

# Exorcism in Mark's Gospel: Implications of Jesus' Perspective for Today

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## Abstract

Exorcism is a theological term which has engaged the minds of some New Testament Scholars in recent times at least in last three decades. It is a universal phenomenon. Research has discovered that some churches especially orthodox ones have not paid much cognizance to this aspect of Jesus' ministry. This paper is an attempt to investigate what exorcism is and how is this ministry being addressed by the contemporary church using St. Mark's narratives as the framework. Humans daily demands for a paradigm shift by the church to also engage in deliverance ministry instead of the focus on "prosperity message." The Church should be aware that prosperity message can not have desired effect until lives of humans enjoy maximal health that can make life worthy living. Jesus in St. Mark's Gospel showed examples of how and what the Church of God should address on the presence of evil spirits or demonic forces in the world of evil that is ravaging the lives of many within God's creation. This paper tried to identify salient areas of concern in addressing the issue of exorcism especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church. The reality of the existence of evil spirits and demonic forces which cannot be contended. If human person needs to achieve his destiny in life according to God's purpose, then issues that can hinder the fulfilment of that destiny should be keenly addressed by individuals or the church to whom the gift of exorcism is deposited.

**Keywords:** exorcism, deliverance ministry, exorcists, contemporary world

## 1. Introduction

The world today is infected with many evil spirits and demonic forces in diverse ways. It is a universal phenomenon. The method used to confront and expel these cankerworm ravaging lives of humans in quantum is referred to as exorcism.

Exorcism relates with the metaphysical involving use of certain rites of invocation by a reputedly holy name to expel an evil spirit from the life of an individual being tormented which makes such a fellow behave in a strange manner.

In Sandy Yule's (2005) analysis of what exorcism means, he says:

It is an act of engaging in casting out a multiple personality disorder in which the body of the patient is infected by more than one personality, which may have carrying degrees of awareness of each other. (Note 1)

In his view, the work of exorcism can then be seen in terms of the identification of a distinct evil *persona* and its removal. (Note 2) The act of expelling such a spirit involves a higher spirit to release such a victim from the strange experiences caused by the evil forces. Hence, to exorcise is to:

1. Drive out
2. Free a person or place from evil spirits.
3. Deliver from evil attack
4. Conjure up.
5. Eject strange spiritual force from an individual.

It is binding by oath. (Note 3) A religious or spiritual practice of purportedly evicting demons or other spiritual entities from a person or an area they are believed they have possessed. (Note 4)<sup>4</sup> Depending on the spiritual beliefs of the Exorcist, this may be done by causing the entity to swear an oath, performing an elaborate ritual, or simply by commanding it to depart in the name of a higher power. The practitioners regard exorcism as more of a cure than a punishment (Note 5).

This paper therefore attempts to investigate the technicalities of this process in effecting a total deliverance of a person under the influence of a demonic attack. The framework of this paper focuses on the biblical and historical origin of demons, the process of inhabiting the life of an individual and how such evil spirit can be expelled by using higher spiritual powers. This paper also recommends to the contemporary church new approaches to exorcism since some church members are victims of demonic attacks at different stages of their lives.

According to the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, exorcism is said to be derived from the Greek word *ἐξορκισμός* meaning, “change under oath.” (Note 6) The above definition seem to be acceptable by some scholars especially F.C. Grant and H.H. Rowley who wrote on this topic. (Note 7)

But the most appropriate definition that represents the exorcism of Jesus in St. Mark’s gospel was the one given in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. (Note 8) In the Traditional African Perspective, exorcism is the practice of expelling evils spirits by means of prayer. (Note 9)

## 2. Origin of Evil Spirits

The Jews have varied traditions. Firstly, it is said that demons were created by God before the world came into being. Satan who is identical with the serpent was the chief demon.

Secondly, it is traced to Gen. 6: 1 – 3. Two angels; Assael and Shemachsn, love the daughters of men and forsaking their allegiance to God, descended from heaven to earth. One of these angels returned to heaven and did not sin, but the other accomplished his desire and his offspring became demons.

In general, every tradition of humans has its own interpretation of the origin of evil spirits from their different socio-cultural milieu.

