

A Study Of Demon Possession

Introduction. Satan exerts great influence today, but can anyone actually be demon-possessed now? Critics of the Bible, of course, allege that this is an example of the sort of gross superstition characteristic of the Bible. The following quote represents a typical atheistic approach to this matter: "Mark 5:1-13 relates an incredible story wherein Jesus casts out the 'devils' from an unfortunate man. He then causes the devils to enter, instead, a herd of swine, and the swine, thus bedeviled, race over a cliff, fall into the sea and drown. Fundamentalists would have us believe that this is a true story. That tells us a lot about fundamentalists. Belief in demons and fairies and goblins and dragons ended, for most people, ages ago, and is remembered only in some Fairy Tales. Such primeval superstitions should be left behind, in our colorful past, where they belong" (Hayes 1996, 129-130).

This sort of dismissal of the historical record is typical of unbelief. The skeptic, and even those religionists who have been influenced by the rationalistic mode of thought, repudiate anything that is not consistent with current human experience. But this simply is not an intelligent basis upon which to establish conclusions. There is validity in the credibility of historical testimony. The reality of demon activity, therefore, is not to be determined upon the basis of current experiences; rather, it is grounded in whether or not the New Testament documents are credible.

In 1846, Simon Greenleaf, Professor of Law at Harvard University, produced a work entitled *The Testimony of the Evangelists Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*. Greenleaf was the greatest authority in the history of legal procedure on what constitutes evidence. His work, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, is a standard on the topic of evidence to this day. Greenleaf argued that the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John passed the strictest tests of authenticity, and thus may be regarded as dependable (1903, 1-54). There is no doubt that these writers described cases of demonic activity during the ministry of Jesus.

I. **The Origin Of Demons**

- A. The etymology of the term "demon" is obscure, but some have suggested that it comes from a Greek root meaning "to know," hence probably means "a knowing one" (Vine 1991, 203). Vincent noted that Plato derived the term from *daemon*, signifying "knowing" or "wise" (1972, 92). Ancient Greek writers suggested that the genesis of the term is to be found in the fact that these entities were considered to be "intelligent beings" (McClintock and Strong 1968, 639). Demons were perceived in the ancient world as evil spirits "somewhere between the human and the divine" (Arndt and Gingrich 1967, 168).

- B. Unlike the literature of antiquity, the New Testament makes no attempt to explain the origin of demons or to describe any materialized features. This appears to be significant, for this restraint is a subtle evidence of the divine inspiration of the narratives. Scholars, however, have speculated as to the origin of demons, and we will briefly consider some of these ideas.
1. A pre-Adamic race.
 - a) Some claim that demons were the disembodied spirits of a pre-Adamic race of men who lived upon the Earth in a "gap period" that allegedly fits between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.
 - b) There are two problems with this notion.
 - (1) There is absolutely no evidence that there ever was a historical "gap" between the first two verses of Genesis.
 - (2) There were no people before Adam. He came directly from God (Luke 3:38), and was the "first man" (1 Corinthians 15:45).
 2. A hybrid of angels and women.
 - a) Others trace the origin of demons to a supposed cohabitation between angels and certain women of the pre-Flood world (Genesis 6:1-6).
 - b) This theory is negated by the fact that Christ taught that angels are sexless beings, incapable of such unions (Matthew 22:30).
 3. Fallen angels.
 - a) It has been argued that first-century demons may be identified with the fallen angels mentioned in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6, some of whom, consistent with the divine plan, were permitted to leave temporarily that sphere of confinement for the purpose of inhabiting certain people.
 - b) Charles Hodge argued this theory, which probably is the most popular idea regarding this matter.
 4. Spirits of evil men.
 - a) Another view is that demons were the spirits of wicked dead men who were allowed by God to leave the Hadean realm to accommodate the implementation of the divine plan of redemption.
 - b) Josephus claimed that demons were the "spirits of the wicked, that enter into men that are alive and kill them, unless they can obtain some help against them" (*Wars of the Jews*, 7.6.3).
- C. No dogmatic conclusion can be drawn with reference to the origin of demons. That they existed is of no doubt admitted by anyone who takes the Bible seriously; as to their origin, the scriptures are silent.

