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Ancestor Worship and the Gadarene Demoniacs

Introduction

In his homily on Jesus's healing of the Gadarene demoniacs in Matt 8:28-9:1, John Chrysostom (AD 349-407) asks why the two demoniacs loved to dwell in the tombs (*Hom.* Matt 28:3). For Chrysostom, the answer to this question does not lie in the text. In fact, Chrysostom avoids answering his own question and instead takes the opportunity to strongly lambast from a theological and experiential perspective the idea that the souls of the dead become demons. He questions the popular-level belief that sorcerers kill children in order to have their souls assist them and asks on what basis one can actually know that the child's spirit is with the sorcerer. He describes the view that souls of the dead become demons as a "pernicious opinion," wrong because, as we all know, the souls of the recently deceased righteous immediately depart to be with God in heaven, or to hell if unrighteous. He asserts that demons are in fact not the souls of the dead but instead evil spirits that have taken on the personae of the deceased.

The question remains, Why did the demoniacs love to dwell in the tombs? Chrysostom most likely avoided answering this own question from the narrative itself because he knew that many 4th century Christians understood demons to be the spirits of the dead and associated them with tombs. If this was the case with his 4th century Christian audience, we can only conclude that there would have been a very high possibility that first-century pagan hearers of Jesus's healing of the Gadarene demoniacs would have understood the association of demons with tombs as relating to ancestor worship in some way. As such, the purpose of this article is to review the portrayal of ancestor worship in ancient sources

and then to ask how the account of Jesus healing the two Gadarene demoniacs might have been understood by first-century ancient holders of such beliefs. The selection of sources is necessarily restricted due to the brief nature of this article.

Ancestor Worship: A Core Belief in Graeco-Roman Culture

In his 1864 masterpiece, *La Cité antique,* Numa Denis Fustel de Coulange argued that ancestor worship represented a core belief that shaped the religious practices, laws, and institutions of ancient Greece and Rome (2006). Fustel Coulange recognizes that within the ancient world there were multiple views as to the state of the dead. There is evidence that many Greeks or Romans believed in metempsychosis, the idea that the immortal spirit escaped one's body at death and migrated to animate another body (e.g., Plato, *Rep.* 10.619b-612d; Virgil, *Aen.* 6.714-750). Some believed that death represented the cessation of both body and spirit. This belief was a minority position held by a few philosophers and a section of Judaism (cf. Plutarch, *Mor.* 27-30). The majority of ancient Greeks and Romans, asserts Coulange, believed that while a few great men might ascend to a celestial abode, an idea first encountered in the poet Phocylides (possibly 6th century BC), the souls of most deceased persons did not pass into a foreign world, but continued to live underground near men (Cicero, *Tusc.*, 1.16; Euripides, *Alc.* 163). For Coulange, the key evidence for this belief are the rites of sepulture that indicate that when a body was buried, it was popularly believed that they were burying something living. This may indicate an answer to Chrysostom's question: Why did the demons love to dwell in the tombs?

Before turning to the rites of sepulture, it is necessary to first define some basic terms. Romans referred to anyone who died and inhabited the afterlife as a *mane* (Ausonius, *Parentalia* 16.1-12; *Epitaphs* 28; Seneca, *Oct.* 343). They were distinguished, however, between those *mane* which were the spirits of one's ancestors, which they called *lares*, and *parentes*, the spirits of one's immediate family—one's father and mother. The *lares* were represented in statue form and were kept in a cupboard in the home. Daily prayers were offered to them and regular festivals were held in their honor. Key to the focus of this article is Cicero's (106-43 BC) observation that "those that the Greeks called demons we call Lares" (*Tim.* 11; cf. Ovid, *Fast.* 2.614; Augustine, *De civ. Dei* 9.11). This link between *lares* and demons is crucial in that it opens up the possibility that many ancient auditors of the Gospel, especially those immersed within Graeco-Roman ancestor worship, would have heard the account of Jesus healing

the demoniacs as signalling his victory over malevolent ancestral spirits. We should add that even Josephus defines demons as spirits of the dead (*War* 7.185). Finally, the *lemures* were the spirits of those dead ancestors who had not enjoyed proper burial, funeral rites, or been buried in tombs. Due to their improper burial, they were typically malevolent wandering spirits that disturbed their living family members.