In the Contemporary African Society, it is believed that these demons were the spirits of dead people who were wicked before they died but still carried on their malignant work. According to Lawrence Richards (1983), the origin of demons is likely the angels who fell with Satan. (Note 10)

They are spiritual powers and real forces of evil operating in the dark world (Eph. 1: 21; 8: 12). The devil and his fallen angels are the only evil spiritual beings about which we have any information in scripture. (Note 11) If demons and fallen angels are the same, then their origin, their place in the ordered realm of created beings, and their fate are all defined in the scriptures.

Satan, the name of the prince of evil, is called *shatan* in Hebrew and *satanas* in Greek. In both Hebrew and Greek, Satan means basically ‘adversary’ as mentioned in Num. 22: 22. (Note 12)

In view of the common beliefs about demons in most ancient cultures, it is striking to find only two specific references to demons in the Old Testament. Deut 32: 17 says of the rebellious generation that died in the wilderness, (Note 13) “They sacrificed to demon, which are not God – gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods that your fathers did not fear.” (Note 14) And Ps. 106: 36 – 37 says, “They worshipped” their idols which became snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons. Both of these passages suggest that real demonic beings existed behind the gods and goddesses of the pagans.

This is in fact something that Paul affirms in 1 Cor. 10: 20 saying that the “sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons.” (Note 15)

The Old Testament contains prohibitions against all spiritism and magic which were linked with the demonic in every ancient culture (cf. Deut. 18: 9 – 12). Others can be found in I Sam. 28: 13 and Isa. 8: 19. The Hebrew word for demon *sēd* was borrowed from the Babylonian *sēdu*. (Note 16) In Babylon, demons were thought to be supernatural powers, neither particularly evil nor particularly good. (Note 17)

Israel’s confidence in the sovereignty of Yahweh was in contrast to the development of demon possession or demonology. In the Old Testament, references are made to the devil or Satan with such terms as “hairy ones,” Lev. 17: 7, II Chro. 11: 15; Isa. 13: 21, the *sedim* in Deut. 32: 17, Ps. 106: 37, the *horse leech* or *vampire* in Prov. 30: 15, the *Azael* in Lev. 16: 8; 10: 26; cf. 1 Enoch 10: 8, the *Lilith* or *night hag* in Is. 34: 14; a demon cited in Arcadian

sources are found in desolate places. All these must have been understood to be references to the evil one, known as Satan. (Note 18)

The Essens at Qumran believed that everyone was ruled either by the Prince of Light or the Angel of Darkness both of whom God had created. This dualism was only secondary, in that in the first place, it was believed that God created both spirits and designed humans to live under them. (Note 19)

According to S.R. Garret (1989) in the gospel of Mark, the author did not use a specific term for Satan but that the manifestation of its work gives its nature as evil. (Note 20) According to Allan Richardson (1995), Satan is also referred to as a lesser deity, a divine power or unknown supernatural force or the human element in touch with the divine. (Note 21)

Obijole (1986) sees Satan as an intermediary between humans and the gods. Josephus, for example, made no arbitrary distinction between good and evil demons; a demon could give good fortune as well as cause of death. (Note 22)

In Obijole's (1986) view, it was the activities of a demon that determines its nature. (Note 23) When a demon attacked a person and cause sickness or frenzy that was life-threatening, it was thought necessary to expel it which is referred to as exorcism. (Note 24)<sup>24</sup> Efforts are made to expel the evil spirit that is inhabiting the body of the sufferer, so that the victim can be delivered from the torment.

In Greek philosophy, demons *δαιμονιον* were supernatural powers that inhabit the air close to earth. They are order of beings between men and gods. The Greeks believed that demons had an evil influence on human affairs; they cause misery and disasters; they were agents of madness and the cause of many sicknesses. (Note 25)

In the New Testament, especially in the gospels, the writers picture demons as living beings with malignant powers. Demons are personal beings, not impersonal influences (Matt. 8: 31). Jesus demonstrated his total mastery of demons, expelling them with a word. Generally, the authors of the gospels affirm that Jesus is the "stronger and more powerful" being of his own, able to "attack and over power the demons in their own realm," (Lk. 11: 21 – 22).

St. Paul also warns that demonic beings are the spiritual realities behind the facades of idolatry. In I Tim. 4: 1, he suggests that demons distort truth and encourage the spread of twisted doctrines of their own.

With the above discussion of the origin and reality of evil spirits in the world from the Jewish culture, Greek philosophy, African Tradition milieu and biblical references to what, evil spirits are and what they do. This paper then discusses demonic possession and exorcism.

