

Reflection | Naming our 'Legion'(s), Healing Political Bodies and the Body Politic  
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This morning we heard one of the stranger stories in the Christian writings, in which,

Jesus travels by boat from Galilee to the country of the Gerasenes,

There he meets a man tormented by demons who lives among the tombs outside of his city, he wears no clothes and is often shackled and chained by the people of his city out of fear that he will harm himself or others.

Jesus asks the tormented man "What is your name".

"Legion" is the answer, for there are many demons who torment him.

Fairly standard Jesus casting out a demon story so far, but it gets odd in the next bit...

Jesus is going to drive the demons out of the man but they beg of him,

Don't send us into the abyss, send us instead into the pigs that are on the hillside.

A strange process of negotiation, but Jesus does so.

The demons enter into the herd of pigs and they rush down the steep slope into the lake.

And they drown.

Those herding the pigs, understandably not loving this, rush into the city and tell everyone.

The whole city comes out,

They see the man clothed and (to use the words of the text) in his right mind.

They are terrified and they ask Jesus to leave.

So, he prepares to get into his boat and return to Galilee.

The man who has been made well asks to come, but Jesus instructs him to stay with his people.

And so, he does.

It's a story with intense symbolism and there is a lot we could say about this,

Too much for one reflection.

We could speak about the vivid imagery of personal torment being rendered as living among tombstones – an experience of living death.

We could have considered the experience of isolation and exclusion experienced by this one who is tormented.

This one who is expelled from community, care and connection, and how perhaps this is a move by this one's neighbours, to not just protect body and property from this one, but to protect their sense of community cohesion and justice – how it is necessary to turn away from suffering to maintain that illusion.

Any number of details in this story would provide an intriguing inroad to consider how we might make meaning from this episode.

As I've suggested, it's an odd story, and one might be compelled to ask and to wonder, why would the authors of the Christian Scriptures include this?

Now, depending on religious background, and perspective,

perhaps I have asked a very strange question in wondering why the authors included this.

If the Christian Scriptures we call the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

Are understood to be first hand, eye-witness accounts of the life of Jesus,

Recorded so that those who come later might believe in him,

Well then, isn't this story is there because it happened? How else might we understand this?

If we come at this text, with curiosity, wondering what meaning and effect this might have had for the people writing and receiving this text,

Wondering how it would have helped them make sense of their moment, and their role in that moment – then perhaps we might be invited to ask similar questions about ourselves.

To get a bit nerdy, this approach is a socio-literary hermeneutic (a fancy word for interpretation or framework through which to read). This way of reading and thinking about Biblical text tries to take seriously the social context of the text and how the writers are engaging with that context through literary technique.

On the surface, this seems to be a story about Jesus defeating demons, and in so doing, bringing healing and wholeness to this figure who has been tormented by the demons.

In a traditional reading this is part of an overall project of making a case for Jesus' divinity, saving power, superiority to other gods/philosophies.

In that way of thinking, the fact that all of this happens in the context of military colonial occupation of Jewish Palestine by the Roman Empire, is essentially irrelevant, it is background

information, the context in which a spiritual/religious event is occurring.

But there are some important details in this story which, when we become familiar with them, might suggest that the colonial context is absolutely central.

Kwok Pui-Lan is a Hong Kong born Asian Feminist Theologian and leading scholar and writer in postcolonial theologies. One of her major ideas is that in highlighting the colonial themes and motifs in Scripture which are generally downplayed, sometimes intentionally, reading Scripture becomes a way of engaging with colonial realities in our world today.

In a similar vein, Ched Myers argues that this is not a story about demons, as in little personifications of evil, but a story about internalized and pathologized trauma related to colonialism, itself named a demonic force which devastates both individuals and communities.

So for our consideration...

This episode takes place in the county of the Gerasenes which Jesus reaches by crossing from Galilee in a boat.

While technically part of Jewish Palestine, this is Gentile country, specifically, Roman country.

The country of the Gerasenes is also known as the Decapolis, 10 cities where many of the large estates would be owned by retired Roman Soldiers who decades earlier had led the campaigns that first brought this area under Roman rule.

This was how Roman colonialism worked, prized land as reward to their military conquerors - an affordable method of payment and also a way to remind the local population of their might as the local landscape is redrawn using the conquerors language!

The second detail is the name the demon gives to Jesus.

*Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him.*

When this story is recounted in Mark, the answer is more dramatic.

*My name is Legion; for we are many.*

Now, maybe you can see where I am going with this, but while *Legion* may now be a word that means in and of itself, many...

In the context of First Century Jewish Palestine, a Legion meant 4000-6000 Roman Soldiers.

One of the most well-known tourist attractions in Israel is the city of Masada, built on a plateau. Outside the city, one can still see today an imprint in the ground of a square, a mile on each side, where the Roman Legion camped out during the siege of the city, almost 2000 years ago.

I am Legion, for we are many.

A few years before Jesus of Nazareth is born, the city of Sepphoris, about an hour north of Nazareth, is burnt to the ground in response to an uprising among the people. For the next 30 years, anyone with skills in carpentry would have worked here.

Sometimes when Jesus is remembered as carpenter, one might imagine he and Joseph making artisanal furniture or something like that, but at this moment, carpentry and construction worker are one and the same – this would mean his apprenticeship would have been rebuilding a Jewish City destroyed by Roman soldiers, but rebuilding it as a modern Roman outpost.

