UNDERSTANDING JESUS' HEALINGS[1]

Andries van Aarde
University of Pretoria

Abstract

The intention of this article is to indicate that Jesus' healings and exorcisms are to be understood against the background of the stress factors in the first-century Mediterranean world, embedded in the structure and institutions of the time The propaganda motive, as well as the competitive milieu in which the Jesus tradition originated and was transmitted, must be kept in mind when interpreting the healings and exorcisms of Jesus.. The various institutions in the first-century Mediterranean world must not be understood as separate from one another: they are in fact embedded within each other. The healings of Jesus should be understood as healings of empowerment. Jesus empowers people to cope. He gives authentic meaning to peoples' lives on account of their experience of God's presence.

1.   Introduction

This study attempts to indicate which factors led to stress in the first-century Mediterranean world. Jesus' exorcisms are attributed to stress for the reason that the healings/exorcisms of Jesus are embedded within the structure and institutions of his time. Demons were in the context of that time viewed as being the antithesis of God, and stress relief meant liberation from these demons.

In this study an attempt is made to demonstrate that Jesus' healings may, within the context of modern society and in contemporary terms, be defined in terms of the phrase *empowerment healings*. Jesus 'empowered' people who succumbed to stress and enabled them to survive. He provided renewed sense and meaning to people's lives. Jesus' healings were not *miracles* in the sense of a supernatural intervention by God in the physical world; rather, they are part of God's engagement with the social world and lives of people. A miracle is not God's periodic interference with a closed natural order. It is, rather, the permanently hidden yet continual and uninterrupted heartbeat of the natural. It is present to those who see and hear it with the eyes and ears of faith (Crossan 1996:88, 96).

2.   Reading through ancient lenses

2.1   The meaning of language is always contextually and culturally bound

All language, whether oral or written, including the language of the Bible, attains meaning on the basis of the social system and cultural context within which it originated (Malina 1993:xi). It is important to realise that the Bible is an ancient collection of documents, an anthology which originated in a world different to the one we know. First-century Mediterranean people lived different lives and thought differently to the way we do at the beginning of the 21st century. This different world of Mediterranean people, with its different way of thinking, obviously affected their manuscripts. The authors of the Bible wrote down *their* experiences, including *their* experiences of and witness concerning God. In this way the writers of the gospels, from within *their* world and its way of thinking, allowed *their* meeting with Jesus and *their* interpretations of the traditions concerning Jesus to appear in *their* manuscripts.

We must not make the mistake of anachronistically viewing Jesus' miracles, healings and exorcisms through technological-scientific lenses by asking 'How could this happen?', or 'Do such things as demons exist?' Such questions are irrelevant. The question should rather be 'What did these people believe?' or 'How did they experience their faith?' These questions would then enable the modern reader of the Bible to form an idea of the worldview of the time.

2.2   External forces

The miracles recorded in the Bible, as well as the distress of first-century Mediterranean people, can be understood by taking cognisance of the insights of cultural anthropology. People's distress was at the time relieved as a consequence of an 'external force' (God) gaining control over another external force (Satan) which had caused that distress. This was done through agents, in the Graeco-Roman world the '*theios aner*' (a 'hero' in the form of a god-man such as Heracles, Asclepius or Priapus), and in the Israelite world through envoys of God, people who possessed the Spirit of God (prophets, kings, priests). Satan, too, had agents in his service. Different names were given to these 'angelic figures' (e g , in the pseudepigraph 'Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah,' written between the 2nd century BCE and the 4th century CE, names such as Beliar, Sammael, Malkira, and Matanbukus are found), who were responsible that demons took possession of a person. To the Israelites the preeminent of these agents was God's Messiah (cf 1 Enoch 53:3-5; 54:4-6; Test Levi 18: 12). When there are references to him in the post-monarchic period, this Messiah often gained the function of a healer (see Rousseau 1992:30-31). But not everyone associated Jesus with the Messiah. To Jesus' opponents (the Pharisees) he was an agent of evil, Beelzebub (Mt 12:22-32).

2.3   The concept 'exorcism'

Exorcism may be defined as the act of an exorcist who orders the hostile entity or entities to leave the possessed person. The exorcist may make use of magic, i.e. spells and witchcraft. In order to understand Jesus' healings and exorcisms one needs to realise that first-century Mediterranean people believed that they shared their living space and environment with invisible spirits and demons. [Several New-Testament texts offer proof of this: 1 Corinthians 10:20-21; 12:10; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 1:21; 2:2; 6:12, 6.] It necessarily presumes a belief in the existence of these invisible, hostile entities as well as the possession of a person by a hostile and invisible entity. This possession may be of a permanent nature, or it may occur intermittently or temporarily. When demons had been exorcised, the anxious possessed person would believe that the cause of the problem had disappeared. This belief would be confirmed by the healer and encouraged by the social circle of the possessed person. This would change the behaviour of the possessed person from anxiety to calmness. What would have changed? The initial problems of the life of the person might (or might perhaps not) still be present, but the perception of the person who had been possessed towards these problems would have changed (Pilch 1995:330;).