### **3. Demon Possession and Exorcism**

There is no doubt that demons do exist from all aspects of human life experiences. There are evil spiritual beings who can and do influence events on earth. From the biblical point of view, they do oppress human beings causing misery, affliction and disease. The gospel confirms that they oppress human lives and make people victims of shame.

It has also been mentioned that in this paper, Jesus has power over them. Jesus is involved in casting out evil spirits out of people who are afflicted with disease. Jesus relied on no rite or magic words in casting out demons from the lives of those who came across him.

Jesus simply commanded the evil spirits and they obeyed. (Note 26) The disciples also did the same in the name of Jesus and the evil spirits obeyed. It should also be noted that the disciples did not do this unless they had personal relationship with Jesus (Acts 16: 16 – 18, cf. 19: 13 – 16). Searching questions do occur which are very important in modern study on demonology.

Can a believer possess demon? Is exorcism a normal practice among those who are genuine Christians? The response to these questions can be either positive or negative. John in his first letter (I John 4: 4) says, "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." it is hard to imagine a demon settling comfortably into any Christian individual where the Holy Spirit reigns. But it does in the sense that any human person, who may not possess the indwelling of the spirit of God, can be possessed by evil spirits. The issue is, if people can be possessed by demons which definitely is a reality, then exorcism is possible if such demon possess people make themselves available for organised deliverance sessions.

#### 4. Exorcism in Mark's Gospel

In Mark's gospel, Jesus' authority over demonic powers is documented by the author. At a word coming out with divine authority, demons were silenced.

At any occasion of such, the sufferer does not need any preparation, it is usually prompt and immediately the demons obeyed which invariably put an end to their mischief in the life of the victim. Any occasion of such usually increased faith in the lives of witnesses (Mk. 9: 23ff).

The orthodox officials never questioned Jesus' power to exorcise demons because it was a common practice then. Jesus knew the magnitude of the evil in the heart of men and he dealt with it headlong. Jesus demonstrated his divine nature in casting out demonic spirits from the lives of those who come his way. This is inevitable and most significant aspect of Jesus' ministry in Mark's writings.

The exhibition of boldness, self-authenticating teaching, his miraculous activity and his miraculous healing (Mark 1: 22, 27; Mark 5: 1 ff) are mentioned in Mark. Jesus came to bind and overthrow Satan thereby setting free and releasing its prisoners (Mark 3: 27).

The aim of St. Mark in documenting the actions of Jesus as exorcist is not to praise himself but to make the Jews know that Jesus Christ has power over Satan and that He is the Messiah, that God has promised to come and set them and other nations free from the bondage of their enemy (Satan) and to gain their freedom from sin and anguish caused by the devil. Jesus in performing exorcisms avoided the method he usually used in performing healing miracles such as touching the sick, lifting a lame man and so on.

Exorcism is different from healing miracles and in dealing with demonic attack, he only focused on addressing that demon with short authoritative commands (Mark 1: 21 – 28; 5: 1 – 20; 7: 24 – 30; 9: 14 – 29).

Casting out a demon (Mark 1: 23 – 28) is the first instance of the word with power. Jesus did not contradict his contemporaries who attributed many diseases, physical or mental, to demon possession. The whole demon world was afraid of the coming doom or emergence of Jesus (cf. Mark 1: 24). In Mark 1: 24, "What have you to do with us... I know who you are. You are the holy one of God."

Here, the demon meant, "why do you interfere with us?" Probably the man had been standing quietly in the synagogue. But when Jesus spoke, he became afraid. He knew Jesus had the power to change his life in some way, so he shouted "you have come to destroy us." 'Us' here means "myself and the evil spirit in me."

He noticed that although the man was ill, he was afraid to be healed, he knew that the change would be painful (Mark 1: 26). "I know who you are." Did he really know who Jesus was? Certainly he did not. He probably meant "you are holy man of God just as the prophets were holy men of God." Jesus says, "Be Silent" (Mark 1: 25). This means "Hold your tongue." Here Jesus spoke to the spirit with authority and power, and immediately, the demon obeyed. Also in the Gerasene Demonias episode in Mark 5: 1 – 20 reveals Jesus' power over Satanic force. The unclean spirit recognised and identified Jesus as "the Son of the Most High God" who always rebuked and cast out unclean spirits from possessed men. They trembled and urged Jesus to send them out of the man to the swine. Jesus "gave them leave" (Mark 5: 13), they entered the swines and drowned in the sea.

