

Amanda Witmer, *Jesus, the Galilean Exorcist. His Exorcisms in Social and Political Context* (Library of New Testament Studies. Library of the Historical Jesus Studies 10; London: T&T Clark International, 2012). Pp. 247. \$ 120. ISBN 978-0-567-57552-4

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In the last few years there has been a change in the scholarly climate regarding Jesus' healings and exorcisms. In the first half of the twentieth century, New Testament scholars were dominated by skepticism regarding the historicity of Jesus. Since the 1970s the works of G. Vermes, J.D.G. Dunn, M. Smith, B.F. Meyer, D.E. Aune, E.P. Sanders and B. Chilton put emphasis on the historical value of the miracle tradition in the New Testament. The interest of this subject was confirmed by the SBL conference in 2009 where several papers on the exorcism and healing activity of Jesus appeared in the session on "Jesus as Healer". In this new scholarly climate we can also view the book by Amanda Witmer, *Jesus, the Galilean Exorcist. His Exorcisms in Social and Political Context* which grew out of her doctoral dissertation (McMaster University – Canada – 2009: *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean Exorcist: a Socio-Political and Anthropological Investigation*). In her work she asserts that Jesus' healings and exorcisms described in the synoptic tradition should be understood not only from a theological perspective but also from a socio-political one. According to her Jesus' activities as an exorcist were one of the major reasons for opposition to him from the Jewish leadership, Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate. In her work she tries to answer the following questions: What did incidents of spirit possession and Jesus' exorcisms mean within the specific socio-political sphere of Galilee and Judea at the end of the first third of the first century? Is there reason to think that spirit possession and exorcism can be assigned to the earliest strata of material that circulated about Jesus? Witmer's work is clearly situated within historical Jesus studies with an inclination to sociological and anthropological approaches. Previous works on this subject focused mainly on the historical, anthropological, and textual issues (for example G. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist*, Tübingen 1993; J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Mediterranean Anthropology*, Minneapolis 2000; E. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism in the*

New Testament and Early Christianity, Tübingen 2002; E. Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus' Miracles*, London 2002; P. Craffert, *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective*, Eugene 2008; E. Eve, *The Healer from Nazareth: Jesus' Miracles in Historical Context*, London 2009). Witmer in her work uses the results and methods of previous studies, trying to form anthropological and textual analysis into a new shape. Her aims are twofold: first, to isolate early and authentic exorcism traditions and establish a link between these early reports of exorcism found in Mark, Q, Matthew and Luke; and, second, to apply sociological and anthropological insights in order to reconstruct the historical figure of Jesus as an exorcist. In her reconstruction of the portrait of Jesus the exorcist she uses two main tools: first, a comparison of the accounts found in the Synoptic Gospels to determine the earliest level of tradition; second, the application of the five primary criteria of authenticity: the embarrassment, multiple attestation, coherence, discontinuity and dissimilarity, and rejection and execution. In her work she uses ethnographic studies from different contexts in order to determine the cultural patterns that coincide with spirit possession and exorcism. She takes into the consideration the wide context of Jewish (late Second Temple period – c. 250 B.C.E – 70 C.E.) and Greco-Roman (37 B.C.E. – 132 C.E.) writings and archaeological evidence. From New Testament writings special attention is paid to the Synoptic Gospels where the texts about exorcisms appear.

Witmer's book consists of 6 chapters. In the first chapter (pp. 1-21) she presents introductory issues about previous works on this subject, the purpose of the inquiry, and its methodology. In the *status quaestionis* of the previous scholarship on Jesus as exorcist there is lacking of the monograph which appeared in 2009, namely, E.M. Pericás, *Jesús y los espíritus: aproximación antropológica a la práctica exorcista de Jesús*, Salamanca: Ed. Sígueme 2009, pp. 189) and important articles on this subject: P.W. Hollenbach, "Help for Interpreting Jesus' Exorcisms", *SBL 1993 Seminar Papers*, ed. E.H. Lovering, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1993, p. 119-128 and C.A. Evans, "Jesus' Exorcisms and Proclamation of the Kingdom of God in the Light of the Testaments", *The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity, and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity*, ed. I.H. Henderson, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 2006, p. 210-233. In the presentation of the aim of research and its methodology there are too many repetitions about the socio-political aspects of this work. In the presentation of works in notes 9, 13, 15, 20, 29, 51, and 53 there is the lack of alphabetical or chronological order.

