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Irony and Spirituality in Matthew 8:23–9:1: A Narrative Analysis

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And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing.” And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?” And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. And the demons begged him, saying, “If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.” And he said to them, “Go.” So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters. The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region. And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. (Matthew 8:23–9:1 ESV)

The literary device of irony can sometimes remain undetected unless we search for it with intentional effort. This is largely due to its inherent quality of surprise. Yet in our aim of reaching out to people with the gospel message, it is well worth digging deeply into the text for every facet that can benefit the spiritual growth of the community we shepherd.

Narrative analysis, one of the most recently developed methodologies in biblical interpretation, is a multidimensional model that escapes the linear thinking of a typical exegetical process (background→text→application). Instead, the interpreter observes the text's artistry through different lenses. The study of characters, plot, actions, motifs, props, settings, and a host of stylistic features and literary techniques help uncover the layered meanings buried beneath the surface of the text.

Irony, as a literary device, may not readily appear as a particularly rich medium for spiritual growth, yet it offers deep theological lessons that may otherwise remain unaccessed. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines irony as a "perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very difference significance."¹ Within the sphere of irony as literary device, two types are prevalent in literature: situational or dramatic irony, and verbal irony. While verbal irony reflects the intentional conceit of the real meaning of the words, situational or dramatic irony involves "a situation in which there is an incongruity between what is expected and what occurs."² This latter type of irony peppers numerous biblical narratives, inviting the serious reader to dig deep into the complex layers of the story in order to uncover the message within.

An example of situational irony is found in Matt 8:23–9:1, the story of Jesus calming the sea and freeing the Gadarene demoniacs, in which the parallelisms present in the passage make manifest several striking ironies. The two miracles in this narrative have typically been studied separately, as parts of triads or as parts in a series of miracles. The commonalities between these miracles, however, also warrant an exploration of them together: the passage begins and ends with Jesus getting into the boat, and the motifs of *sea*, *peril*, *power*, and *rescue* run through the entire narrative, weaving a remarkable mesh of surprising parallelisms that saturate the story with dramatic irony. Thus, in order to highlight the irony, I have structured the essay around three parallels between different characters. Within this complex web of parallels, Jesus stands out as a unique character whose very nature exhibits an ironic polarity of power and vulnerability, displayed in resolute action and active submission.

As will be seen throughout the essay, an exegetical practice that includes the search for irony can be of great aid to pastors and leaders desiring to bring freshness and depth of message to their congregations.

THE DISCIPLES AND THE DEMONS

The parallelism between the disciples and the demons emerges from the

¹*The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, March 2008), digital edition.

²*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, online at <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/294609/irony> (accessed April 13, 2015).

speech patterns. Both sets of characters initiate a dialogue with Jesus and in response Jesus replies once to each. The dialogues exhibit five common elements: peril, fear, loss of control, an accusatory spirit, and recognition of limited power.

Both the disciples and the demons face peril, which elicits fear. The disciples fear perishing in the storm and the demons fear being tormented before the time. Consequently, they each reach out to Jesus with a request. The disciples ask Jesus for help, and the demons beseech him to let them enter a herd of swine.

Furthermore, both pleas to Jesus couch an accusation. The fact that the disciples wake Jesus up and state the obvious in the situation (“we are perishing”; 8: 25) implies reproach. How could Jesus be sleeping when they are in such dire circumstances? How could a caring master remain undisturbed when his followers experience life-threatening distress? As Stuart Weber suggests, “The natural reaction of anyone in this situation would be to bail out the water, so the disciples must have been working feverishly,” so they “were probably angry that Jesus was not contributing to the bailing effort or exercising his power to help save their lives.”³ The fact that after the miracle they marvel at Jesus’ supernatural power makes it most likely that their request remained in the realm of what was humanly possible (“what sort of man is this?”; 8:27). “To these men of little faith (8:26), Jesus was at least another pair of hands”⁴ who could help steer the boat and keep the water out.

The demons’ accusation is more forthright: “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” (8:29). The detail “before time” suggests that even while the demons are aware of a future doom, fairness requires that Jesus respect a certain time frame. Making no apology for their controlling actions, the demons set the stage for the plea to enter the swine and use an accusatory and subtly manipulative speech in order to ensure a positive response.