The Rites of Sepulture

The idea that burial involved the internment of something living is found throughout Greek and Roman sources (Virgil, *Aen.* 4.24-34). For example, in Virgil's (70-19 BC) description of the burial of Polydorus he recalls how Aeneas arrived in Thrace whereupon he set up an altar upon a mound of earth upon which a myrtle tree grew. The myrtle tree had branches that protruded from the ground like sharp spears. Aeneas proceeded to uproot one of the branches with which to decorate the altar, whereupon, to his horror, black blood started to ooze out from the end of the speer-like branch. Aeneas pulled out another branch and the same thing happened. Finally, he pulled out a third bleeding branch, at which point he was addressed by a voice from under the ground, the voice of the deceased Polydorus. Polydorus appealed to Aeneas for clemency and then claimed that the blood from the javelin-like branches was in fact his own blood resulting from his murder by Lycurgus the king of Thrace. He then advised Aeneas to flee Thrace for his own safety. Aeneas then conferred with his fellow travellers and they agreed to solemnize "fresh funeral rites" on behalf of the already dead Polydorus (*Aen*. 3:61). These rites included the heaping up of a fresh mound of earth and the erection of an altar to "his honored shade" (*stant Manibus arae*, 3.63). New milk and blood were then poured out on the ground and his soul laid in the tomb (3.63-68). Throughout this account the deceased Polydorus is assumed to be living in some sense (see also Homer, *Il.* 23.221). Proper burial involved the provision of appropriate food and shelter for this 'living' being. The expression used by Virgil to 'lay the soul in the tomb' was widely used in antiquity as a colloquial expression for burial. It is found in both Ovid and Pliny despite the fact that neither writer accepted this view of the living soul (Ovid, *Fast.* 5.451; Pliny, *Ep.* 7.27). In addition to inhumation, cremation was widely practiced in the ancient world, although there is little to indicate that this variation in practice indicated a different understanding of the dead.

In such situations the funeral ceremony was not performed to assuage the grief of the mourners but rather to ensure "the rest and happiness of the dead" (Coulange 2006:18). The rite included a number of steps,

described by Walter Burkett as "the laying out of the corpse, *prothesis*, the carrying out, *ekphora,* and the funeral proper with funerary sacrifices and a funerary banquet, which are taken up as the basis of a continuing grave cult" (1985:192). This rite indicates that it was necessary for the soul to be confined to a subterranean abode suited to its second life, and for this to occur the body to which it was attached had to be covered with earth. A failure to bury the body or an improper burial resulted in a wandering spirit that would restlessly search for an appropriate resting place. Such a wandering spirit was known as a *larva,* or phantom, a being that would wander without ever receiving the offerings and food it required. The result of such deprivation was that the spirit would become a malevolent spirit, a spirit that tormented the living. Such a spirit would inflict disease, disrupt harvests, and frighten the living by appearing to them as a ghostly apparition, warning the living to give sepulture to its body and to itself. Coulange claims that "all antiquity was persuaded that without burial the soul was miserable, and that by burial it became forever happy" (2006:17). Two examples illustrate this belief.

In his comedy *The Ghost,* Plautus (d. 184 BC) tells of a father who returns unexpectedly from a trip abroad. His son has been living a riotous life with his newly freed slave girl and fellow guests, and, in their panic at the father's return, lock the front door of the house and hid in silence. One of the household slaves welcomes the father home but warns him not to enter the house for the terrible reason that in the father's absence, they have discovered that the previous owner of the house had murdered a guest and hidden his body under the house. This improper burial procedure resulted in the soul of the murdered guest appearing to the son in terrifying visions, warning him to leave the house because it was cursed (*scelestae [hae] sunt aedes*, *impia est habitatio*, *Mostellaria* 504). The ruse works and the father leaves.

A second example of the effects of improper burial is found in Suetonius' (b. *ca.* AD 69) account of the burial of Gaius Caligula. Caligula, a despised and hated emperor, had been stabbed to death in his palace by, and accounts differ, either two tribunes or by a group of centurions (*Cal.* 58). His body was then secretly spirited out of the palace and partially burned on a hastily erected pyre in the gardens of the Lamian family. His charred body was then buried under a thin layer of turf. This improper burial is said, according to Suetonius, to have resulted in ghosts or shades (*umbris*) disturbing the caretakers of the garden and numerous fearsome apparitions in the building where he was murdered (*Cal.* 59). This situation was only rectified when his sisters, upon their return from exile, dug up his body, cremated it properly, and placed it in a tomb.

These two examples illustrate the fear that improper burial rites would result in wandering souls which would disturb the living and that specific rites were necessary to ensure that the souls of the dead were properly placed in and restricted to their tombs. The corollary of this rite was the possibility that through alternative rites, the spirits of the dead might be tempted out of their tombs.