2.4   A competitive milieu .

One should also, when reading about miracle healings, bear in mind the competitive milieu in which the gospels originated. It should be remembered that these external forces stood in competition with each other. The crowd participated in highly committed fashion in this competition: hence the controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees in the healing pericopes and the presence of a crowd which deemed Jesus' authority as being higher than that of the Pharisees (see Mt 7:28-29).

Within this competitive milieu the propaganda motive must also be borne in mind. It is important to know that, apart from Jesus, there were also many other miracle workers. These miracle workers were played off against one another and from the perspective of the evangelists Jesus must be placed at a level higher than that of the other miracle workers (cf Vermes 1973:58-82). Different types of miracle narrative were added to the Christian repertoire in order to place Jesus in competition with other charismatic wisdom teachers, exorcists and miracle workers (see Funk 1996:253).

In a world in which other miracle workers were also active it was important for the followers of Jesus to propagate Jesus as a miracle worker. Miracle traditions were used by the early Jesus groups in sermons, teaching and missionary work under pagans in order to persuade people to believe in Jesus (see Engelbrecht 1986:37). This propaganda motive means that Jesus is portrayed in the New Testament as being in competition with the Greek gods and other miracle worker (see Funk & The Jesus Seminar 1998:547). The same propaganda motive also appears clearly in Matthew's narrative of the silver coin in the mouth of the fish (Mt 17:24-27). One of Matthew's purposes was to proclaim Jesus' superiority over the gods of the sea by means of this narrative (see Van Aarde 1994b:226).

3. The structure of Mediterranean society

The structure of Mediterranean society consisted mainly of the following institutions:

- family (highest priority);
- politics;
- economy;
- religion.

In the Mediterranean world religious, familial, political and economic structures cannot simply be divided into separate compartments (Van Aarde 1994a:89). Family structures enjoyed the highest priority within which politics, the economy and religion were embedded. A person's family not only determined his or her status within the community but also served as the primary economic, religious, educational and social network. The breaking of familial bonds also meant the loss of these important networks (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:100-101).

The fact that religion was not a clearly demarcated terrain independent from, for instance, the medical terrain, is to be inferred from the fact that it was common practice to approach prophets (religious personnel) for healing (2 Ki 5:1-3). In contradistinction to this the institutions of first-world countries today function independently from each other. For instance: the president of America is not the monarch of the country as a result of being the head of a (specific) family.

When applied to the legal system this difference may be illustrated in the following way: if a legally accountable son were to embezzle money today a judge would 'remove' the person concerned from society by sentencing him to jail. This would result in family stress, though it would not be unusual if the father visited his son in jail. In contradistinction to this, if in the Mediterranean world a son would steal money from a family member he would have been seen as an 'agent of evil' and would have been ostracised. An external force therefore would have caused an emergency situation to arise. The same applies with regard to sickness. If somebody were sick an external force would have had an effect on that person. In Israel this would have meant it was accepted that God had allowed evil to possess the life of a person who was ill. Such a person could therefore

be viewed as an agent of evil and it could, within this society, be accepted that such a person would under certain circumstances be excluded by his or her family. The distinction between institutions did not apply in the Mediterranean world.

The biggest distress at the time was experienced in being found to be unacceptable, rejected by one's 'family of procreation' (the biological extended family in an agrarian context) and the 'family of orientation' (Israel as *ethnos*). In contradistinction to this we have today in the first world largely separated the different institutions from one another and therefore also started making distinctions with regard to distress. For instance, distress in the church is sin, while economic distress is material lack.

3.1   Family

Mediterranean family life was patriarchically oriented, with the father the most important figure within the first-century family. The male head of the family enjoyed absolute authority over his wife(s), children, slaves and other dependants. It was the task of the father to represent his family in public (also with regard to the cult) and to protect its good name. This illustrates the overlapping of familial structure with religious life. This overlapping is also clearly evident from the fact that the synagogue was at the centre of the religious and social life of Israelites because it served as school, meeting place and court of law. Initially *synagogai* were not buildings (such as churches today) but local village meeting places in the houses of people (see Horsley 1994:113).

Approximately 90% of the inhabitants of first-century Palestine were farmers and lived in villages which often were settlements around larger cities. The leaders of the villages were the heads of the families (the elders) who possessed public honour. It explains the hostility of many small villages towards Jesus. Jesus would have arrived in these villages with a crowd of followers who mostly came from the peasant community, which often consisted of the 'impure', and in this way threatened the leadership of the heads of local families (Van Aarde 1994a:102; cf also Jn 11:47-48.