Another parallel feature between the disciples and the demons is recognition of their limited power as both sets of characters lose control under the threat of superior powers. The disciples lose control of the boat as they are powerlessly tossed back and forth on the raging sea. In response to their desperate appeal for help, Jesus displays his superior power and controls the natural forces that control the disciples, thus saving them from perishing. He is “sufficiently in control of the situation to be able to deal with the disciples’ fear before taking action on the storm,”⁵ and he manifests concern not only for their physical safety but also—primarily, in fact—for their spiritual security.

The demons are quite impressively introduced as characters that hold inordinate power in the country of the Gadarenes. Not only do they control two men, but the territory as well. They are “so fierce that no one could pass that way” (8:28). Their dominance, however, is suddenly threatened by the presence of someone

³Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000) 119.

⁴Ibid.

⁵R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 336.

they recognize as superior in power. Jesus' mere presence is an ominous prediction of their grim future, which they attempt to evade by entering the swine. Under the threat of Jesus' superior power, they lose control of both the two men and the territory. Thus, in a remarkable "confrontation between a formidable array of demons" and a "single individual,"⁶ Jesus demonstrates a power before which even the demons are bound to bow down.

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As noted, the disciples and demons exhibit the common features of peril, fear, loss of control, pleading with Jesus in an accusatory spirit, and recognition of their limited power. These similarities paint the background for the ironic and striking differences between the two collective character sets. The disciples fear because they do not know Jesus' power; the demons, quite the contrary, because they do know it. While the disciples marvel at "what sort of man" Jesus is (8:27), the demons recognize the authority of the "Son of God" (8:29).

Another irony emerging from the comparison of these two characters is the fact that, at the intersection of knowledge and obedience, one can take different paths. The disciples follow Jesus through life-threatening storms even while they evidently do not fully grasp his nature and power.⁷ The demons demonstrate no confusion. They know precisely with whom they are dealing and their opposition derives precisely from this knowledge. Apparently, then, knowing God does not guarantee following him, just as following God does not necessitate knowing him fully.

Lastly, the ironic dissimilarity between the disciples and the demons is underscored by the sea motif: while the disciples fear perishing in the sea, the demons disappear in the waters. The "great storm" (σεισμός μέγας; 8:24) that threatens the disciples gives way to a "great calm" (γαλήνη μεγάλη; 8:26). This calm becomes almost prescient of the pigs' violent death. The very sea that Jesus calms in order to save the disciples swallows the demon-possessed pigs. Under the superior control of Jesus, the sea participates both in rescue and death, in a symbolic prefiguration of the final judgment.

THE DEMONS AND THE GADARENE POPULATION

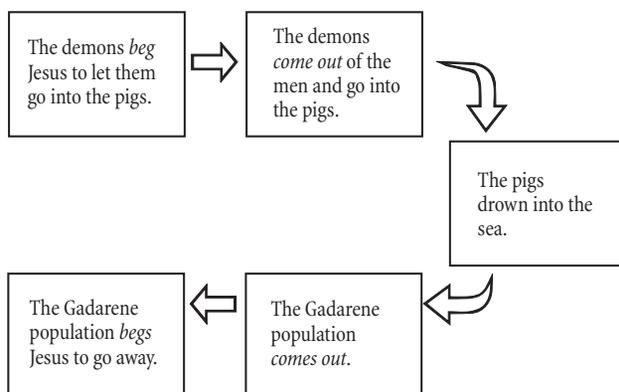
The demons are connected with the Gadarene population through two common actions described in two words: begged and came out. When confronted with the grim outcome signaled by Jesus' presence, the demons *begged* (παρεκάλουν;

⁶Ibid., 339.

⁷David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 245.

8:31) Jesus to allow them to enter the herd of swine. Permission granted, they *came out* (ἐξεληθόντες; 8:32) of the men and went into the pigs. The Gadarene population's two recorded actions mirror those of the demons in reverse order: they *came out* (ἐξῆλθεν; 8:34) of the city and begged (παρεκάλεσαν; 8:34) Jesus to leave.