The Festival of Feralia

Festivals for the dead played an important part of Graeco-Roman culture. The Roman festival of Feralia, held on February 21, marked the end of *Paternalia* (February 13-21), a nine-day festival honoring one's dead ancestors. An important source is Ovid's *Fasti* in which he provides a description, month by month, of the origins and rituals of the various festivals practiced by Romans. The work covers the first six months of the year (January to June) and it is uncertain as to whether Ovid (43 BC—AD 17) completed the final six months or whether they have been lost. Ovid's description of the festival, found in *Fast.* 2.533-616, sets out the purpose of the festival as to placate "the souls of your fathers" *Animas placate paternas* (2.533), to placate the shades (*sed et his placabilis umbra est*, 2.541), or to placate ghosts (*ultima placandis manibus illa dies*, 2.570). These acts of placation were achieved through the giving of gifts. Thankfully, Ovid tells us, the dead ancestors (*manes*) do not require costly gifts but rather attach greater significance to the motive in which the gifts were given. Acceptable gifts included "a tile wreathed with votive garlands, a sprinkling of corn, a few grains of salt, bread soaked in wine, and some loose violets, these are offerings enough" (2.537-539). These might be left on a potsherd in the middle of the road and were to be accompanied by prayers and appropriate words offered at hearths set up for this purpose. Ovid explains that these practices originated with Aeneus who offered offerings and prayers to the spirit of his deceased father (2.540-544).

Ovid warns that a failure to offer such rites occurred during a period of war when many funerals were held at the same time outside the walls of Rome (2.548-562). The result was that the spirits of Rome's dead ancestors left their tombs and roamed the streets of Rome, groaning and moaning and terrifying the inhabitants. As a result, the rites of ancestral worship were reinstated and a limit was set on the number of funerals that could take place at any one point in time. According to Ovid, weddings were prohibited during the festival of Feralia, although it is difficult to gauge how widespread this prohibition was respected. A brief allusion to the festival is also found in Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which he describes Andromache, the wife of dead Hector, "offering her yearly feast and gifts of mourning to

the dust, and calling the ghost to Hector's tomb," which consisted of a green mound of turf before which she had placed two altars (*Aen*. 3.300-305). Such accounts testify to a popular level of belief in the abiding presence of ancestral spirits and a belief that it was necessary to placate them with certain rites in order to enjoy their favor. The extent to which these beliefs were held was such that, according to Ramsay MacMullen, they heavily influenced early Christian beliefs and practices in Rome well into the fourth and fifth centuries AD (MacMullen 2010).

The Festival of Lamuria

A counterpart to the festival of Feralia was the festival of Lamuria, held in May, with the purpose to placate the *lemures*. Again, Ovid's *Fasti* is a key source (cf. *Fast*. 5.419-492). The ritual of Lamuria was performed at midnight by the head of the household after everyone had gone to bed, and dogs and fowl had quietened down. The head of the household would rise and make the sign of the *mano fica* (fig gesture) in case he might meet a malevolent spirit. The *mano fica* was an obscene gesture that represented the sexual union between a man and woman. The term *fico* is the Latin for fig, a term used for the female vulva. It was used to ward off the evil eye and demons in the belief that malevolent spirits were fearful of the idea of sex and would flee at the sign.

The head of the household would then wash his hands in clean spring water and then take a handful of black beans and throw them behind him, walking barefoot around the house, while repeating nine times the phrase, "These I cast; with these beans I redeem me and mine" *haec ego mitto, his redimo meque meosque fabis* (*Fast*. 5.437-438). It was believed that the malevolent spirits of the dead would follow behind and collect the beans. The master of the household, having attracted the spirits, would then touch water and clash bronze implements, imploring the spirits nine times to depart with these words, "Ghosts of my fathers, go forth!" *Manes exite paterni* (*Fast*. 5.473). This festival was celebrated on May 9, 11, and 13, and resulted in the belief that marriages solemnized in May would not last, expressed in the popular phrase, "Bad girls marry in May" *mense malas Maio nubere* (*Fast*. 5.490). In summary, such rites testify to a popular belief that improper burial practices or a failure to continually care for one's ancestors could result in them turning into malevolent spirits.