Evidence and reminders of Roman Military violence was a very present reality for the people of this text.

The most well-known, the most feared fighting force in this part of the world is the 10th Legion, known for their ability to quell uprising through brutal violence.

And when they march into battle, which always ends in defeat that will torment the survivors of an area for years, they carry their flag, upon which is emblazoned their emblem - a wild, charging, boar.

A pig!

So, in this story in the Gospel of Luke, we have demons named “Legion” who are cast into pigs (the symbol of the local Roman Legion), who then run into the lake and drown.

It is worth noticing here that other symbols of the 10<sup>th</sup> Roman Legion included a bull, a ship, and the Neptune, God of the Sea.

It also happens that in the First Jewish Roman War, there was one naval battle.

The Jewish historian Josephus writes about a battle in the mid 60s in the land of Capernaum in which the 10th Roman Legion is regularly attacked by a band of rebels, under the leadership of Jesus son of Sherat (a good reminder, that Jesus was a reasonably common name – in Hebrew it would be Yeshua, which we would more likely translate as Joshua).

After a number of skirmishes, the Legion chases the rebels to the lake of Genesat where the fleeing rebels get in boats, are surrounded and subsequently every last one of them is drowned.

This vivid event occurred just a generation before the Gospel of Luke is written.

It is worth remembering that the Christian Scriptures emerge from a people who have experienced deep collective trauma. All of this is in the collective psychology of the people who wrote and received this story we’ve heard – and we might read in these stories a people seeking hope and possibility amidst all of this, particularly how the Jesus movement made a space for this.

This brings an intensity to the imagery of a man tormented by demons named for the Roman military living among tombs (itself a reference to the prophetic tradition which we heard from in the Book of Isaiah).

All of this imagery deeply ties the personal and the political in a complex and complicated knot – an individualized experience of collective terror, a longing for healing and wholeness for bodies who are political and for the collective body politic.

Then to use Kwok Pui-Lan's framework that uncovering the colonial undertones of the text calls us to attend to the colonial realities of our lived moment, does this text insist we pay attention to the political bodies individually and collectively traumatized by contemporary experiences of terror.

We might pick up books like Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* an essay from a Black American author to his child, whose bodily safety in a time of racial violence, is a deep fear:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

We might attend to trans artist, Vivek Shraya's powerful *I'm Afraid of Men*

<https://vivekshraya.com/projects/books/im-afraid-of-men/>

Or particularly as we approach National Indigenous People's Day, we could look at Haudenosaunee author Alicia Elliott's *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, a collection of essays about colonialism and personal and collective trauma.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/haudenosaunee-writer-alicia-elliott-s-personal-look-at-intergenerational-trauma-1.5076515>

You can find online in a previous form, one of the most powerful essays in this collection *Dark Matter* in which she reflects on her and her child's experience of the acquittal of the man who shot Nehiyo youth Colton Boushie

<https://hazlitt.net/longreads/dark-matters>

As we think then about the Book of Luke and this particular narrative we've heard today.

A people who understand themselves first and foremost as defeated, victims of Roman violence and might are invited to take on a new self-identity – as Roman might is undermined in this text.

Suddenly this story full of strange details is seen as creative narrative resistance.

It brings to mind the sort of subversive brilliance of Thomas King's legendary novel *Green Grass Running Water*.

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/green-grass-running-water-1.3992352>

In this novel, a very particular context, the fictionalized Prairie town of Blossom created by a dam that has disrupted the ways the river had run for millenia. Four elders who are simultaneously figures in Blackfoot mythology and subversive characters in American and British Colonial Literature, three stolen cars, a Nissan, a Pinto, and VW Karmann-Ghia (the Nina, Pinta, and Santa

Maria) and Coyote's song and dance which creates a flood and in so-doing makes possible a re-telling of the Blackfoot creation myth which begins with – Water Everywhere.

Can this sort of reading and think about our sacred texts open us up to a more robust engagement with the ongoing traumatic colonial realities of our society.

Public Theologian Damon Garcia (<https://twitter.com/whoisdamon>) suggests this...

The revelation within this story is that the apparent “eternal strength” of imperial powers is an illusion. Every empire is fragile, and its collapse is inevitable.

Meanwhile, the kin-dom of God persists.

The kin-dom lures us toward liberation, and one of the ways this happens is through reminders of the ephemeral nature of oppressive powers.

Within all of us rests a cosmic authority that outlasts any earthly authority, and empowers us to build a new world.

Jesus tapped into that authority, and we can too.

We name this day, a day to prayer, and lament.

Lament is a very different move than ‘wallowing’.

Lament is about becoming unsettled.

It is about never becoming ok with a status quo which allows for deep suffering.

The challenge is of course, that usually, when we find ourselves, once unsettled, settling back

At the end of the story, the text notes that the people of the cities ask Jesus to leave because they are ‘filled with great fear’ – which is odd isn't it?

Shouldn't this miraculous transformation be cause for joy?

Well, if what Jesus has done here is in fact unmask the pervasive power of the Roman occupation as the demonic force that torments, well then, their previous strategy of casting out those struggling is no longer tenable.

When Jesus makes this individual healing about a political body, then there is an implication for the whole of the community, the whole body politic –

they cannot possibly return from this moment of revelation, unmasking, naming their Legion.

