J.F. (1866). *History of Rationalism: Embracing a Survey of the Present State of Protestant Theology*. New York: Carlton & Porter.
- Keener, C.S. (1993). *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Keener, C.S. (2011). *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Köstenberger, A.J. (2009). *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Kovacs, J.L. (1995). 'Now Shall the Ruler of This World Be Drive Out': Jesus' Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20-36. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 114(2), 227-247.
- Kruse, C.G. (2004). *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction and Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Laato, A. (2013). The Devil in the Old Testament. In I. Fröhlich & E. Koskenniemi (Eds.), *Evil and the Devil* (pp. 1-22). Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- LaGrand, James. (1999). *The Earliest Christian Mission to 'All Nations' in the Light of Matthew's Gospel*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Langton, E. (1949). *Essentials of Demonology: a Study of Jewish and Christian Doctrine, Its Origin and Development*. London: Epworth Press.

- Licona, M.R. (2013). A New starting Point in Historical Jesus Research: The Easter Event. In J. van der Watt (Ed.), *The Quest for the Real Jesus: Radboud Prestige Lectures by Prof. Dr. Michael Wolter* (pp. 99-128). Leiden: Brill.
- Loewe, H. (1911). 'Demons and spirits (Jewish).' In J. Hastings, J.A. Selbie & L.H. Gray (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Vol. 4). Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Longman, T.E. (2013). 'Exorcism'. In T. Longman (Ed.), *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- McKnight, S. (1999). *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Meggitt, J. (2011). The historical Jesus and healing: Jesus' miracles in psychosocial context. In F. Watts (Ed.), *Spiritual Healing: Scientific and Religious Perspectives* (pp. 17-43). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meier, J.P. (1994). *A Marginal Jew* (Vol. 2). New York: Doubleday.
- Metzger, B.M. (1994). *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.
- Midelfort, H.C.E. (2012). The Gadarene Demoniac in the English Enlightenment. In E. Michelson, S.K. Taylor & M.N. Venables (Eds.), *A Linking of Heaven and Earth: Studies in Religious and Cultural History in Honor of Carlos M.N. Eire*. (pp. 49-66). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Ossa-Richardson, A. (2013). Possession or Insanity? Two Views from the Victorian Lunatic Asylum. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 74(4), 553-575.
- Peck, M.S. (1983). *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Penney, D.L. & Wise, M.O. (1994). By the Power of Beelzebub: An Aramaic Incantation Formula from Qumran. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 113(4), 627-650.
- Piper, R. (2000). Satan, Demons and the Absence of Exorcisms in the Fourth Gospel. In D.G. Horrell & C.M. Tuckett (Eds.), *Christology, Controversy, and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole* (pp. 253-278). Leiden: Brill.
- Pullum, S.J. (2011). Exorcising Evil: The Bible and Psychology on Demon Possession. In J.H. Ellens (Ed.), *Explaining Evil* (Vol. 3) (pp. 144-163). Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Reiser, W.E. (2000). *Jesus in Solidarity with his People: A Theologian looks at Mark*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
- Resseguie, J.L. (2005). *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

- Sanders, E.P. (1995). *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. London: Penguin U.K.
- Sanders, E.P. (2002). Jesus, Ancient Judaism, and Modern Christianity: The Quest Continues. In P. Fredriksen & A. Reinhartz (Eds.), *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism* (pp. 31-55). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Schaper, J. (2005). 'Demon/Devil'. In E. Kessler & N. Wenborn (Eds.), *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seely, P.H. (1991). The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I: The Meaning of *raqia'* in Gen 1:6-8. *Westminster Theological Journal*, 53(2), 227-240.
- Slaten, A.W. (1920). Did Jesus believe in demons? *The Biblical World*, 54(4), 371-377.
- Smith, D.M. (1995). *The Theology of the Gospel of John*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sorensen, E. (2002). *Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament and Early Christianity*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Sparks, K. (2004). The Sun Also Rises: Accommodation in Inscripturation and Interpretation. In V.E. Bacote, L.C. Miguez & D.L. Okholm (Eds.), *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics* (pp. 112-132). Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Stein, R.H. (1981). *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Stein, R.H. (2008). *Mark*. Baker Academic.
- Strauss, D.F. (1846). *The Life of Jesus* (Vol. 2). (G. Eliot, Trans.). London: G. Allen & Company. (Original work published 1836).
- Stuckenbruck, L.T. (2008). Jesus' Apocalyptic Worldview and His Exorcistic Ministry. In G.S. Oegema & J.H. Charlesworth (Eds.), *The Pseudepigrapha and Christian Origins: Essays from the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* (pp. 68-86). London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Stuckenbruck, L.T. (2013). The Demonic World of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In I. Fröhlich & E. Koskenniemi (Eds.), *Evil and the Devil* (pp. 51-70). Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Sweet, L.M. (1915). 'Demon; Démoniac; Demonology'. In J. Orr (Ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Sykes, A.A. (1737). *An Enquiry Into the Meaning of Demoniacs in the New Testament*. London: J. Roberts.
- Thiessen, G. (1991). *The open door: variations on biblical themes*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Turner, D.L. (2008). *Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

- Twelftree, G.H. (1985). *Christ Triumphant: exorcism then and now*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Twelftree, G.H. (1993). *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Twelftree, G.H. (2007). *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism among Early Christians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Twelftree, G.H. (2010). 'Demons and Exorcism'. In C.A. Evans (Ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus*. London: Routledge.
- Unger, M.F. (1994). *Biblical Demonology: A Study of Spiritual Forces at Work Today*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications.
- Van der Loos, H. (1965). *The Miracles of Jesus*. Leiden: Brill.
- Van Oyen, G. (2011). Demons and Exorcisms in the Gospel of Mark. In N. Vos & W. Otten (Eds.), *Demons and the Devil in Ancient and Medieval Christianity* (pp. 99-116). Leiden: Brill.
- Watkins, P. (1971). *The Devil – the Great Deceiver: Bible teaching on sin and salvation*. Birmingham: The Christadelphian Magazine & Publishing Association Limited.
- Wessel, W.W. & Strauss, M.L. (2010). Mark. In T. Longman III & D.E. Garland (Eds.), *Expositor's Bible Commentary (Vol. 9) (671-989)*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Wilson, M. (1975). Exorcism: A clinical/pastoral practice which raises serious questions. *The Expository Times*, 86(10), 292-295.