In the NAME of JESUS
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Exorcism among Early Christians

Graham H. Twelftree
To
Catherine and Paul
and
those they have
married and made
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My interest in exorcism among early Christians began in Nottingham with my doctoral studies under James D. G. Dunn. This is the third book that has its origins in that research. The first book, Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) was a thorough revision of the dissertation, focusing on Jesus as an exorcist: his methods, self-understanding, and how his audience would have perceived what he was doing. The second book, Christ Triumphant: Exorcism Then and Now (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), though published first, due to the mysteries of the publishing world, took the discussion a stage further in trying to recover what the New Testament writers understood about Jesus as an exorcist and what place exorcism had in their churches. A considerable part of that book also sought to draw out present-day implications from that study.

In this book I want to look in more detail at what was sketched out rather inadequately and too briefly in the fourth chapter (“The Early Church”) of Christ Triumphant. This will also enable me to explore what Q and the Synoptic Gospels are able to tell us about exorcism among the early Christians they represent. Further, I want to focus more carefully on the issues raised by reading the Fourth Gospel and the letters of Paul with questions relating to exorcism in mind. As I will explain, to help do that I have looked beyond the canon, as well as to second-century critics of Christianity.

Few students of the New Testament are able to examine the earliest documents of the church without sensing an obligation to consider the contemporary ramifications of what is discovered and discussed. Also, not least because of significant changes in my views on exorcism in the contemporary church, this book concludes with some brief contemporary corollaries of our study.

As this project comes to completion I am gratefully aware of the help I have received from others: Dale Allison, Hessel Baartse (who can do mysterious things with a computer), Edwin Broadhead, Peter Davids, Clayton Jefford,
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I have a special friend in the Adelaide hills of South Australia who is an orchardist. As one drives along the roads and tracks around and between the twenty thousand and more pear trees spread across the rolling hills, there appears to be neither reason nor order to the manner of planting. Then, as one moves along looking at the apparently disordered trees, at certain spots here and there are moments when one can look in almost any direction and see the perfectly straight rows of evenly spaced trees. There is reason and order after all; one just needed to be standing in the right place to see it. In looking at exorcism among early Christians, I have often felt as if I was looking at a disordered mass of material. But from time to time, when I assume I was—I hope—looking at the subject from the perspective of those who set it out, the order at last became apparent. This book is an attempt to chart both my journey through the apparent disorder as well as give the reader the opportunity to stand with me at the various points where the order is obvious and the reasons apparent.

Graham H. Twelftree  
Regent University  
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The Problem of Exorcism

In recent years interest in exorcism in the New Testament has been increasing.1 However, for most students of the New Testament, there are at least two significant problems in relation to exorcism. The fundamental problem is the premise on which exorcism is based: that malevolent spiritual beings exist and that they can invade, control, and observably impair the health of an individual who, in turn, can be cured through someone purportedly forcing the spiritual beings to leave.2 For the vast majority of biblical scholars and theologians this is tantamount to belief in such entities as elves, dragons, or a


2. Although the term ἐξορκιστής (“exorcist,” from the verb ἐξορκίζω, “command,” “compel,” “adjure,” or “oath,” only in the NT at Matt. 26:63) occurs once in the NT (Acts 19:13), the earliest known occurrence of the word (cf. LSJ 598; BDAG 351), it was probably reasonably well known (see Josephus, Ant. 8.45) and can be taken as a fair description of what the NT writers thought Jesus and his followers were doing in expelling demons and unclean or evil spirits. For further discussion on the definition of exorcism, see Graham H. Twelftree, Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus (WUNT 2.54; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 13, including those cited and, more recently, Sorensen, Possession, 1–2.
flat earth. Nevertheless, for the historian to deem possession and exorcism in the ancient world a problem of, for example, “crowd psychology” and so place it “off limits”4 is to miss what was, for most people,5 including early Christians, a significant aspect of their Weltanschauung.6 Therefore, despite our difficulty with exorcism, for the sake of historical inquiry, it is important to suspend judgment on the reality of the demonic7 and approach the subject in terms of the cultural milieu of the text.8

