

Mental Illness and Demonic Possession: Historical and Theological Perspectives – *Brendon Naicker*

Abstract

The relationship between mental illness and demonic possession has long been debated in religious and medical circles. This paper investigates New Testament accounts of possession that share characteristics with contemporary understandings of mental illness. It investigates how Jesus' ministry addressed these issues holistically and compares it to modern medical interventions. By examining the relationship between spiritual deliverance and medical treatment, this study emphasises the importance of combining theological insights with scientific advances in addressing human suffering.

Introduction

Historically, mental illness was frequently linked to demonic possession, as evidenced by various biblical accounts. This viewpoint dominated ancient and mediaeval conceptions of human suffering. Today, psychiatry and neuroscience have largely replaced spiritual interpretations of mental illness, with a focus on brain chemistry, genetics, and environment. This shift raises important questions: Were there New Testament examples of possession cases involving mental illness that met modern standards? Do people suffering from similar afflictions today require spiritual deliverance, medical intervention, or both? This paper investigates these issues without advocating a specific approach, focussing instead on the intersection of spiritual and medical responses to human suffering.

Biblical Accounts: Possession or Illness?

The Gerasene Demoniac

The account of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20) is a vivid example of behaviour that may correspond to modern descriptions of severe mental illness. The man's violent tendencies, isolation, and self-harm are consistent with symptoms of psychotic disorders. Jesus' deliverance of the man from a "Legion" of demons, resulting in his sanity (Mark 5:15), was interpreted by first-century audiences as spiritual liberation.

Craig Keener observes that such accounts reflect the worldview of the time, where spiritual forces were seen as intrinsic to health and behaviour. From a modern perspective, this story could be reinterpreted as a case of psychosis or extreme trauma. However, the spiritual dimension in the text cannot be ignored, as it underpins the narrative's theological message of Christ's authority over evil.¹

¹ Mark 5:1–20; Keener, IVP Bible Background Commentary, 2014.

The Epileptic Boy

In Matthew 17:14-18, a boy described as "moonstruck" (traditionally interpreted as epileptic) is brought before Jesus. The symptoms—seizures and self-destructive behaviour—are consistent with epilepsy, but the Gospel explains his condition as demonic possession. Jesus rebukes the demon, and the boy is instantly healed.

R.T. France notes that the biblical narrative conflates physical ailments and spiritual affliction, a common perspective in ancient Jewish thought. This account underscores the difficulty of categorising such conditions within a purely medical or spiritual framework. It also raises questions about the interplay between spiritual deliverance and physical healing in cases where both dimensions may be involved.²

Jesus' Holistic Healing Ministry

Jesus' healing ministry emphasised the interconnectedness of physical, spiritual, and mental health. In Luke 4:18, He proclaims His mission to "set the oppressed free," integrating spiritual liberation with physical restoration. The healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 exemplifies this holistic approach: Jesus first forgives the man's sins, addressing spiritual reconciliation, before restoring his physical mobility.

N.T. Wright argues that Jesus' approach transcends modern compartmentalisation of ailments. For Jesus, healing was not merely about alleviating symptoms but restoring individuals to wholeness—physically, mentally, and spiritually. This integrated perspective challenges contemporary models of healthcare, which often neglect spiritual dimensions of well-being.³

Medical Interventions and Spiritual Deliverance

Modern psychiatry and psychology offer effective tools for diagnosing and managing mental illnesses. Medications like antipsychotics and antidepressants have revolutionised treatment, enabling many to lead functional lives. However, some theologians and practitioners question whether these interventions address the root causes of such conditions.

M. Scott Peck, a psychiatrist and Christian, suggests in *People of the Lie* that certain manifestations of mental illness may have spiritual origins. Peck advocates for a dual approach, combining medical treatment with spiritual discernment to address the complexities of human suffering.⁴

Critics of a purely medical approach argue that it often prioritises symptom management over holistic healing. Medication, for example, may help to stabilise neurochemical imbalances but not address underlying emotional or spiritual pain. Conversely, relying solely on spiritual

² Matthew 17:14-18; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007.

³ Luke 4:18; Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 2016.

⁴ Peck, *People of the Lie*, 1998.

interventions without taking into account medical advancements risks ignoring the physiological aspects of mental illness.