The second chapter (pp. 22-60) discusses spirit possession and exorcism in the Ancient World. In this chapter she presents texts from Greco-Roman

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and Jewish literature which are the wider context for Jesus's activities as healer-exorcist. She takes into consideration ancient Greek texts, the Jewish prophets and the texts from Qumran, especially the Psalms Scroll, Genesis Apocryphon, Prayer of Nabonidus, 1 Enoch and Jubilee. In this presentation there is a lack of rabbinic writings (Tosefta, Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud). In spite of their late date of redaction they contain many ancient traditions about Jesus as false magician, healer and exorcist. The rabbinical texts should not be seen as a description of the historical Jesus, but as counternarratives to the stories about Jesus' activity in the Gospels (see P. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007; D. Jaffé, *Le Talmud et les origines juives du christianisme. Jésus, Paul et les judéo-chrétiens dans la littérature Talmudique*, Paris: Cerf 2007).

The third chapter (pp. 61-96) provides a reconstruction of Galilee in 30 CE using a sociological analysis of both textual and archaeological evidence. After reading this chapter we can ask why Witmer limited her presentation only to Galilee. Jesus as healer and exorcist acted also in Judea which was the scene of his execution and death. The chapter about the socio-political context of Judea in 30 CE would be good preparation for a textual analysis of Jesus' activity in its Judean context.

In the fourth chapter (pp. 97-150) the author examines a wide spectrum of indirect evidence about Jesus' spirit possession and exorcisms found in the Gospels. Although in the introduction to this chapter she stipulates that the evidence is limited to the Synoptic Gospels and to Q, she takes into consideration the texts of the Gospel of John (pp. 130-131). This is a positive approach, because the lack of exorcisms in the Fourth Gospel does not mean a lack of accusations of madness and demonic possession in a very severe polemic between Jews and Jesus (Jn 7:20; 8:48.52; 10:19-21. For the details on this polemic in M.S. Wróbel, *Who are the Father and His Children in Jn 8:44? The Literary, Historical and Theological Analysis of Jn 8:44 and its Context*, Paris: Gabalda 2005).

The fifth chapter (pp. 151-202) analyzes the texts which are direct evidence of Jesus' activity as exorcist. Witmer performs a good analysis of four texts of the Gospel of Mark (with reference to Matthew and Luke) which focus on the exorcisms themselves (the demoniac in a Synagogue – Mk 1:21-28/ Lk 4:31-37; the demoniac in Gerasa – Mk 5:1-20/Mt 8:28-34/Lk 8:26-39; the boy with a spirit of muteness and deafness – Mk 9:14-27/Mt 17:14-21/Lk 9:37-43; the Syrophenician woman's daughter - Mk 7:24-30/Mt 15:21-28). The literary analysis of these texts when linked to socio-political and historical issues gives a fresh portrait of Jesus as healer and exorcist in its historical context.

The last chapter (pp. 203-207) contains the conclusion of the investigations in the previous chapters. At the end of the book there is a bibliography (pp. 209-229), an index of biblical and ancient sources (pp. 231-239), and an index of authors and subjects (pp. 241-247).

Witmer's book deserves the attention of biblical scholars. Her textual examination of New Testament texts in connection with socio-political, anthropological, and archaeological evidence opens up new areas of interpretation. They are based on the historical authenticity of exorcisms in the mission of Jesus. In the light of this study the texts describing Jesus' activity as healer-exorcist in Judea and Galilee do not contain the abstract ideas of their writers, but have a strong historical, political, and sociological context. Jesus's exorcisms can be better understood in the spiritual and political context of his life. Referring to the Old Testament texts, the author concludes that Jesus' role as healer-exorcist was connected with his role as a prophet. On the one hand, Jesus' exorcisms stir up the hostility on the part of his opponents (the Jewish and Roman leadership), and, on the other hand, they are signs of his messianic and prophetic power. Witmer's book contains a very interesting answer to her two main questions: What did incidents of spirit possession and exorcisms in New Testament texts mean within the specific socio-political and religious context of first century Palestine? What can a better understanding of these incidents and Jesus' role as an exorcist contribute to our understanding of the historical figure of Jesus?