Not only do the two characters mirror each other, they are connected by causality. The causality can be illustrated as follows:



LINK OF CAUSALITY BETWEEN THE ACTIONS OF THE DEMONS AND THE ACTIONS OF THE GADARENE POPULATION

Jesus' sending the demons into the pigs ("Go"; 8:32) works like a boomerang and Jesus ends up being sent away from that place. While Jesus values people over pigs, the Gadarenes value pigs over people. By turning the value system upside down, the Gadarene population align with the demons and place themselves on the side of Jesus' enemies. As a result of focusing on what was taken away from them, they fail to understand what was being offered, and they treat the savior as an enemy. Thus, in yet another ironic twist, the Gadarene population treat Jesus in the same way Jesus has treated the demons: Jesus expels the demons from the men, and the Gadarene population expel Jesus from their country. The demons' last wish is a remarkably strategic plea that ensures revenge and opposition to Jesus' ministry even as the demons compel the pigs down the steep banks. The story offers no reason why the pigs would "commit suicide," except under the impulse of the demons. What is clear in the story, however, is the opposition between Jesus and the demons. This is initially expressed in their question: "What have you to do with us?" (8:29), which "is not a question for information, but a formula of repudiation—literally, 'What to you and to us?' meaning 'What do we have in common? We belong to two different worlds.'"⁸ The contrast between Jesus and the demons is further underscored by the demons' use of power in order to possess versus Jesus' use of power in order to free. Given this unambiguous opposition, the de-

⁸M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 232.

mons' request is most likely a well-thought-out plan to ensure sustained hostility against Jesus, which is precisely what the Gadarene population demonstrates. As "the unclean go into the unclean,"⁹ the Gadarene population identify themselves with the demons and prove to be a people uninterested in being cleansed by Jesus.

THE DEMON-POSSESSED MEN AND THE GADARENE POPULATION

The parallel between the demon-possessed men and the Gadarene population yields some of the most subtle, yet incredibly powerful, ironies. Both the demon-possessed men and the Gadarene population receive freedom. The demon-possessed men are freed from possession and are given back control over themselves. The Gadarene population is given back control over their territory. The place where no one could pass by for fear of the demons is now freed and the city inhabitants are able to walk to Jesus.

The way in which the Gadarene population uses its freedom, however, is astoundingly ironic. While the very act of Jesus freeing the demon-possessed men made it possible for the Gadarene population to freely go where Jesus was, they use their freedom in order to ask him to leave. Their choice reflects their bondage to material possessions, as suggested by the author's use of the word *πᾶς* (whole, all, entire) twice in the story: "the whole herd [*πᾶσα ἡ ἀγέλη*] rushed down the bank and drowned" (8:32), and "all the city [*πᾶσα ἡ πόλις*] came out to meet Jesus" (8:34). These descriptions are key for grasping the Gadarene population's union with the pigs. The people identify themselves with their material possessions so completely that they become blind to the miracle of liberation. Thus, ironically, while the demon-possessed men are freed to regain control over themselves, the Gadarene population succumbs to deeper bondage to material possessions. As the demon-possessed men, who had succumbed to oppression too deeply to even speak for themselves, are liberated, the Gadarene population, who still have a voice to speak for themselves, use it only to make manifest their deeper acquiescence to material captivity.

IRONY AND SPIRITUALITY IN MATTHEW 8:23–9:1

As mentioned in the introduction, the literary device of irony can sometimes remain undetected unless we search for it with intentional effort. This is largely due to its inherent quality of surprise. Yet in our aim of reaching out to people with the gospel message, it is well worth digging deeply into the text for every facet that can benefit the spiritual growth of the community we shepherd. Above and beyond the artistic quality the use of irony offers a story, this literary tool yields deep spiritual lessons. To illustrate this further, I offer a review of the spiritual lessons emerging from Matt 8:23–9:1.

⁹Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) 117.

The disciples

Two spiritual lessons arise from analyzing the disciples and observing the irony in this passage. First, as underscored by the parallel with the demons, closeness to Jesus is not a warrant of true knowledge of God. Although the disciples were followers of Jesus and thus were in close proximity to him, their knowledge of his true nature was limited, leading consequently to their weak faith. Conversely, an accurate knowledge of God does not guarantee obedience, as the demons who knew Jesus well demonstrate through sustained opposition to his ministry. The story illustrates two alternatives: we may (1) know Jesus fully and oppose him, or (2) know Jesus little and have little faith. A cross between these two emerges as the most desirable choice, which no character illustrates in this story, but becomes the ideal for the reader: (3) to know Jesus fully and follow him in great faith.