3.2   Politics

All gatherings of the village people, whether for business, feasts or prayer, took place on the market square, in the 'city hall', or in one of the larger houses (Van Aarde 1994a:102). Such gatherings (that is, 'political' meetings) were also designated *synagogai* (see Chiat 1981:50; Meyers 1981:62). The *place* where the function was carried out therefore, unlike today, did not differ depending on the nature of the function.

May I mix politics and religion? This question testifies to a typically Eurocentric, modern way of thinking and understanding of the structure of society. Persons within a first-century Mediterranean culture would not have asked such a question since religion and politics would have been matters deeply imbricated with each other. This matter may be illustrated by several passages in the gospels in which 'publicans' and 'sinners' are mentioned together (cf Mt 9:10-11; 11:19) - both were 'traitors.' Publicans were 'traitors' since they co-operated with the Roman authorities or Roman 'client rulers.' The godless were also 'traitors' as they betrayed God who had redeemed Israel. There was not, in other words, a clear distinction between religious and political betrayal in first-century Judaism (see Sanders 1985:178).

3.3   Economy

The economy was embedded within the family in the first place since it was both the unit of production and consumption. As the family was the unit of production, marriage (which entailed a woman being taken out of her family in order to be incorporated into the

home of the bridegroom) resulted in a loss for one family and a profit to the other. For this reason a bride price was required in order to compensate for the loss (cf Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:100).

The economy was, in addition, also embedded within politics, which meant that the political entity had control over the movement and distribution of certain goods to and from the city, in particular from key institutions such as the palace (and army), the temple (and the priests) and the aristocracy. Nowhere do we find terminology which suggests a separate 'economic system.'

The temple was never a religious institution separate from political institutions. There could be a domestic religion which was controlled by 'family personnel' and/or a political religion which was controlled by 'political personnel', but religion was never seen as being a completely separate entity controlled by purely 'religious personnel.' Devotions were also not carried out differently to the way they were at home. Religion was the meaning which was given to the way in which politics and the familial system were grounded in practice (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:138). These preceding remarks clearly illustrates the overlapping of the familial structure, the economy, religion and politics.

3.4   Religion

Religion, as a separate, institutional entity in the modern sense of the word did not exist. Rather, religion was an overarching signifying system which united politics and the family (with their economic aspects) into an ideological whole. Religion was the instrument through which politics and the family were legitimated and articulated, but also through which they were delegitimised and criticised. The language of religion was borrowed from family relationships (father, son, brother, sister, virgin, child, patron, mercy, honour, forgiveness, ransom etc.), as well as from politics (king, kingdom, prince of the world, powers, covenant, law etc.). Religion was part of and therefore embedded within the above-mentioned structures of the family, politics and the economy. Religious goals, action, rolls, employment, organisation and systems of devotion were guided by political and familial and not by 'religious' considerations (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:138; see also Van Aarde 1994a:89).

According to Malina & Neyrey (1991a:73-74) the family was the basic and primary social unit towards which these dyadic persons stood in relation. They lived for this group within which they were embedded; without this group they led a senseless existence.

4.   Factors which caused stress within the Mediterranean social structure
4.1   Intrafamilial conflict

Many of Jesus' followers started following him because he healed them/exorcised demons from them. It is unlikely that people would follow Jesus merely because he 'called' them. What would have been the motives of people who followed Jesus? Why did they follow Jesus? Stevan Davies (1995:81) considers intrafamilial conflict one of the main causes of possession by devils. It can therefore be said with relative certainty that persons from whom demons had been exorcised and who returned to their families without any changes to the conflict situation within the family would not have a high chance with regard to long-term success/healing. It seems that Jesus' solution to this problem was that he encouraged people to avoid such situations in future by encouraging them to leave their families and become part of a surrogate (fictive) family with God as the Father (GosThom 99; Mk 3:32-35; also supported by Q 9:59-62; 12:51-53; 14:26-27; Mk 10:28-30). Jesus encouraged people to leave their families, a fact which is to be understood in view of the circumstances which caused people to come to Jesus for healing and exorcism.

These pronouncements of Jesus can be understood within the context of people from whom he had exorcised demons, people who suffered under pressure that they would be rejected by their families for some or other reason and, as a result, were engaged in an internal struggle. Some of Jesus' pronouncements make good sense only when read within this context, for instance the Gospel of Thomas 68-69a: 'Jesus said: Congratulations to you when you are hated and persecuted; and no place will be found, wherever you have be persecuted.' Jesus said: 'Congratulations to those who have been persecuted in their hearts: they are the ones who have truly come to know the Father' (see Scholars Version, in Funk & Hoover 1993:512; cf Patterson, Robinson & Bethge 1998).

