

Ragy R. Girgis:

*On Satan, Demons, and Psychiatry:
Exploring Mental Illness in the Bible*

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The author, Ragy R. Girgis is an associate professor of clinical psychiatry at the Columbia University Department of Psychiatry and a researcher, as well as one of the directors of the New York State Psychiatric Institute. He specializes in the study of particularly severe mental illnesses and their experimental treatment options. In addition, he considers himself to be a practicing Christian. In this volume, he planned on summarizing his psychiatric experience and knowledge in the light of biblical contexts. Already the book title itself is extremely eloquent, it is as if we were getting an abstract of the work since, indeed, the author sets out to make an analysis of the concepts of Satan, demons, and their relationship to psychiatric illnesses in biblical stories.

Examining the volume as a whole, we may conclude that it does not always occupy the same coherent position, and is also plagued, to the reviewer's mind at least, by methodological errors resulting from disciplinary one-sidedness, a considerable amount of repetition and blurred boundaries between chapters, especially in its first part. But the second part is really remarkable. I find it commendable that in the second half of the book, the author already puts down a foot for his own skeptical view as opposed to his Christian conviction. A particularly interesting process of character development can also be observed at this point though not in the biblical characters covered in the book. The author himself is changing, and to a surprising extent. In the first chapters – although he does not specifically deny the existence of Satan or question the power of Christ – he mostly appreciates the deeds of the Lord on a par with those of a faith healer. This image, I think, fatally simplifies and empties Jesus' ministry. Halfway through the book, he already says that “psychiatric treatment and medications are, in many cases, no less miraculous than God's will,” pushing by this the reader into fatal skepticism.

Needless to say, it has been questionable all along how much he as a Christian could have spoken his mind in the quality of a scientist. But I believe, by virtue of the above-cited sentence, then and there Dr Girgis decided whether he would sign the copies of his book as a Christian or as a doctor. My personal assumption is that the original purpose of the publication of the volume was perhaps not to expand

faith-based knowledge, but to help believers recognize, and understand in secular terms, mental illnesses so that suffering patients could receive adequate therapy.

But at this point a miracle happens. A surprising process begins here in the work, and at the end of that process we can see as it were the light of Christ. The reader feels as if the author had suddenly converted while writing the book and before reaching his original, fundamentally skeptical goal, begun to seek to convey God's message. The bottom line is that he closes his book almost schizophrenically, with a special sermonic blend.

In addition to the above, I find the actual case explanations – which are all included in the first half of the book – a bit vacuous as I miss not only the demons, but above all God, in the text. Even the primary thesis of the book appears only short before we are halfway through the material, and before that we experience a constant wavering, as if the author were just gathering the courage to stand up for his opinion.

Although he indicates in the introduction that he had been thoroughly immersed in biblical theology before he wrote the book, evidence does not bear out this statement. He refers to “other books” many times as he looks for praise of his own work but does not name them. Furthermore, he announces already in the introduction that he will cap references to the Bible and scholarly articles, which is unreasonable and difficult to accept in an academic study.

The colophon reveals that Dr Girgis relies solely on the New International Version for biblical texts, although the blurb promises exegetical analysis and deep biblical exploration – but that is an impossible undertaking if you rely on a single English translation. I think it was a huge mistake to omit the incredibly rich commentary material that could have added real colors to the biblical stories. Including that material could have strengthened and in some places, made more valid his volatile conclusions based on a single translation.

However, despite the negative aspects I have mentioned, I still find the volume useful albeit not for its theological but psychiatric content, which does not reject, or consider as pathological, the fidelity to God but integrates it into medical practice.

Viktor Csanádi