Providing for the Needs of Ancestral Spirits

Ancestor worship required the ongoing provision of physical food for the souls of the dead. Virgil tells of food left at altars placed before tombs

(*Aen.* 5.98; cf. Pausanias, *Descr.* 2.10.5). Ausonius' fourth century AD collection of epitaphs indicates that the feeding of one's ancestors was widely practiced:

> *On the Tomb of a Happy Man:* Sprinkle my ashes with pure wine and fragrant oil of spikenard; bring balsam too, O stranger, with crimson roses. Unending spring pervades my tearless urn: I have but changed my state, and have not died. I have not lost a single joy of my old life, whether you think that I remember all or none. (Ausonius, *Epitaphs* 31)

Euripides tells of a less appetizing meal offered to the ghost of the dead Achilles, who returned from his grave and demanded the death of Polyxana, the daughter of Priam the king of Troy (*Hecuba* 536-582). Polyxana had earlier become a confidant of the living Achilles and had revealed to her brothers, Paris and Deiphobus, the secret of Achille's weakness—his heel. They had then taken advantage of this knowledge and killed Achilles, shooting arrows into his heel. Polyxana, who had been captured by Achille's son Neoptolemus, permitted her throat to be cut in order for her blood to be offered as a libation offering to pacify the angry spirit of Achilles. While this story does not present a rite, it further attests to a basic belief that spirits of the deceased needed to be placated with libations.

Tombs as Temples for the Gods/Demons

Tombs functioned as the temples of ancestral spirits and often included an altar either before or above the tomb as the case with the temples to the gods. Suetonius describes how Nero was buried in a sarcophagus, which was placed in his family tomb with an altar of luna marble standing above it (*Nero* 50). Many tombs bore the inscription, *Dis Manibus Sacrum* ("to the sacred ghost-gods")*,* and in Greek, *theois chthoniois* ("to the gods of the nether world"). There is widespread literary evidence that many Greeks and Romans believed that souls of the deceased were in some sense divine (cf. Homer, *Il.* 1.222; 3.420; Augustine, *De civ. Dei* 8.23). Euripides (b. *ca.* 480s BC) recalls how Admetus, after the death of his wife Aclestis, a death necessitated in order that Apollo might prolong Admetus's life, was encouraged to honor her in death as a god:

> Let not the grave of your wife be regarded as the funeral mound of the dead departed but let her be honored as are the gods (*theoisi*), an object of reverence to the wayfarer. Someone walking a winding path past her tomb shall say, "This woman died in the stead of her husband, and now she is a blessed divinity (*makaira daimōn*). Hail, Lady, and grant us your blessing!" With such words will they address her. (Euripides, *Alc*. 995-1004)

Of particular interest in this passage is the way in which Euripides equates the dead Aclestis with the gods while also describing her as a "blessed demon." Clearly, the term 'demon' was not just a pejorative term as in the Gospels but was instead frequently used with reference to dead ancestors in a honorific manner that evoked divinity (cf. Philostratus, *Imag.* 1.5.16.). Support for this view is found in Euripides's statement that "there are many shapes of divinity (*tōn daimoniōn*), and many things the gods (*theoi*) accomplish against our expectation" (Euripides, *Alc*. 1160).

Plutarch (b. before AD 50, d. after AD 120) cites Varro as describing Roman sons as honoring "the tombs of their fathers even as they do the shrines of the gods; and when they have cremated their parents, they declare that the dead person has become a god at the moment when first they find a bone" (*Rom. Quest.* 14). To be declared a god upon one's death does not mean that one's character was suddenly transformed for the better, that sinners were miraculously transformed into godly saints. Rather, as one's character was during one's life, so it remained in death. The view that demons were ancestral spirits was not universally held. Socrates claimed that something "god-inspired (*theion*) and spirit-like (*daimonion*, literally, a divine power)" comes to him, starting when he was a boy, a warning voice in his head that functioned rather like the Christian conscience, alerting him of things he should not do (Plato, *Apol.* 31c-d, 40a). Dio Chrysostom (AD 40-120) tells the story in his *Fourth Discourse on Kingship* of Diogenes the Cynic warning Alexander the Great that he will never become king until he propitiates his attendant spirit (*prin an hilasē ton hautou daimona*, *4 Regn.* 75). The king reflects the popular understanding that a demon is a deity that would require sacrifices (*4 Regn.* 76). Diogenes 'corrects' Alexander by informing him that there are evil and good demons (*hoi ponēroi kai agathoi daimones*) but that these are nothing more than the guiding spirit of the owner, that is one's own character choices (*4 Regn.* 79-81). Diogenes's correction of Alexander's understanding may be taken, however, as further evidence of the widespread belief that demons were divine spirits, often associated with ancestors.