Elements of this Jesus tradition also occur in the Sayings Gospel Q (see Lk 6:22-23). Matthew's (5:11) interpretation of this tradition must be understood against the background of the controversies with the synagogue. The persecutions to which the passage refers in the context of the historical Jesus probably did not arise on the basis of a synagogical controversy; this persecution probably occurred within families and consequently brought about internal torment. It is perhaps no inflation of historical probabilities to say that the following familiar sayings in the Gospel of Thomas and in the Sayings Gospel Q form a pattern that resembles family disintegration:

Jesus says, '[Foxes have] their holes and birds have their nests. But the son of man [human beings] has [have] no place to lay his [their] head down (and) to rest' (GosThom 86; cf Q 9:58).

Jesus says: 'Whoever does not hate his father and his mother cannot become a disciple of mine. And whoever does not hate his brothers and his sisters (and) will not take up his cross as I do, will not be worthy of me' (GosThom 55; cf Q 14:26-27).

Jesus says: 'Blessed are the poor. For the kingdom of heaven belongs to you' (GosThom 54; cf Q 6:20b).

'Blessed are you who hunger, for you will be satisfied' (Q 6:21a; cf GosThom 69:2).

'Blessed are you when(ever) they hate you (and) persecute you' (GosThom 68; cf Q 6:22).

The disintegration of families and poverty as consequence could be caused by military occupation and dispossession of land. In Plutarch's 'Life of Tiberius' (see Bultmann 1931:102 note 2; cf Dreyer 2000:252), we find a speech about land reform which argues that soldiers of the emperor had the right to receive land that had been taken from others. Tiberius was the emperor when the teachings of the historical Jesus were heard. Tiberius declared: 'The wild beasts inhabiting Italy have holes, their places of rest and refuge, but those who fight and die for Italy have no share in it except air and light and are forced to wander unsettled with their wives and children' (see Collins 1996:150). This saying of Tiberius was probably well-known among the peasants during the time of Jesus. Antagonism towards Roman en Herodian authorities on account of the dispossession of land and the resulting disintegration of families was to be expected. It is impossible to know whether Jesus had the saying of Tiberius in mind. It is possible that a similar wisdom saying of Jesus could have been taken over in the Q tradition and only later, when placed in a biographical context, resonated with the saying of Tiberius.

Several of Jesus' pronouncements must be understood against the background that many of his followers had earlier been members of families which experienced domestic conflict and had now been incorporated into a surrogate family. What could therefore have happened here is that Jesus 'healed' such a situation. When Jesus encouraged people to hate and leave their family he did so against the background of the people to whom he spoke already having experienced serious familial conflicts. Some of them *already* 'hated' their mothers, fathers, mothers in law and so forth. 'Family' in this context refers both to biological families and to marital relationships (Davies 1995:110). In Jesus they found a new (surrogate) family.

Jesus probably sent out people on missions 'to heal and cast out devils in his name', but their effectivity would have been directly proportional to and dependent on his reputation as a healer. At the time the name 'Jesus' was a common one and would not in itself have had 'magical effectivity.' If Jesus had a reputation as a healer and exorcist it is possible that his representatives co-operated under his auspices and healed as well as cast out demons on his behalf (Davies 1995:111).

Jesus can, therefore, be viewed as a *faith healer*. Following Jesus would in these terms amount to faith in the power of the healer. Cases which have been healed or improved by faith healing have usually been psychosomatic in nature. Stevan Davies is of the opinion that such a faith healer will only be effective with regard to psychosomatic illness. Davies (1995:69-70) uses the term 'hidden illness,' also known as 'hidden hysteria' and 'hidden neurosis' (nervous disease).

A hidden illness may occur when a person develops guilty feelings about a particular action, but does not want to accept the guilt and internalises it. This internalised guilt then manifests itself in 'self-punishment' such as blindness, paralysis, or dermatitis (inflammation of the skin). Traumatic experiences may lead to a 'hidden illness' if they are repressed and later reappear as physical symptoms. The conspicuous characteristic of this illness is a change in or loss of physical function which suggests physical sickness but which really is an expression of a psychological conflict or need.

The patient may benefit from this hidden illness in two ways. In the first place the person may attain primary benefit. For instance, inner conflict as a result of loss of temper may be manifested after an argument as 'dumbness,' or as 'paralysis' of the arm; or if a person has witnessed a traumatic event conflict with regard to the recognition of this event may be expressed as 'blindness.' In these cases the symptom has symbolic value which is a re-presentation and specific solution of the underlying psychological conflict. Secondly, the person may gain secondary benefit through avoidance of a particular activity that is harmful. For instance, a soldier with a paralysed arm is unable to handle a gun.