1.1 Setting the Scene

Notwithstanding, the issue that has given rise to this study—the second significant problem with exorcism—is the place and practice of exorcism among early Christians. In the modern study of early Christianity the prevailing view has been that exorcism played a significant role in the success of early Christianity. For example, many years ago Adolf von Harnack said, “It was as exorcisers that Christians went out into the great world, and exorcism formed one very powerful method of their mission and propaganda.”9 More recently, in seeking to explain the extraordinary and unparalleled success of early Christianity, Ramsay MacMullen has maintained not only that miracles were the primary engine for producing conversions in the ancient world, but also that exorcism was “possibly the most highly rated activity of the early Christian church.”10 Citing Justin, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Eusebius, he concludes that,

although the institution of exorcism had taproots in Judaism and was of little account otherwise, “in Christianity it found an extraordinary flowering” and was essential in its growth.11 Similarly, it has been Bernd Kollmann’s main objective to show that healing miracles, notably exorcism, were critical for early Christians’ success in winning many people to the faith.12

108. MacMullen, Christianizing, and S. Vernon McCasland, By the Finger of God: Demon Possession and Exorcism in Early Christianity in the Light of Modern Views of Mental Illness (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 104, who held a similar view, are followed by Amanda Porterfield, Healing in the History of Christianity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63. See also, e.g., Albrecht Oepke, “ἰάομαι . . .,” TDNT 3:214: “The unparalleled missionary vigor of Christianity in the first centuries derives not least of all from the bold supremacy, continually confirmed by striking experiences, with which the new religion brought freedom to those who were enslaved by demons and destiny (Εἱμαρμένη).”


Notably for us, in his essay on “Miracles and Early Christian Apologetic,” Geoffrey Lampe (1912–1980) argued that, in early Christian writings that defended the faith and commended it to unbelievers, not only was the dominant miracle exorcism but also miracle was used in two ways: to introduce an argument in the most direct way by performing one, as in the case of John in the Acts of John; and by preachers to make an appeal to a miracle performed by another person in support of that person’s authority, character, and doctrine (e.g., Acts of Paul). Lampe also argued that, sometimes, in the face of opposition, appeal to miracle took the form of a competition along the lines of that between Moses and the Egyptian magicians, as with Peter and Simon Magus in the Acts of Peter. Lampe says: “All this belongs essentially to the realm of popular fiction.” However, attempting to save the integrity of great Christian writers, Lampe adds: “Serious authors pay little attention to all this.” G. W. H. Lampe, “Miracles and Early Christian Apologetic,” in Miracles: Cambridge Studies in Their Philosophy and History (ed. C. F. D. Moule; London: Mowbray, 1965), 205–18, quoting 206. However, Lampe does mention that Eusebius reproduces the legend of Abgar, king of Edessa, corresponding with Jesus about his healing (Hist. eccl. 1.13). Origen says of the apostles of Jesus: “Without miracles and wonders they would not have persuaded those who heard new doctrines and new teaching to leave their
Nevertheless, there have been a few voices, such as those of Kenneth Grayston and Ernest Best, suggesting that there was not much interest in exorcism among early Christians. Also, F. Gerald Downing asserted, “Tales of miracles seemed to the evangelists to be worth repeating among the committed; they had little impact outside.” Further, in taking into account the Fourth Gospel, Frederick E. Brenk put it plainly: “The subsequent history of the Church shows a great reluctance to see demons in individuals or to practice exorcism.” Therefore, in light of this range of views, it is reasonable to heed H. K. Nielsen’s call for more light to be shed on this relatively neglected area of research: the role that exorcism played in the early church.

Part of the reason for this difference of opinion on the role of exorcism in the early church could be inherent in the New Testament canon itself. For, in seeking to shed more light on the place and practice of exorcism among early Christians, we are confronted with apparent significant anomalies embedded in the literary legacy of the early church. To begin with, there is a disjunct between the various ways Jesus’ involvement in exorcism is portrayed. On the one hand, even though the Synoptic Gospels are not agreed on the precise place of exorcism in his ministry, they portray Jesus not only as spending a great deal of time performing exorcisms—as well as other healings—but also Matthew and Luke further report that he saw his exorcisms encapsulating his mission as no other aspect of his ministry was able.

