

Meanwhile (and I declare an interest), if one is going to conclude that Aquinas plus Aristotle is the way not backward but forward, can one write about virtue ethics while entirely excluding the huge contribution of theological ethics? A book that sharply points out ironies has to wrestle with this irony: why not address those scholars that do exactly as the author asks?

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Giovanni B. Bazzana, *Having the Spirit of Christ: Spirit Possession and Exorcism in the Early Christ Groups*

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Giovanni Bazzana's *Having the Spirit of Christ* is an important book. Despite an occasional minor secondary error in the text (e.g. on p. 244, n. 131, *Ant.* 2.458, 480 should be *War* 2.458, 480; 1 Cor 2:10 on p. 259, n. 25 is indexed as 12:10), Bazzana himself is very careful and precise. Although (with some justification) he defines spirit possession so broadly that the category loses some of its interpretive value, he appropriately advances a forceful and provocative case for the relevance of anthropological studies of spirit possession to early Christian sources. Although he acknowledges predecessors, he also blazes an independent trail.

One advantage of Bazzana's research is, as he points out, the opportunity to heuristically adopt a fresh vantage point, to 'defamiliarize' passages (p. 10). His frequent thick description of cases in other cultures (e.g. pp. 81–4, 88–91) is helpful for initiating Western readers into a different perspective. While recognising with John Pilch that medical anthropology allows for more emic understandings of illness and healing, Bazzana also appropriately warns that 'cognicentric biases' preclude full understanding of 'mystic' experience (pp. 103, 120).

Unlike most New Testament scholars today, Bazzana takes spirit possession seriously, not as a mere myth. He complains that New Testament scholars often marginalise exorcism accounts by essentially allegorising them as theological or socio-political symbols; he counters that these narratives also contain realistic features that real audiences could take seriously both in the first century and our own. Bazzana rightly challenges Bultmann's ethnocentric dismissal of such topics as unintelligible to Western readers, and *therefore* mythological.

Bazzana engages critically with anthropological research as well as studies of early Christianity. For example, he helpfully prefers an approach that allows for a range of experiences rather than following an earlier structuralist approach that reads all phenomena through a singular social interpretive grid.

As Bazzana's introduction shows, no nomenclature is perfect. He rejects the more generic category of 'religious experience' as a Christian construct (p. 21). He also rejects 'altered states of consciousness', though these could allow for neurological constraints in

the definition (though also common to other states such as REM sleep or psychomotor seizures).

The language of ‘possession’ itself is problematic, but its now-conventional usage in anthropological literature makes its use inevitable. Bazzana’s broad definition of spirit possession (p. 30) may be unavoidable; earlier studies defined such possession, for example, as ‘any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit’.¹ Such ‘possession’ is not just *control*, but negotiation between the host and the spirit. Indigenous interpretations paradoxically increase the variety and broaden the definition of spirit possession in ways that do not require trance states.

More controversially, Bazzana contends that Jesus really did expel demons by Beelzebul, though in the earliest memory Beelzebul was a foreign spirit rather than Satan (for Bazzana, the earliest memory he reconstructs fits his model but differs from Q and Mark). On analogy with spirit possession in many parts of the world, spirits could be morally ambiguous. But should not use of these wider potential analogies be tempered when closer cultural analogies lie at hand? In most cultures, possessing spirits can be morally ambiguous, but most ancient Jewish and Christian sources are *conspicuous* for their distinctive difference in this regard. The identity of the spirit in the Beelzebul passage is contested, not irrelevant.

Is all possession bad? Even among monotheists, one’s answer may depend on the definition of possession (i.e. whether one includes the Spirit of the one true God in the definition). Thus, for example, Clint Tibbs (in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 26/2 (2016), pp. 17–38), argues for a broader definition, against my narrower application of anthropological analogies to possession accounts in the Gospels (in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20/2 (2010), pp. 215–36). More recently, Mark Crooks argues for a specifically Christian approach in *Journal of Mind and Behavior* (39/4 (2018), pp. 257–343), to which I responded in the same issue (pp. 345–72). Psychiatrists, sociologists, anthropologists and missiologists all approach spirit possession differently; a fully neutral academic standpoint must leave all on the table for discussion. But Bazzana defines his language carefully and follows it consistently.