Somatic illness is a related syndrome and has the following characteristics: repeated and multiple somatic complaints which last for several years, for which medical help has been sought, but which is unlikely to have been caused by a physical sickness. Somatic illness has hidden or pseudo-neurological symptoms which may include weight loss, dumbness, deafness, blindness, paralysis, muscle deterioration and excessive menstrual bleeding. Somatic illness is, in essence, a form of hidden illness which occurs over a longer period. Dumbness, deafness, paralysis (complete or partial) and excessive menstrual bleeding form the majority of cases healed by Jesus. This leads Davies (1995:67-73) to the conclusion that the types of persons healed by Jesus probably suffered from the illnesses discussed above.

4.2   Pressure of the Roman regime/levying of tax
Different people react differently to a stressful situation. Thus a small percentage of students will, for instance, today develop a skin rash before a big examination

(psychosomatic dermatitis), while other students show no symptoms. In the same way some first-century Palestinians 'survived' under the pressure of the Roman regime and the levying of excessive taxes, while others became psychosomatically ill. Evidence proves that Jesus healed some of the latter. Therefore Jesus' healings may be described as psychotherapeutic in nature.

Certain groups of people have a greater tendency than others to show heightened somatic symptoms in spite of the absence of physical sickness: (a) persons with neuroticism or personality disorders which can be diagnosed (b) persons with chronic psychopathological disorders, for instance depressive disorders (c) persons who experience continuous difficulties in their lives, for instance a long period of joblessness, continuous conflict within marriage, or an unsafe residential area (d) persons who experience an acute episode of stress-related psychological symptomatology, for instance mourning after the death of a loved one (Depue & Monroe 1986:36).

The following texts can be seen as examples of hidden disorders which were understood by first-century Mediterranean people as devil possession (Davies 1995:73):

- fever punished as a demon (Lk 4:38-39);
- loss of movement of a limb (Mk 2:1-12);
- hunched back caused by a demon (Lk 13:10-12);
- blindness (Mk 8:22-27);
- deafness (Mk 7:31-37);
- blindness and deafness caused by a demon (Mt 12:22);
- demonic possession (Mk 1:21-28).

We find here explanatory paradigms in which somatic, sensory and identity dissociation are linked to and explained in terms of the hypothesis of belief in the existence of demons and demon possession. It is unclear whether diseases/defects were always understood as being caused by a demon, but it is clear that all forms of defects could be understood in this way.

The difference between our contemporary judgement of these cases and that of the time of the New Testament lies in the difference between a 'realistic' image of the situation, namely that the problems originated as a result of forces outside of the particular person (demons) and an 'idealistic' view (ours) that the problems could have originated as a result of internal forces within the persons involved (cf Malina 1991:67-96). Here we see the difference between the mythological worldview (of which the Bible is testimony) and the modern scientific worldview. Our understanding of an event in the New Testament may differ from the understanding and experience of a first-century Mediterranean person for the simple reason that our understanding of reality is based on our modern technological knowledge of the world and that we read from this perspective (see Vorster 1986:49)

5.   Factors giving rise to demon possession
5.1   Social stress

Social stress may be caused by various factors such as, for instance, class conflict which has its origin in economic exploitation, labelling, and 'colonial dominance' (see Kiev 1964:135-137, 204-205, 262-263; Lewis 1971:35; Bourguignon 1976: 53-54; Van Eck 1995:309). De Villiers (1986:27) describes the circumstances of the first-century peasant as a 'deep feeling of uncertainty and alienation.' They conditioned people psychologically and created fertile ground for miracle healings.

5.1.1   Economic exploitation

The average peasant farmer and his family would probably keep and be able to make use of as little as 20% of their annual proceeds for their own use and survival (cf Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:375-376). In the case of farmers who did not own their own land but rented it, the percentage would clearly have been even lower. This social tension resulting from economic exploitation and the levying of taxes a possible cause of devil possession (see Bourguignon 1976:53-54). Some first-century Palestinians did manage to 'cope' with the pressures of the Roman regime and the Judaic tax levies, while some became psychosomatically ill (see Davies 1995:2).

5.1.2   Labelling

There are many examples of labelling in the synoptic gospels. Labelling could be positive or negative (see Malina & Neyrey 1988: 152-157 for a list of positive and negative labels in Matthew). For this reason it is always important to query the identity of the persons who bring accusations. With reference to Mark 3:22-30, the label 'demon' (negative) or 'spirit' (positive) depends on the perspective of the onlooker (see Davies 1995:31). Jesus was labelled positively by some groups ('Christ the Lord' - Lk 2:11; 'great prophet' - Lk 7:16; 'Master' - Mk 5:35; 'Son of God' - Lk 1:35), and negatively by others ('possessed by Beelzebub' - Mk 3:22; 'agitator' - Lk 23:5) and so forth.

Negative labelling was a powerful social weapon with which a person could be caused damage (see Malina & Neyrey 1988:4). Negative labelling emanating from influential persons could cause damage if the particular label led to a person being viewed as 'out of place' by the community (see Malina & Neyrey 1991b:99). To understand the true danger of negative labelling the *dyadic personality* of the persons in the New Testament needs to be borne in mind. It mattered what other people thought of one and this was, in turn, related to honour and shame.