On the other hand, when we turn to the letters of Paul, the Christian writings closest in time to Jesus and his first followers, they appear to tell us nothing about Jesus being an exorcist. We are bound, then, to ask both about the accuracy of the Synoptic portrait of Jesus as well as whether Paul’s apparent silence simply has to do with the difference in the two kinds of literature that Paul and the Synoptic Gospel writers were producing, or whether there are some other more fundamental explanations. More puzzling, and the point at which this problem of exorcism is most acute, is this question: Why do we hear nothing whatsoever from the canonical Johannine literature about exorcism or Jesus being an exorcist?
The problem of this divergence of perspective on Jesus’ ministry—not to say contradiction—continues to be played out in the different portrayals of what Jesus is said to require of his followers. The Synoptic Gospel writers have Jesus commissioning his followers to be exorcists while the Johannine tradition is completely silent on the matter. Paul, as well, at least on a prima facie reading, also appears to say nothing about exorcism in his own ministry nor among that of his readers. The problem of this diversity is further exacerbated when we take into account that, in telling the story of the first followers of Jesus, the Synoptic Gospel writers, especially Mark, wished to portray the disciples as model exorcists for their readers to follow in ministry.18 In short, some writers in the New Testament suggest that exorcism is to be part of Christian ministry; others do not. Hence, I have two principal aims in this study. My chief aim is to determine the place as well as to describe the practice of exorcism among early Christians reflected in the New Testament documents. Secondarily, I will attempt to explain the variety of approaches to exorcism in the New Testament canon. Then, acknowledging the narrow basis of this study, I anticipate being able to make some brief comments about the role of the traditions about Jesus in shaping the theology and practice of early Christianity.

1.2 This Study

Solving the problem of the place of exorcism among early Christians is potentially important for a whole cadre of reasons. (1) Being able to describe the place of exorcism among early Christians contributes to our understanding of the nature of early Christianity, including what turns out to be its various understandings of its mission. In turn, (2) a careful study of what was thought and practiced in relation to exorcism among early Christians draws attention to aspects of significant early theological diversity. Further, (3) given the argued place of exorcism in the ministry of Jesus,19 our project can provide a case study for understanding the various ways early Christians viewed and handled the traditions that had initially developed around Jesus and what part these traditions had in forming early theology and practice. This leads us (4) to inquire in what way, if at all, Jesus functioned—or intended to function—as a model for early Christian ministry, particularly in relation to conducting exorcism. Answering this question will require setting out what models or options were available for those early Christians who were interested in exorcism.

18. See §5.1 below. (I retain the convention of designating the Gospel audience as “readers,” acknowledging that they were probably initially hearers, but also recognizing that, probably almost immediately, they were readers or included readers.)

19. See Twelftree, Exorcist.
From the work of those who have gone before us, we already have some hypotheses to hand that might explain the interest in and role of exorcism among early Christians. It could be that (1) interest in exorcism, along with miracles in general, diminished over time. In a 1965 essay Maurice Wiles contended that it was not long after the close of the New Testament that the apologetic appeal to outward miracles diminished. This was because, he argued, the early miracles were appropriate to the start of a great spiritual movement, only necessary to give rise to a faith, making further miracles unnecessary.20 More recently, John Dominic Crossan has said, “Miracles were, at a very early stage, being washed out of the tradition and, when retained, were being very carefully interpreted.”21 Alternatively, (2) the variation we see in the interest in exorcism in the New Testament may be accounted for in terms of cultural variations across time and place. For example, relying on the work of Eric Sorensen, it may be possible to show that part of an attempt by early Christians to adapt to the cultural sensitivities of a Greco-Roman culture—where exorcism was an unconventional and peripheral occult activity, only “in the eddies of the cultural mainstream”22—explains the varying interest in exorcism. Sorensen argues this is particularly noteworthy in the continuation of exorcism in the westward expansion of early Christianity. Or, (3) it could be that the diverse attitudes toward exorcism had theological roots that we might be able to detect and describe through a close examination of the New Testament documents.

Another proposed role for exorcism is (4) its association with baptism, which Elizabeth Ann Leeper argued was a fundamental factor in the development of the church as an institution.23 In two studies that arose out of her 1991 Duke University PhD dissertation, Leeper examined the role played by exorcism in early Christianity.24 She says that, for modern historians, exorcism among early Christians is usually taken to be associated “within the context of baptism, where it formed an essential part of the catechumenate and baptismal preparation.”25 While this link may be obvious later, we need

to note how far and in what way this relationship had been established in the first two Christian centuries.