This is exorcism in practical terms. The afflicted man was relieved of the torment. In Mark 9: 14 – 29, another practical exorcism is mentioned where Jesus' disciples were not able to perform like their Master: Jesus, having known that the disciples ought to be able to step into his shoes but they failed, rebuked them and called them together and performed the miracle himself.

Also in Mark, Jesus being aware of the importance of exorcism, delegated his disciples to do so (Mark. 16: 17). Examining Jesus' charge to his disciples before his ascension in a scale of preference, we discover that priority was given to exorcism (Mark 16: 1). The fact that the Apostles were able to perform similar miracles at the invocation of the name of Jesus shows that there is mysterious power in the name Jesus.

By A.D. 350, the early church actually possessed an order of exorcists. It should be noted that there was a great difference in the sense that the ordinary Jewish and pagan exorcists used incantations, spells and magic rites, but that of Jesus was with one word, clear and simple, accompanied by authority and divine power exorcised demons from those afflicted by demonic spirits.

The word *exousia* is the Greek word used for 'authority' and *exousia* was defined as a unique knowledge together with unique power which is what Jesus possessed. Hence, the authority Christ used in exorcism was his own authority because He is God incarnate.

## 5. Implications of Jesus' Perspective for Today

Martin in his book "Hostage to the Devil" stresses the crucial importance of exorcist in giving the possessed person the possibility of regaining self-control which is the main reason for Jesus actions against evil spirits. (Note 27) At any deliverance session, either is an organized open air crusader or in a church revival service, the manifestations of the evil work hatched by the possessed person is usually made known in an unconscious mind by the exorcee. A practical example happened recently at an open church revival service when a young lady of about eighteen years fell under heavy anointing of the leader of the revival service, confessed the havoc she had done to people's lives without being aware of what she said. The deliverance session took almost one hour. At the end of the session, the young girl was totally delivered. When she regained her senses, she became ashamed of herself when she was told all what she uttered during the deliverance session. This girl was kept under surveillance for a considerable length of time to ensure that she was totally delivered.

According to Martin (1992), an exorcist takes a great risk during deliverance sessions. He is expected to demonstrate a genuine courage and self-sacrifice, at times, placing his life in jeopardy by confronting the entity which controls the possessed victim. (Note 28)

As the crucial intervention by the exorcist is to bring the power of Christ to bear upon the evil spirit through prayerful invocations, this intention is severely tested. (Note 29) Exorcism is a rite of last resort for the Church.

Many churches today engage exorcists for deliverance sessions because evil forces also find their ways in holy assemblies, manifesting themselves through possessed persons. A concrete example in Nigeria of Christian Organizations that makes exorcism a priority in her church programmes is Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries (M.F.M). Many attend their church programmes just for deliverance sessions. There are public testimonies of victims of demon-possessed people that regained their normal lives after deliverance sessions.

In Sandy's (2005) view, the evil spirit cannot be exorcised until "the pretense" is shattered probably because the breaking of "the pretence" means the beginning of a clear separation of the person from the possessing spirit. (Note 30) When the 'entity' behind the evil spirit is separated from the possessed person, it is then that total deliverance is assured.

Martin's account of exorcism stresses the clash of wills between the exorcists and the dominant evil spirit and the extreme nature of the procedure.

According to Sandy (2005), he says a more clinical approach is proposed by Peter Horrobin, the director of Ellet Ministries. (Note 31) He says,

He prefers the term "deliverance ministry" for freeing of people from demonic possession and control, using the term 'exorcism' for the expulsion of demonic holds upon places, buildings and objects. (Note 32)

This view can be argued from both ends in the sense that in deliverance session, the evil spirit is cast out from the possessor which is similar to what is done by exorcists; whether the exorcee is human person or inanimate object, as far as the objective is achieved.

Peter Horrobin's model is that it is necessary to minister to people in the power of the Holy Spirit and in full reliance upon the Biblical promises and examples. Unless a person is fully committed to Jesus and living a holy life he cannot be involved in deliverance ministry. Deliverance is seen as a process of cleaning up the life of the person which progressively removes the rights by which demons claim access.