Medication and Spiritual Deliverance: Bridging the Gap

The distinction between medication and spiritual deliverance may be unnecessary when addressing the complexity of human suffering. Biblical accounts highlight how Jesus addressed both physical and spiritual dimensions, providing a model of holistic healing. In contrast, modern medicine offers tools unavailable in ancient times, yet its focus often shifts toward symptom management rather than comprehensive restoration. The Apostle Paul's exhortation to discernment—"so that you may approve what is excellent" (Philippians 1:9–10)—suggests the need for a balanced approach that integrates both theological insights and scientific understanding.

Contemporary Medical Approaches

Modern medicine has made remarkable advances in treating mental illnesses and physical conditions. However, the pharmaceutical industry's emphasis on profit-driven goals raises ethical concerns. Historically, medicines were derived from natural substances, many of which had fewer side effects and were used holistically. Today, synthetic drugs dominate the market, designed primarily to manage symptoms rather than address underlying causes.

For example, antidepressants, while effective in stabilising mood disorders, often come with significant side effects such as weight gain, fatigue, or dependency. Studies have shown that the focus of "Big Pharma" is frequently skewed toward creating long-term consumers rather than delivering curative solutions. Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, has criticised the industry for prioritising shareholder profits over patient care, noting that pharmaceutical innovations often favour treatments that generate the highest revenue rather than those with the greatest potential to heal.⁵

This contrasts starkly with the healing ministry of Jesus, whose acts of restoration went beyond symptom relief. For instance, in the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12), Jesus not only restored physical mobility but also forgave the man's sins, addressing spiritual and emotional dimensions of his suffering. N.T. Wright emphasises that Jesus' healings were not merely physical remedies but signposts of the kingdom of God, pointing to complete restoration of humanity's brokenness.⁶

The Shift from Natural to Synthetic Remedies

Traditional healing methods often relied on natural remedies, such as herbal treatments, which aimed to work in harmony with the body's processes. In ancient medicine, willow bark, a precursor to aspirin, was used to reduce pain and inflammation.⁷ Today, many

⁵ Horton, Richard. "Offline: The Crisis of Medicine and the Meaning of Life." *The Lancet* 391, no. 10137 (2018): 1178.

⁶ Wright, N.T. *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016.

⁷ Sneader, Walter. *Drug Discovery: A History*. Chichester: Wiley, 2005.

pharmaceutical solutions are synthetic derivatives that prioritise efficiency and mass production, sometimes at the expense of the body's long-term health.

Additionally, the practice of holistic care—once central to medicine—has been largely replaced by a compartmentalised approach. In contrast, Jesus' healing ministry operated with an understanding of the interconnectedness of the mind, body, and spirit. His actions demonstrated a care for the person as a whole, rather than isolating symptoms from the deeper spiritual and emotional realities of human experience.

Balancing Symptom Management and Holistic Restoration

Medication can provide stability and functionality, particularly for conditions like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression. However, it may fail to offer the holistic restoration exemplified in Jesus' ministry. Spiritual deliverance, on the other hand, addresses moral and existential dimensions of human suffering but may not resolve physiological issues such as chemical imbalances in the brain.

Critics of the pharmaceutical model argue that symptom management alone often leads to a cycle of dependency. For example, anti-anxiety medications like benzodiazepines offer temporary relief but may create long-term reliance, without addressing the psychological or situational factors contributing to the disorder.⁸ This limitation invites reflection on whether modern approaches to healing align with the biblical vision of restoration.

The challenge lies in discerning the appropriate response for each individual while respecting both medical advancements and spiritual beliefs. An integrative model that combines effective medical treatment with spiritual care could reflect the holistic nature of Jesus' healing ministry, offering both symptom relief and deeper restoration.

Conclusion

The New Testament accounts of demonic possession emphasise the complexities of human suffering, in which spiritual, physical, and mental dimensions intertwine. Modern medicine has changed our perception of mental illness, providing effective treatments that were unthinkable in biblical times. However, Jesus' holistic healing model calls us to consider whether current approaches adequately address the full range of human needs. Rather than advocating for one viewpoint over another, this paper proposes an integrative approach that values both medical science and spiritual wisdom. By doing so, we can better reflect the full scope of Christ's healing ministry in addressing the complexities of mental illness today.

⁸ Ashton, Heather. "The Diagnosis and Management of Benzodiazepine Dependence." *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 18, no. 3 (2005): 249–55.

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