II. ***The Nature And Character Of Demons***

- A. The worship of demons occurs or is alluded to several times in the Old Testament (Leviticus 17:7; Deuteronomy 32:17; 2 Chronicles 11:15; Psalm 106:37; 1 Corinthians 10:20-21). The Israelites were not to participate at all in demonology (Deuteronomy 18:9-11).
- B. For the most part, there was no direct work of demons among men in the Old Testament. However, all sorcerers, witches, and necromancers were practicing a form of idolatry in that they claimed assistance and fellowship with deities other than God. Scriptures showing Bible incidents of divination indicate that they were frauds instead of the work of demons.
 - 1. Pharaoh's magicians failed (Genesis 41:8).
 - 2. They produced serpents by trickery (Exodus 7:11-12).
 - 3. They produced bloody water by trickery (Exodus 7:21-22).
 - 4. They produced frogs by trickery (Exodus 8:7).
 - 5. They failed regarding the lice (Exodus 8:18-19).
 - 6. Samuel's appearance was by the power of God, not the witch (1 Samuel 28:7-19).
 - 7. Egypt could get no advice from the familiar spirits (Isaiah 19:3).
 - 8. God called them "vain" visions (Ezekiel 12:24).
 - 9. Nebuchadnezzar's astrologers and sorcerers failed (Daniel 2:1-11).
 - 10. Belshazzar's astrologers could not read the handwriting on the wall (Daniel 5:8, 15).
 - 11. Simon was "giving out that himself was some great one" (Acts 8:9).
 - 12. Elymas was "full of all subtilty and all mischief" (Acts 13:6-11).
- C. There are two instances recorded in the Old Testament of God using an "evil spirit." The first is with Abimelech and the men of Shechem (Judges 9:23), and the second is with Saul (1 Samuel 16:14; 18:10; 19:9).
 - 1. This was not an "evil spirit" or a demon sent by the Lord. This would violate the principle that God does not tempt to evil (James 1:13-15).
 - 2. In Judges and 1 Samuel, there were feelings of jealousy and vindictiveness which arose between the parties and produced ill will.
 - 3. This is similar to God giving people "up" or "over," allowing them to do their own wicked will (Romans 1:24, 26, 28; 2 Thessalonians 2:11).
- D. On the other hand, the reality of demons in the time of Christ is beyond doubt. The nature of demons is spelled out explicitly in the New Testament.
 - 1. They are spirits without bodies (Ephesians 6:12).
 - 2. They are numerous (Mark 5:8-9).

3. They are organized (Matthew 12:24).
 4. They are knowledgeable of God (Matthew 8:29).
 5. They can inflict sickness (Matthew 9:32-33).
 6. They can possess or control animals (Mark 5:13).
 7. They can possess or control human beings (Luke 8:2).
 8. They know that Jesus Christ is God (Mark 1:23-24; James 2:19).
- E. The terms "demons" and "spirits" are used interchangeably. The fact that they were spirit beings creates a problem for the skeptic, who denies that there is anything beyond the material (cf. Matthew 8:16). Since it is known also that "a spirit hath not flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39), one must conclude that demons were not physical beings.
- F. As spirit beings, demons could exercise both volition ("I will return") and locomotion ("Then goeth he") in Matthew 12:44-45. Moreover, they could assimilate factual information (Luke 4:34; cf. Mark 1:24). They possessed a religious understanding (James 2:19). "Shudder" means to "be struck with extreme fear, to be horrified." They trembled because of the prospect of their ultimate doom (Matthew 8:29).
- G. As to their character, demons are depicted as "unclean" and "evil." In describing the nature of the Jewish nation of His day, Jesus gave an illustration regarding a man who was possessed by an "unclean" spirit; the spirit left the man, but eventually re-entered the man, taking with him other spirits "more evil" than himself (vs. Matthew 12:43-45). This passage reveals the "unclean" or "evil" disposition of demons. This text also shows that there were degrees of vileness ("more evil") in demons.

III. ***The Effects Of Demon Possession***

- A. The physical or mental effects occurring in individuals as a consequence of being possessed by a demon or demons were varied. More than one could indwell a person; Mary Magdalene had once been inhabited by seven demons (Luke 8:2). Some demoniacs were afflicted with blindness and/or the inability to speak (Matthew 9:32; 12:22). Some might be prone to violent convulsions.
- B. A case recorded by all three synoptic writers tells of a young man who was "epileptic." He suffered grievously, frequently falling into the fire or into water (Matthew 17:15). He was dashed to the ground and bruised badly (Mark 9:18; Luke 9:39); he foamed at the mouth, ground his teeth, and "pineth away" (Mark 9:18). This final description may suggest that the boy's body became rigid and incapable of motion.
- C. A demon-possessed man who lived among the tombs on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee had excessive strength. He often had been bound with chains and fetters, but he had broken these restraints, and

no one had the power to tame him (cf. Acts 19:16). Furthermore, he was characterized by both emotional illness and antisocial behavior (e.g., he wore no clothes, Luke 8:27), but when Christ removed the demon from the man he was observed "clothed, and in his right mind" (Mark 5:15).