Jesus and the Gadarene Demoniacs

We return to Chrysostom's question, Why did the demoniacs dwell in the tombs? If this question is addressed in light of the evidence considered above, it seems reasonable to conclude that Matthew's account of Jesus casting out the demons from the Gadarene demoniacs would have been understood by many first-century readers within an ancestral spirits framework. Chrysostom was well aware of this possibility but tried to dismiss it (cf. Davies and Allison 1991:83). Before considering the account from this perspective, a clarificatory word about demons is necessary.

Demons are presented biblically as fallen angels rather than the spirits of dead ancestors. In Deut 32:17, for example, Israel is criticized for making Yahweh jealous by sacrificing "to demons (MT: *laššeḏim*; LXX: *daimoniois*), not God, [and] to deities (MT: ʾelōhim; LXX: *theois*) they had never known." The parallelism in this verse indicates a close association of demons with strange gods, which, in the wider context of Scripture, may be identified as fallen angels (cf. Isa 14:12-15; Rev 12:7-9). In this context, the numerous references to Jesus casting out demons should be interpreted as an indication that Israel was in a state of idolatry, under the control of strange deities. His exorcisms functioned as the equivalent to the actions of Old Testament judges or prophets who tore down the high places and cleansed Israel of foreign gods (cf. Judg 6:28-32).

In classical Greek usage there was a distinction between *daimonion*, a general reference to the manifestation of divine power, and the more specific *daimōn* which connotes a particular god or goddess. It is difficult to know whether this distinction is maintained in the New Testament. According to BDAG 2000:210, *daimonion*, which is found frequently in the Gospels, may refer to a particular god or goddess as well as to a hostile divinity or evil spirit. *Daimōn*, however, is only found in Matt 8:31 and, according to BDAG, refers specifically in that instance to an evil spirit.

1. *Gentile Demoniacs Dwelling Amongst the Tombs*: When Jesus entered the country of the Gadarenes, two men who are possessed by demons (*daimonizomenoi*, Matt 8:28) meet him. Matthew drops Mark's reference to unclean spirits (*en pneumati akathartō*, Mark 5:2; compare his use of 'impure in 5:8, 13) and ritual impurity and instead adopts demon-related language more common in Gentile usage (Wahlen 2004:122). The region seems to have been near the town of Gadara on the eastern side of Lake Galilee in the Gentile territory of the Decapolis. The Gentile nature of the region is affirmed later in the account by the presence of a herd of pigs, inconceivable in Jewish territory (Hill 1972:168; Luz 2001:24). The Evangelist describes the demoniacs as "coming out of the tombs" to meet Jesus (8:28). Contrary to Chrysostom's question, Matthew drops Mark's reference to them dwelling there (cf. Mark 5:3). The element of indeterminacy relating to their abode may possibly indicate that the improper burial rites were carried out with respect to these particular ancestral spirits. Alternatively, Matthew's omission may simply reflect his editorial practice of reducing Mark's more lengthy account. Whichever option is chosen, the association of the demoniacs with tombs, understood by Graeco-Romans as temples for the dead, would have affirmed for believers in ancestor worship that the two men were controlled by the spirits of their ancestors, by *manes* who normally dwelt in tombs in close proximity to the urns in which their bodies were interred (Burkert 1985:191).

2. *Fierce Demons*: The Evangelist describes the demons as very fierce (*chalepoi lian*), as controlling the surrounding region (Matt 8:28). The term *chalepos* indicates that they were a cause of great trouble or stress, intensely violent (cf. 2 Tim 3:1). Background sources indicate a certain ambiguity over why demons might be either good or bad. They were sometimes viewed as beneficial, as indicated by one rite recorded in a Greek magical papyri to attract demons: "A [daimon comes] as an assistant who will reveal everything to you clearly. And will be your [companion and] will eat and sleep with you" (*PGM* I.1-42 quoted in Betz 1992:3). They may alternatively turn troublesome as a result of the community's failure to follow correct burial rituals or to regularly honor the dead. Additionally, they may be malevolent simply because their behavior reflects the character of the deceased person. Either way, these two possibilities point to either a failure on the part of the wider community to honor their ancestors or a failure of some in the community to live virtuous lives. The demoniacs present a particular problem for the community in that they are described as permitting no one to "pass that way" (Matt 8:28). From an ancestor worship perspective, this was a particularly serious problem in that it would have inhibited the local community's ability to regularly honor the graves of their ancestors, leading to a downward spiral in relations between the communities of the living and the community of the dead.