That Bazzana draws eclectically on different possession cults to fit the model he envisions in the text need not be methodologically problematic – except where this reading process becomes circular, a danger that Bazzana recognises in other models. His complaint that Joel Marcus’ reading of the Beelzebul passage is ‘trapped within modern Western assumptions’ (p. 44) seems unfair to me; Marcus’ reading is immersed in ancient Jewish sources. Certainly biblical and early Jewish sources treat positively the activity of the one God’s Spirit whereas other indwelling spirits normally appear negatively. Marcus’s grid may not be purely inductive, but neither is Bazzana’s in this case.

By contrast, Bazzana’s detailed exploration of the Dead Sea Scrolls regarding ‘impure spirits’ (pp. 64–6) offers a significant contribution, connecting them with ghosts of the Enochic giants. In addition to scholars he cites here (especially Loren Stuckenbruck and Archie Wright), some other relevant studies² offer similar insights. Some other ancient analogies (e.g. with Philinnion, pp. 74–5) appear more distant, except to illustrate the more general idea of the return of haunting ghosts.

Insofar as one defines spirit possession generically in terms of experience of a spirit (not limited to trance states), most of Bazzana’s argument in the second half of the book

¹V. Crapanzaro and V. Garrison (eds), *Case Studies in Spirit Possession* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1977), p. 7.

²For example, Peter Bolt, 2003; G. Ibba, 2009; Andreas Hauw, 2019.

follows if one accepts the relational or 'Christ-mysticism' approach to Paul's 'in Christ' language (see especially pp. 106–11). Many (including myself) will appreciate his experiential linkage of 'in Christ', 'in the Spirit', the indwelling of the Spirit, Christ's body, as well as visionary and charismatic experience. While such linkage itself is not new, anthropological analogies provide academic language to retain this experiential aspect of Paul's language often neglected by exegetes. Other interesting suggestions include his connection of a possible ancient understanding of angelic tongues with Jesus's different language. Conversely, given his broad definition of spirit possession, it seems strange that he finds it missing in Johannine literature (cf. John 14:17; 16:13–16; 1 John 4:6).

Bazzana is consistently respectful in his explicit disagreements with other scholars, often praising works from which he demurs on some points. Still, sometimes Bazzana may envision a narrower audience than may read his book. For example, although Matt. 12:28//Luke 11:20 fits the criterion of coherence with Jesus's kingdom sayings, Bazzana rejects acceptance of its authenticity as reflecting bias. Modern critical attempts to view Paul as demythologising regarding angels, demons, and so forth, are 'theologically biased' (p. 115).

No one can or need cite all prior discussions. Though some important scholars of religion and spirit possession, such as Felicitas Goodman and Edith Turner, are missing, Bazzana displays extensive knowledge of twenty-first-century anthropological sources and evaluates methodologies critically. He engages some earlier scholars who looked at anthropological spirit possession and early Christian accounts, such as Amanda Witmer and especially helpfully Pieter Craffert. He omits the less extensive engagement by John Dominic Crossan and the interesting nineteenth-century explorations of David Friedrich Strauss (chronicled in Thomas Fabisiak's *The Nocturnal Side of Science in David Friedrich Strauss's Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 2015).

The key weakness of Bazzana's approach may have been unavoidable. Precisely because his definition of spirit possession is so wide, it provides less prescriptive force for interpretation. The vast variation in models of exorcism in different cultures mandates caution in extrapolating which elements are transcultural. Some societies, for example, have possessed healers whereas in others possession is purely an illness. Similarly, 'spiritual experience' is generic and vague enough to encompass a vast range of phenomena, but differences as well as similarities matter. During a 2010 interview a Zimbabwean African Traditional Religions exorcist who had become a Christian highlighted for me some contrasts between exorcism in the two contexts, the most obvious being that in his Christian understanding all invasive spirits are bad, except for the Spirit of the only true God.

Respecting early Christian experience of spirits as part of the wider cross-cultural experience of spirits is a helpful contribution; suggesting the plurality of spirits acceptable to Jesus or his early movement tends to read into or behind first-century texts and neglects the early Jesus movement's (and presumably Jesus' own) view that only control and indwelling by God's Spirit was positive. Thus Bazzana may impose too much of his eclectic external grid on the text.

Nevertheless, Bazzana's alternative to traditional modern grids may break their gridlock and allow for a rethinking of categories. A new thesis's overenthusiastic first promoters sometimes treat it as a universal key. Yet, as here, it becomes valuable in providing an alternative lens.