- D. It is important to distinguish between cause and effect in these cases.
 - 1. The cause was demon possession; the effects were physical and emotional problems. The scriptures never confuse the two. In other words, demon possession was not just an ancient, unenlightened attempt to explain physical or mental problems.
 - 2. Instead, a clear distinction is made between being inhabited by an unclean spirit and being sick. Demon possession could produce illness, but not all illness was attributed to the indwelling of evil spirits.
- E. There is an important distinction in Mark 1:32.
 - 1. The double use of the definite article, together with the conjunction, reveals that two distinct classes are under consideration -- those who were merely sick, and those who were demon-possessed and may or may not have had additional problems.
 - 2. Lenski commented, "Two classes are markedly distinguished: those suffering from ordinary diseases and those possessed with demons. The distinction shows that the latter cannot be classed with the former in spite of modern attempts in that direction" (1964, 84).

IV. ***The Divine Purpose In Allowing Demon Possession***

- A. There were eight instances where Jesus cast out demons in the Bible.
 - 1. The man in the synagogue (Mark 1:23-26; Luke 4:33-35).
 - 2. Two men of the Gadarenes (Matthew 8:28-34; Mark 5:2-20; Luke 8:26-39).
 - 3. The mute man (Matthew 9:32-33).
 - 4. The blind and mute man (Matthew 12:22; Luke 11:14).
 - 5. The daughter of the Syrophenician woman (Matthew 15:22-29; Mark 7:25-30).
 - 6. The deaf mute in Decapolis (Mark 7:31-37).
 - 7. The child with seizures (Matthew 17:14-18; Mark 9:17-27; Luke 9:37-42).
 - 8. Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2-3).
- B. The New Testament clearly indicates that demons were under the control of divine authority. Jesus could command them to leave a person, or even to keep quiet (Matthew 8:16; Mark 1:34). The demons that tormented the man in the country of the Gadarenes could not enter the nearby swine herd except by the Lord's command (Mark 5:13-14).

- C. Since demons could do nothing except by divine permission, why did God allow these evil beings to enter into people? The truth of the matter is, the Bible does not give a specific answer to this question. However, a reasonable case can be built to help shed some light on the subject.
- D. If the mission of Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, was to be effective, the Lord's absolute authority had to be established. Accordingly, we see the Savior demonstrating His authority in a variety of ways.
1. Christ exhibited power over diseases and physical ailments (Matthew 9:20-22; John 4:46-54; 9:1-41).
 2. The Lord exerted His authority over material objects (Matthew 14:15-21; 17:24-27; John 2:1-11; 21:1-14).
 3. Jesus showed that He could control the elements of nature (Matthew 8:23-27).
 4. Jesus even suspended the force of gravity with reference to His own body when He walked upon the waters of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:22-23).
 5. The Lord released certain ones who had been captured by death (Matthew 9:18-26; John 11:1-45).
- E. Finally, it is not unreasonable to assume that, just as the Savior had displayed His marvelous power in all these realms, it was likewise appropriate that He be able to demonstrate His authority in the spirit realm as well to show that Satan is not in full control (cf. Luke 10:17-18). Hendriksen said, "Jesus viewed the triumph of these [disciples] as being symptomatic of ever so many other victories over Satan throughout the course of the new dispensation, triumphs accomplished through the work of thousands of other missionaries. He was looking far into the future (cf. Matthew 24:14). He saw the ultimate discomfiture of the ugly dragon and all his minions" (1978, 581). A similar argument is made in other occasions (Matthew 12:28-29; Luke 11:20-22).
- F. Demon possession established the comprehensive and supreme authority of the Son of God. Why demons entered particular individuals is not explained in the scriptures. Unger speculated that "in the great majority of cases possession is doubtless traced to yielding voluntarily to temptation and to sin" (1952, 95). However, in the instance of the epileptic boy, he had been tormented "from childhood" (Mark 9:21), which suggests, at the very least, that personal sin was not a causative factor in demon possession.

V. ***A Contrast With Paganism***

- A. The ancient world abounded with superstition relative to demons (where the genuine exists, the counterfeit will be as well). But there is

a vast difference between the accounts of demons in the New Testament and that of the pagan world and, in fact, even among some of the Jews.