Negative labelling was meant to accuse a person of transgressive behaviour. 'Transgressive behaviour' was that kind of behaviour deemed by members of a social group as behaviour which disturbed their communal understanding of order within their particular community. Such 'transgressive behaviour' therefore depended on the opinions of the persons who brought the accusation and was not determined by the metaphysical nature of the matter. In the eyes of the ones who did the labelling, namely the *agents of censure* (see Malina & Neyrey 1991b:102), the labelled person may be out of place to such an extent that a (negative) redefinition was required.

5.1.3   Colonial domination

Palestine under Herod was viewed by the Romans as the property of the Roman authorities (*ager publicus populi Romani)* and, therefore, 'available' for exploitation (Oakman 1986:67). Exploitation and expropriation of land were part of a cruel reality in spite of the fact that the Romans respected Jewish land as well as marriage arrangements. Large pieces of land were bought and rented out for personal gain or to support the Roman army (see Fiensy 1991:79).

This colonial domination and oppression would necessarily result in stressed people. It therefore follows logically that mental disturbance/demonic possession would take up such an important place within the community. Many scholars (see Hollenbach 1982; Myers 1988:141-152; 1992:1-13; Waetjen 1989:113-119; Davies 1993:2; Crossan 1996:92) showed the link between oppression and demonic possession. The classic example to illustrate this is Mark 5:1-20 (the possessed man of Gerasa). The name of the demon, *Legio*, refers to Roman colonialism in Palestine and the economic exploitation, political

oppression and social upheaval which accompanied it. By casting out the evil spirits, sending them into the pigs and letting them fall into the sea, Jesus not only illustrated his power over 'colonialism' but simultaneously destroyed the Roman legions' source of food. Roman imperialism meant that, on a social level, Israelites were possessed by demons. By casting out the demons Jesus (symbolically) liberated people from oppression (Van Eck 1995:311; Crossan 1996:93). Each Israelite liberation fighter dreamed of the day the Romans would be driven back into the Mediterranean (Crossan 1996:92).

In this pericope we also see the convoluted nature of the Mediterranean social structure. The demonic possession of the man is the result of Roman oppression (politics). As a result of his possession the man lives among the tombs and not with his family (familial structure). His demon possession also has an effect on his family and results in the upheaval of family life.

5.2   Preservation of social power

A matter which may be viewed as being closely related to the concept 'labelling' concerns the 'preservation of social power.' According to Bourguignon (1976:53) and Rosen (1986:5-17) this means that allegations of mental disturbance, demonic possession and magic may be used by socially dominant classes as a measure of social control. These allegations are based on a distancing technique which has as purpose to discredit, isolate, deny common bonds and, eventually, to establish a separate identity. It may happen, for instance, when the understanding of the community by persons in positions of religious authority is questioned. In reaction these leaders would classify the person questioning them as possessed by demons and in the process attain social control of this person while simultaneously also protecting and maintaining their own understanding of the social structure (Van Eck 1995:309).

5.3   Protest

Demonic possession may also be viewed as a socially acceptable form of indirect protest against dominance or even as an escape from such dominance (Fanon 1963:290; Kiev 1964:218-219; Lewis 1971:72; Ward & Beaubrun 1980:206). Certain cases of demonic possession can be seen as a survival mechanism which may (see Davies 1995:37), for instance, be used by children against their parents, or by women against their husbands, with the result that feelings and demands may be expressed which otherwise would have remained latent. Certain types of demonic possession may therefore be understood as an escape from, 'healing' of, as well as symptom of social conflict (see Van Eck 1995:309). In a stressful situation demonic possession was therefore a socially accepted and recognised practice – a survival mechanism which served as an outlet for the stress caused by circumstances.

5.4   Possession as coping mechanism

Several cross-cultural studies have proven that demonic possession is a way in which a socially subordinate individual reacts to particular circumstances (Davies 1995:81). It is a way in which a person may survive within her or his circumstances (usually family conflicts) – therefore a survival mechanism. This is probably the reason why demonic possession usually occurs among women and children: they are subordinate members of a family structure (Davies 1995:81). In view of anthropological analysis, most of the possessed people from whom Jesus casted out demons found themselves in unbearable, socially subordinate circumstances (within their family groupings) and that it is probable most of these persons were women (Lk 8:1-3). Being possessed by the devil therefore was

often a coping mechanism, a way of responding, rather than a supernatural occurrence *per se* (Davies 1995:86).

6.   'Illness', 'disease', 'healing' and 'cure'

In Western society, in which achievement and self-sufficiency are culturally highly valued, health might be defined as 'the ability to carry out those functions which enable the organism to maintain itself.' But from a medical-anthropological perspective health is understood as a *condition of wellbeing* as seen from a particular cultural perspective (Pilch 1995:319-320).