1.3 Scope and Hazards

This is unequivocally a study of New Testament texts, expecting them to yield at least some evidence to help solve the puzzles surrounding exorcism among early Christians. Nevertheless, in order not to torture the texts to say more than the authors intended, we will be looking for assistance beyond the horizons of the canon.

In order to balance the need for the advantage gained from taking into account literature written some distance in time from the material in the canon over against the need to keep manageable the amount of material to be discussed, as well as to remain as close as possible in time and culture to the origins of the New Testament traditions, two limits have been set on the material to be taken into account. First, I have set the terminus ad quem for the scope of this study at 200 CE. This involves leaving aside Tertullian from consideration. Though born well within our period (probably ca. 170 CE), he was not converted until near the end of the century (ca. 195 or 196 CE) and did not begin writing until between then and the turn of the century. Though this is unfortunate, it conveniently confines our study to the period when early Christians remained primarily in a Greek milieu. For Tertullian was the first theologian to write in Latin, the first Western Christian to give us an extended theology, and the writer who “liberated” Christian thought from its Greek origins. Notwithstanding, Tertullian will still be of considerable interest in helping us understand exorcism among the Montanists of the late second century (see §11.8 below).

Secondly, not only in order to keep the amount of material discussed within reasonable bounds, but also because our interest is in what came to be orthodox Christianity, I have taken into account only that which is generally considered orthodox or from mainstream early Christianity. Although our results would be little changed, discussion of second-century gnostic documents will have to wait for a possible future study.

It is anticipated that, looking back as through a lens along the already diverging trajectories of their interpretations, we may be able to detect subtleties in the New Testament texts, as well as discern implications of these writings

that would otherwise be imperceptible or appear insignificant to us in viewing the New Testament documents unaided. Or, to change the metaphor, as we survey an increased amount of material over time, we may be able to hear, as through an amplifier, signals that would be too faint for our senses in listening only to signals from the New Testament.29

Obviously, in turning to later sources to help interpret New Testament writings, we open ourselves to the potential hazard of using the increased distance in time to give us the illegitimate advantage of historical hindsight.30 That is, without careful and convincing argument, we might be tempted to fill gaps in our knowledge by using information only known at a later time. In other words, we might read back into the New Testament conclusions drawn from material of a later time regarding practices and theologies relating to exorcism. Rather, resisting these temptations, we can reasonably use reported developments or outcomes, as well as evidence from later times, to help look back with new sensitivity to detect aspects, details, or implications of earlier reports that might otherwise escape our attention.31

1.4 Plan of Attack

My plan is, first, to set out a brief general description of exorcism and exorcists in the period, including that associated with Jesus. This will enable us to see more clearly not only how Jesus would have been perceived as an exorcist by his followers and early Christians, but also to see the options that were available to Christians who sought to perform exorcisms (chap. 2). This will provide a context of understanding, as well as points for comparison, to help us see more clearly not only the distinctive features of the practice of exorcism among early Christians, but also to see those points held in common with others. Then, in chronological order in part 2, beginning with the letters of Paul, I will carefully scrutinize New Testament documents so that each writer’s view on the place and practice of exorcism among early Christians can be seen clearly (chaps. 3–9). The conclusions to these chapters are


particularly important\textsuperscript{32} for they carry the results of our inquiry, results that will contribute to answering the major questions driving this study.

In part 3, I turn to the second century. In the first two chapters (10–11) I will examine the Apostolic Fathers, along with apologists and the longer ending of Mark—again in as near to chronological order as is possible given our imprecise knowledge. This will enable us to gather insight into what the more immediate inheritors of the traditions associated with Jesus thought about exorcism. Then, still in the second century, chapter 12 looks through the spectacles of critics of Christianity, including three of the most significant critics: Celsus, Lucian of Samosata, and Galen. It is anticipated that, through this set of historical lenses (the Apostolic Fathers and other early Christian writers, and the somewhat less focused critics of Christianity), I will be able to bring into sharper relief what we have seen in the New Testament texts. First, then, we turn to setting out a description of exorcism and exorcists that the Christians of the first two centuries would have known.

\textsuperscript{32} See §§3.6; 4.11; 5.10; 6.4; 7.8; 8.4; and 9.11 below.