- B. For instance, as mentioned earlier, there are no accounts in the New Testament of any visual descriptions of demons. Such characterizations, however, were common in the heathen world. A bronze statue from ancient Babylon contains the image of the demon Pazuzu. The figure has the wings and feet of an eagle, a human body with claws for hands and a misshapen head.
- C. Josephus tells of a demon expulsion whereby the exorcist "put a ring which had a root of one of those sorts mentioned by Solomon, to the nostrils of the demoniac, after which he drew out the demon through his nostrils" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 8.2.5). The New Testament contains no such absurd fabrications.

VI. ***Can Demons Possess Man Today?***

- A. Do evil spirits enter into human bodies and afflict people today? Evidence from the Bible affirms that they do not. Unfortunately, though, some modern writers have argued that demonic activity still exists.
 - 1. Charles Ryrie contended that certain "fallen angels" are "still free to roam the earth as demons carrying out Satan's designs" (1959, 296). Merrill Unger, a respected scholar, subtitled his book, *Biblical Demonology*, "A Study of the Spiritual Forces Behind the Present World Unrest."
 - 2. Several years ago a book titled *UFOs, Satan and Evolution* enjoyed a limited circulation in the "evangelical" community. The author claimed that hundreds of UFO visits to Earth represented an invasion of demons.
 - 3. Christianity Today, a popular "evangelical" magazine, recently stated, "Whether Christians use the formal rites of Roman Catholicism or the vigorous prayers of charismatic and Pentecostal believers, exorcism is God's good gift to the church. Through exorcism, God graciously delivers people from demonic powers, which seek a person's total physical and spiritual destruction ... So long as we live in this fallen world, we may be sure that demons not only exist, but will make bullying and presumptuous challenges of God's authority."
- B. The position that demon possession does not exist today can be argued from two directions.
 - 1. A thoughtful study of the details associated with the so-called modern examples of demon possession reveals that these cases bear no resemblance to the genuine examples of spirit possession described in the New Testament. The contrast is dramatic.

2. A consideration of information set forth in the New Testament leads only to the conclusion that demon possession was a first-century phenomena; it was allowed for a very specific reason, and the divine concession was suspended near the end of the apostolic era.

C. The modern exorcism mania.

1. When the movie, *The Exorcist* (based upon William Blatty's novel of the same name), made its appearance in December 1973, a wave of mystical excitement that has been dubbed "the exorcism frenzy," swept the nation. By the time the movie had been out for five weeks, Blatty's book had sold nine million copies.
2. Scores of people began to surmise that they were possessed of evil spirits. Numerous articles regarding these alleged experiences appeared in major newspapers and magazines. A careful consideration of the details involved in these alleged episodes highlights some startling contrasts to the New Testament.
 - a) The "exorcisms" of today are performed almost invariably in dark, secluded environments, only to be publicized later. When Jesus cast out demons, the episodes were public, and therefore subject to examination (Luke 4:31-37).
 - b) The Lord could expel evil spirits with a word, and the effect was immediate (Luke 4:36; Matthew 17:18). The Jesuit Priest who supposedly "exorcised" a demon from the youngster who served as the subject of Blatty's book, *The Exorcist*, confessed that it took him two months of preparation (fasting on bread and water), and 20 ritual ceremonies to purge the child. The miracles of Jesus never occurred after a prolonged period of weeks with numerous pronouncements that had ended in failure, as portrayed in *The Exorcist*.
 - c) In the Bible, only those with miraculous powers were able to cast out demons: Jesus (Matthew 4:24; 8:16; Mark 3:22; Luke 4:41), the disciples (Mark 9:38; Luke 10:17), Peter (Acts 5:16), Philip (Acts 8:7), and Paul (Acts 16:16-18; 19:12). In the Catholic Church, exorcisms can be exercised only by an ordained priest (or higher prelate), with the express permission of the local bishop. Other religious groups have specially-appointed people to perform "exorcisms," not Holy Spirit-inspired men.
 - d) The demoniacs of the New Testament era were afflicted, either physically or mentally, by a malfunction of what were otherwise normal human traits. Those cases involved no grotesque details. However, according to Roman Catholic priest Luigi Novagese (the official exorcist for the papal diocese in Rome), "A man's skin turned white like paper, his teeth became transparent, his eyes bulged with balls of flame and fire issued from his mouth."