The minister, claiming the authority of Christ prayerfully addresses the evil spirit and orders it to leave. In our day to day life experiences, the presence of evil spirits or demonic forces is real. Many by his nature contend with these spiritual forces as he attempts to fulfill his purpose in life. If the reality of evil spirits cannot be denied, it behooves that attempts should made to confront these forces headlong, using the example of Jesus in St. Mark's gospel.

According to John Parratt (2012), he says, all Christian churches accept that the Bible is authoritative, that is, it is the foundation document of the Christian faith. (Note 33) The words of the bible are inspired word of God. They are powerful and backed with divine authority to cast out demonic forces in the life of an individual and in any infected environment. Hence, the major tool for any deliverance minister is the Bible.

As earlier mentioned in this paper that, Jesus is God, which cannot be contented, by implication, He has power and authority over every creature on earth. At the onset when God created the earth, 'ex-nihilo' out of nothing, all that was created was good (Gen. 1: 31).

Satan found its way into the lives of humans according to the biblical account through Adam and Eve who allowed themselves to be tempted by the devil. The good nature of man became corrupted because of the fall of Man in Gen. 3. Since this experience happened at the early stage of God's creation, God made frantic efforts to restore man to the original state of goodness by raising up judges, priests, prophets, for human restoration. But when all these efforts failed, God incarnated himself in person of Jesus Christ in order to redeem man through his self sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary.

Jesus accomplished his mission of redemption by his death and resurrection. The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost enabled the apostles to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth. Exorcism was part of the key areas of Jesus ministry especially as found in the Gospel of Mark. It was a serious concern for Jesus Christ to find people being tormented by the devil, or being captives in the kingdom of Satan. Hence, he used his divine authority to cast out demons from the exorcises so as to restore the victims into the original state of life.

The world today is infected with evil spirits. It is evil spirit that indwells a person who decides to kill a fellow man with impurity. Wanton destruction of lives and property especially in recent times in Nigeria by Boko Haram terrorists, Niger Delta militants, kidnappers, Fulani herdsmen and so on has changed the image of Nigeria on the global level.

It is evil spirit that indwells a person who has no respect for sanctity of human life. Jesus demonstrated genuine love for those in bondage of satanic forces as mentioned in this paper and he made efforts to deliver them all. The Church is expected to fulfill this aspect of church mission in engaging in aggressive deliverance ministry. The church's mission should be wholistic in taking care of all aspects of human life in all its ramifications in line with the apostolic ministry of the early church.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has identified the gray areas of exorcism which can gear up the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century into action in order to fulfill the purpose of incarnation to the fullest. In every given community of human persons, there are people infected and afflicted with diseases. These category of people are within God creation that need the attention of the Church. Hence, it is necessary with the contemporary experiences that School of Deliverance Ministry should be established and stocked with people who are gifted in exorcism. Church leaders especially in Orthodox Churches should not clamp down on gifted individuals who can take charge of this unique aspect of the Church ministry. Moral and financial support should be given to encourage those saddled with this responsibility.

The last hope of the common man is the church. Deliverance ministry should take the place of prosperity messages which has become the focus of most New Generation Churches. Health is wealth. It is when an individual is healthy that such a person can be prosperous in terms of financial viability.

The church should therefore imbibe the approach of Jesus in having concern for the oppressed, the marginalized, the captives, the afflicted, the demon-possessed, the destitutes, the physically and mentally challenged people, the down trodden in the society since the society is the immediate constituency of the church. Therefore, church leaders in the contemporary world should wake-up to this important aspect of church ministry which has been neglected for so long.

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## Notes

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- Note 2. Sandy Yule, 'Exorcism' *The Burning Mirror: A Christian Encounter with Shamanism*, 148.
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Note 16. Lawrence Richards, "Origin and Fate of Demons," *Expository Dictionary of the Bible Words*, 217.

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Note 18. T. Ling, *The Significance of Satan*, (London: SPCK, 1961), see also E.C.B. MacLaurin, 'Beelzebub,' *Theology Today*, Vol. 20, 1978, 156 – 160.

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Note 29. M. Martin, *Hostage to the Devil*, 158.

Note 30. Sandy Yule, 'Exorcism' *The Burning Mirror: A Christian Encounter with Shamanism*, 161.

Note 31. Ellet Ministries is based in Britain. An account of its history is given in Horrobin, 9 – 15.

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