The second irony is that the disciples' weakness is made manifest in their very area of expertise. Being fishermen by profession, we can safely assume that the disciples could recognize real danger,¹⁰ and thus we can grasp the extent of the threat as we witness grown men cry out loud for help. If anyone could survive a storm on Galilee, unpredictable as the sea was,¹¹ our best bet would be on experienced fishermen. Yet their area of proficiency proved insufficient in the moment.

to seek God on the same terms as we seek help from fellow human beings is an insult to God's power and a disgrace to God's mercy

Sometimes it is most difficult for us to appeal to God when we are tried in the areas where we are most confident in our capabilities. Despite how real and great a danger we are facing, we tend to rely on ourselves in what we know best and seek the solution through our own powers. The presence of Jesus is guaranteed to ensure victory and salvation, but only when we know him to be more capable of saving us than we are ourselves. To seek God on the same terms as we seek help from fellow human beings is an insult to God's power and a disgrace to God's mercy. As disciples of Christ, our "first priority... must be to focus on the power of Jesus, not on the power of life's storms that threaten to overcome [us]."¹² Only then can our fear give way to trust and hope.

The Gadarene population

The actions of the Gadarene population, particularly as evidenced by contrast

¹⁰France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 337.

¹¹Commentators elucidate that sudden and violent storms are not unusual on the Sea of Galilee. Due to its relatively low location and being surrounded by mountain ranges, unpredictable storms were common and were strong enough to produce waves up to seven feet. These waves could easily capsize a fishing boat without sails of the sort that Jesus likely used in the account of Matt 8:23–9:1. See Weber, *Matthew*, 119, and Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 351.

¹²Turner, *Matthew*, 245.

with the outcome of the demon-possessed men, illustrate an ironic, sad, and rather counterintuitive reality: we can search for Jesus in order to ask him to leave. We can undertake a journey to find him, at the end of which our plea sends him away. On what wretched efforts we hang our hope for security!

Knowing that like the Gadarene population we are liable to choose the false safety of material possessions over the freeing presence of Jesus, we are urged to ask ourselves with proper gravity: What might we be afraid of losing or unwilling to let go of, should God display his rescuing power in our life or the life of our neighbor? Are we able to value the healing of our brothers and sisters above our material belongings? Are we ready to let God bless us with his presence even at the cost of losing our possessions?

The demon-possessed men

Lastly, the outcome of the demon-possessed men reminds us that God is willing and able to free us even when we have succumbed to our oppressor too deeply to even verbalize our want for liberation. Despite giving in to oppressive people or habits, despite losing our self-control almost completely, our inner hope and desire—faint and silent as they may be—can remain fastened in our knowledge of a God who takes initiative and walks up to our place of defeat to create victory.

Jesus

The ultimate irony in these stories is Jesus himself, whose character exhibits a surprising contrast. He, who has the ultimate power through which he frees human beings from natural and supernatural oppression, humbly submits to the villagers' request to leave. Thus, the great value he places on freedom is manifested not only in freeing the oppressed, but also in respecting the freedom of those who choose oppression. This irony is at the very core of God's nature. God has unlimited power, but has chosen to become limited by human beings whom he invested with reason and freedom to choose—even knowing that they will choose wrong.

God is powerful beyond measure, yet vulnerable beyond belief. The Son of God, as this passage shows, has authority over the entire realm of our planet: supernatural, natural, and human. Yet when asked to leave, he wordlessly and compliantly gets into the boat and crosses over to his own city (9:1).

As our ultimate example, Jesus teaches us that in our effort to bring the freeing message of salvation to others, respecting their freedom to choose is a prerequisite for successful ministry, even when in the moment it more resembles failure. This is as true as it is ironic, and it is as counterintuitive as the vulnerability of Jesus' earthly ministry is to the human mind.

The growth path that brings us ever closer to Jesus is often situated at the crossroad between the stories of the Bible characters and our personal experience. Situational irony, as we have seen in our exploration of Matt 8:23–9:1, is a tool that allows us to access spiritual lessons of eternal consequence. In the pursuit of truth,

it would profit pastors to include the use of irony in their hermeneutical toolbox as, ultimately, the recovery of precious lessons with which to nourish the searching souls is at the very heart of the pastoral ministry. ⊕



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