3. *Jesus' One-Word Command*: The demoniacs confront Jesus, asking what he wants with them. Their tone is aggressive, shouting at him (*ekraxan*, Matt 8:29). They question Jesus' business with them, addressing him as Son of God, and asking whether he has come to torment them before the time. Their identification of Jesus as Son of God implies supernatural knowledge, an ability, from an ancestor worshipper's perspective, of one supernatural being to recognize another. In reply, Jesus says nothing. He performs no ritual. The mood of the demoniacs then changes from aggression to one of desperation, and supplication.

The demons (*daimones*) beg (*parekaloun*) Jesus to send them into the pigs feeding some distance away. Matthew's use of *daimōn* (evil spirit) instead of *daimonion* in v. 31, a hapax in the New Testament, is, according to Clinton Wahlen, a concession to the "Gentile-dominated locale since it was the more common term for demons in Hellenistic circles" (2004:122). From an ancestor worship perspective, this request would have been understood as the spirits of the dead seeking to remain in close physical proximity to their buried cadavers and deceased family members (8:31). In contrast to Mark's account in which Jesus enters into dialogue with the demons (Mark 5:8-9), in Matthew's account Jesus does not engage with them. Instead, he uses a single command, structurally at the heart of the account, the only word he utters throughout: *hypagete* "Go!" (Matt 8:32).

For ancestor worshippers this would have been highly surprising in that they were used to employing elaborate rituals and lengthy and repetitive incantations to control malevolent spirits (cf. Betz 1992:38, 301, 304). In the case of the demoniacs, all previous attempts to control them had failed (cf. Mark 5:3-4). In contrast, Jesus controls them with a single word, an indication of his complete mastery over them.

4. *A Community in Fear*: The demons depart into the pigs, who rush down the steep bank into the lake and perish (*apethanon*) in the water (Matt 8:32). There is some evidence for Jewish belief that spirits were afraid of water because it had purifying capabilities (Davies and Allison 1993:84). On the other hand, other sources indicate that some types of demons were associated with water. The Evangelist is silent either way on this issue. It is also unstated as to whether the demons die with the pigs (Luz 2001:25). Nevertheless, these actions would further signal to ancestor worshippers Jesus' complete mastery over malevolent ancestral spirits. They respond to his bidding.

The swineherds then announce to the local townsfolk what has happened. The "whole town" then came out to meet Jesus and begged (*parekalesan*) him, as the demons had begged him earlier, to leave their region (8:34). The reason for their communal request is not made explicit. It may have been out of fear, as in Mark 5:15 and Luke 8:35. Some suggest it was due to the economic implications of losing their livestock (Vledder 1997:197). Matthew is silent as to their motive. We may suppose, however, that from an ancestor worship perspective, the Gentile inhabitants of the town would not have believed that the drowning of the pigs would necessarily have resulted in the destruction of the demons. From their perspective, the demons, who had been so disrespected by Jesus, now inhabit the waters of Galilee. As such, they would have feared further trouble from the demons. The Evangelist finishes his account with these words: "And after getting into a boat [Jesus] crossed the sea and came to his own town" (Matt 9:1). From Jesus' perspective, the power of the demons has been broken, indicated by his ability to travel unhindered and undisturbed. Not even a storm disturbs his journey home.

Conclusion

In his account of the healing of the Gadarene demoniacs, the Evangelist does not argue against the existence of demons. Instead, he affirms Jesus's power over them. Jewish readers of the Gospel would likely have interpreted references to demons within a fallen-angel framework.

In contrast, many Gentiles and early Gentile Christians steeped in ancestor worship would have interpreted Jesus' exorcism as a

demonstration of his control and absolute power over ancestral spirits. John Chrysostom's deep concern that readers do not read the passage in such terms affirms the very likelihood of such readings. The fact that the exorcism occurs in Gentile territory and in the vicinity of tombs would have strongly affirmed such associations. Maybe this is why Chrysostom avoided directly appealing to Matthew's story as evidence against ancestral spirits. Instead of dissuading belief in ancestral spirits, he could have appealed to the text as strong evidence that Jesus is more powerful than such spirits. If he had taken this approach, the decision that believers in such spirits would have had to make was whether or not to permit the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus to replace their ancestor's spirits as the controlling spirit of their community.

Endnotes

[1] Elsewhere, Chrysostom describes how "many of the simpler sort" believe that those who die violent deaths turn into demons. Chrysostom, *Hom. Laz.* 6.235-236. Unless stated, quotations from Graeco-Roman sources are taken from LCL.

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