In medical anthropology 'sickness' is used as an umbrella term to describe a reality. 'Disease' and 'illness' are used as explicating terms to describe two sides of this one coin, sickness. 'Disease' lies in the sphere of biomedicine – a prognosis may be made and therapy prescribed. 'Disease' affects individual persons; a person becomes sick, e g a person is leprous. But persons in Mediterranean society are always embedded within a group (compare the concept of the dyadic personality). For this reason the term 'illness' is used in medical anthropology to represent the socio-cultural perspective which accounts for the social and personal experience of a sickness. 'Illness' as an explicating concept which describes the human observation, experience and interpretation of certain social conditions which lack value – which includes 'disease' but is not limited to it (Worsley 1982:327). Thus 'disease' is an explicating concept which describes abnormalities in the structure and/or function of human organs.

'Curing' pertains to 'disease' and refers to the anticipated result. In other words, an attempt is made to attain effective control over an indisposed biological and/or physiological process. 'Healing' pertains to 'illness': an attempt is made to give life personal and social meaning which has been removed from it. The problem with modern biomedicine may be that it is aimed solely at 'curing' the 'disease' while the patient is looking for a 'healing' of the 'illness' (Pilch 1995:320; cf Kleinman 1980).

7.   Curing for the sake of curing?

A miracle narrative seems to never be told solely for the sake of the miracle; it seems always in principle instrumental in dealing with another matter (Hills 1993:6). A miracle narrative, including the miracle narratives in the New Testament, is the biblical author's representation and interpretation of particular events. When an author tells a story it is done from a particular perspective and with a particular purpose, whether the purpose is the communication of information, the persuasion of the auditor, or whatever. A miracle narrative is a speech act, a linguistic act – it is not merely a physical act. Therefore the reader must be aware of the interpretation of the author as well as of the purpose for which the author uses the miracle narrative (see Vorster 1986: 52-53). Jesus healed symptomatically, that is, his healing is focused on the relief or control of symptoms, a process aimed at the creation of new meaning in the life of the patient (Pilch 1992:31).

Jesus was a faith-healer – an individual of whom other people believed that he could cure them and who, on the basis of their faith, really did heal or, at least, relieved their symptoms to such a degree that the ill were convinced healing had taken place or that the natural healing process (which in any case would have occurred) was thanks to the (faith-) healer's role. The question is which symptoms may be healed by a healer who, according to the reports in the gospels, depended on people's faith in his ability to heal them. Which types of healing would a successful healer be able to effect? The answer to this is simply that these would be psychosomatic disorders resulting from stressful situations. Jesus'

healings may therefore be described as 'psychotherapeutic' in nature (see Davies 1993:1; see also Funk 1996:253).

Jesus' healings in a modern society may be circumscribed in contemporary language with the term *empowerment healing*: Jesus 'empowers' people to survive again; He gives new meaning and sense to people's lives. But Jesus the healer paid a price for this when he was labelled a 'friend of publicans and sinners' (Mt 11: 19). The healings of Jesus were not miracle cures in the sense of a supernatural intervention by God in the physical world: rather, they are God's engagement with the social world of people. God became present in people's lives through the healings of Jesus. People were healed through God becoming present in the lives of 'nobodies': in the lives of sinners and other social outcasts.

It is possible that God today still carries out miracle healings, but then healings as understood above. It does not appear as if God today lengthens limbs or makes a malignant growth disappear overnight. God asks believers to be instrumental in letting people in distress, social outcasts according to contemporary standards, experience something of God's love for and acceptance of them through their fellow human beings.

BIBLIOGRAPPHY

Bourguignon, E 1976. *Possession*. San Francisco: Chandler and Sharp.

Bultmann, R [1921] 1931. *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*. Zweite neubearbeitete

Auflage. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck.

Chiat, MJ 1981. First-century synagogue architecture: Methodological problems, in Gutmann 1981:49-60.

Collins, AY 1996. The origin of the designation of Jesus as 'Son of Man', in *Cosmology and eschatology in Jewish and Christian apocalypticism*, 139-158. Leiden: Brill. (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 50.)

Crossan 1996. *Who is Jesus? Answers to your questions about the historical Jesus*. New York: Harper Collins.

Davies, S 1993. Whom Jesus healed and how. *The Fourth R* 6(2), 1-11.

Davies, S 1995. *Jesus the healer*. London: SCM Press.

Depue, RA & Monroe, S M 1986. Conceptualization and measurement of human disorder in life stress research: The problem of chronic disturbance. *Psychological Bulletin* 99, 36.

De Villiers, PGR 1986. Jesus and the Divine Man tradition: Miracles in the world and time of the New Testament, in De Villiers, PGR (ed), *Healing in the name of God*. Pretoria: CB Powell Bible Centre, University of South Africa.

Dreyer, Y 2000. Institutionalization of authority and titles used for Jesus. PhD dissertation, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

Engelbrecht, J 1986. The blind can see, the lame can walk, the deaf hear: Miracle workers and their miracles in the New Testament, in De Villiers, PGR (ed), *Healing in the name of God*. Pretoria: C B Powell Bible Centre, University of South Africa.

Fanon, F 1963. *The wretched of the earth*. New York: Ballantine.

Fiensy, DA 1991. *The social history of Palestine in the Herodian Period*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen. (Studies in the Bible and early Christianity 20.)

Funk, RW 1996. *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a new millennium*. New York: Harper Collins.

Funk, RW & Hoover RW (and The Jesus Seminar) 1993. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Funk, RW (and The Jesus Seminar) 1998. *The Acts of Jesus: What did Jesus Really Do?* San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. (A Polebridge Book.)

Gutmann, J 1981. *Ancient synagogues: The state of research*. Chico, CA: Scholars Press. (Brown Judaic Studies 22.)

Hills, J 1993. Jesus' miracles in history and tradition history. Jesus Seminar Papers, March 1993, Westar Institute, Santa Rosa, CA.

Hollenbach, PW 1982. Jesus, demoniacs, and public authorities: A socio-historical study. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49, 507-588.

Horsley, RA 1994. The historical Jesus and archaeology of the Galilee: Questions from historical Jesus research to archaeologists. *SBL 1994 Seminar Papers*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.

Kiev, A (ed) 1964. *Magic, faith and healing: Studies in primitive psychiatry today*. New York: Free Press.

Kleinman, AM 1980. *Patients and healers in the context of culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lewis, IM 1971. *Ecstatic religion: An anthropological study of possession and Shamanism.* Baltimore: Penguin.

Malina, BJ 1991. First-century personality: Dyadic, not individualistic, in Neyrey, JH (ed), *The world of Luke-Acts: Models for interpretation*, 67-96. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Malina, BJ 1993. *Windows on the world of Jesus: Time travel to ancient Judea.* Louisville: John Knox.

Malina, BJ & Neyrey JH 1988. *Calling Jesus names: The social value of labels in Matthew.* Sonoma: Polebridge Press.

Malina, BJ & Neyrey JH 1991. Conflict in Luke-Acts: Labelling and deviance theory, in Neyrey, JH (ed), *The world of Luke-Acts: Models for interpretation*, 97-124. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Malina, BJ & Rohrbaugh, RL 1992. *Social science commentary on the synoptic gospels.* Minneapolis: Fortress.

Meyers, EM 1981. Ancient Gush Halav (Giscala), Palestinian synagogues and the eastern Diaspora, in Gutmann 1981:61-78.

Myers, C 1988. *Binding the strong man: A political reading of Mark's story of Jesus.* New York: Orbis.

Oakman, DE 1986. *Jesus and the economic questions of his day.* New York: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Patterson, SJ, Robinson, JM & Bethge, H-G 1998. *The fifth gospel: The Gospel of Thomas comes of age.* With a new English translation by H-G Bethge et al. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

Pilch, JJ 1992. Understanding healing in the social world of early Christianity. *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22(1), 26-33.

Pilch, JJ 1995. Insights and models from medical anthropology for understanding the healing activity of the historical Jesus. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 51(2), 314-337.

Rousseau, JJ 1992. Jesus in the world of exorcism. Jesus Seminar Papers, October 1992.

Rosen, G 1986. Madness in society: Chapters in the historical sociology of mental illness. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sanders, EP 1985. *Jesus and Judaism.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Van Aarde, AG 1994a. *Kultuurhistoriese agtergrond van die Nuwe Testament.* Pretoria: Kital.

Van Aarde, AG 1994b. A silver coin in the mouth of a fish (Mt 17:24-27): A miracle of nature, ecology, economy and the politics of holiness, in Van Aarde, AG 1994, *God-with-us: The dominant perspective in Matthew's story, and other essays*, 204-228. Pretoria: University of Pretoria. (HTS Suppl 5.)

Van Eck, E 1995. *Galilee and Jerusalem in Mark's story of Jesus: A narratological and social scientific reading.* Pretoria: University of Pretoria. (*HTS* Suppl 7.)

Vermes, G 1973. *Jesus the Jew.* London: Collins.

Vorster, WS 1986. On miracles and miracle stories: From the earthly Jesus to the written text, in De Villiers, PGR (ed), *Healing in the name of God.* Pretoria: CB Powell Bible Centre, University of South Africa.

Waetjen, HC 1989. *A reordering of power: A socio-political reading of Mark's gospel.* Minneapolis: Fortress.

Ward, C & Beaubrun, MH 1980. Psychodynamics of demon possession. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19(2), 201-207.

Worsley, P 1982. Non-western medical systems. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11, 315-348.