- e) Modern demoniacs frequently are described as uttering curses and blasphemy. In the New Testament record, demons were always respectful of deity (Mark 1:24; 3:11). There is not a single case of a demon blaspheming either God or Christ in the Bible.
 - f) Two cases of demon possession in the New Testament reveal that the unclean spirits could empower their hosts with supernatural strength (Mark 5:1-20; cf. Acts 19:13-16). The demoniac described in Mark 5 could not be bound even with a chain. A respected university professor posed this interesting query: "If we have demon-possessed people today, why in my travels in over 40 countries of the world have I never seen a person who is so strong that you can't bind him with chains (cf. Mark 5:3)" (Edwards 1996, 135)?
 - g) The ability to cast out demons in the first century was given in order to confirm the truth of the gospel (Mark 16:17-20). Modern "exorcists" preach everything but the true gospel. They furthermore attempt to cast out, not true demons, but "demons" of lust, tobacco, the flu, etc.
3. Medicine can explain some aspects of the "symptoms" shown by those persons allegedly possessed (i.e., "supernatural" strength is common in some cases of insanity or mania). The fact that exorcism works on people experiencing symptoms of possession is attributed to the placebo effect and the power of suggestion. Some supposedly possessed persons are actually narcissists or are suffering from low self-esteem and act like a "demon-possessed person" in order to gain attention.
- a) In 1994 an Indian man living in Britain explained his criminal behavior as ghost possession. Exorcisms failed to help. The psychiatrists' diagnosis was a dissociative state and/or paranoid schizophrenia. The patient was treated with medication and the supposed ghost possession ended.
 - b) In the modern era, the Catholic Church and most other religious groups authorize exorcisms rarely, approaching cases with the presumption that mental or physical illness is the real cause.
- D. The end of demon possession.
1. A powerful case can be made for the proposition that demon possession was not allowed to continue beyond the apostolic age -- the era of miracles. With the close of the first century, the age of the supernatural came to a close. Even the Old Testament prophesied of the cessation of this type of activity (Daniel 9:24). God is not empowering men to operate in a miraculous fashion today.

2. This is easily demonstrated in the scriptures.
 - a) Nothing duplicating the miracles of the first century is apparent today. No one can walk upon water, raise the dead, calm a raging storm, turn water into wine, instantly heal an amputated ear, extract tax money from a fish's mouth, etc. Miracles are self-authenticating phenomena that cannot be denied, even by hostile critics (John 11:47; Acts 4:14-16); clearly, they are not occurring today.
 - b) The purpose of supernatural gifts was to confirm the authenticity of divine revelation being received from heaven (Mark 16:9-20; Hebrews 2:1-4).
 - c) Since the process was completed when the last New Testament book was written, miracles no longer are needed and have ceased.
 - (1) Micah 5:11-12 and Zechariah 13:1-2 are often used to show that not only would "unclean spirits" cease, but also activities relating to witchcraft and soothsaying would be done away. Modern day "exorcisms" would fall under the purview of witchcraft and soothsaying.
 - (2) Paul defended that position both in Ephesians 4:8-16 and in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10. During the early days of the apostolic era, divine revelation had been "in part," i.e., piece-by-piece.
 - (3) The apostle said that when "the perfect" or "the complete" arrived, the partial revelation, which came by means of the various "gifts" (e.g., supernatural knowledge and prophecy), would cease (1 Corinthians 13:8-10).
 - (4) With the completion of apostolic testimony and the completion of the scriptures, "that which is perfect" had come and the temporary gifts were done away. The scriptures provided by the Spirit of God were "perfect." Nothing was to be added to them, and nothing taken from them (Galatians 1:6-9; Revelation 22:18-19).
3. If it is the case that miraculous powers have ceased, including the ability to cast out demons, does it stand to reason that God would allow demons to supernaturally assault people today, thus granting Satan an undue advantage over mankind? How would this reconcile with the promise that, "greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4; 5:18)? In other words, if the gift of expelling demons no longer exists, is it not a reasonable conclusion that demon possession is obsolete as well? The gospel is God's power to save (Romans 1:16-17). This would be negated if demon possession could condemn someone.

4. Even if the miraculous gifts of the early church were for today, would God be allowing people to work them who do not teach His full plan of salvation? The Bible shows that the steps that lead to the forgiveness of sins are faith, repentance, confession of faith in Christ, and water baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:36-38; Romans 10:9-10); but many so-called miracle workers today teach that baptism is not necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, many of these who all claim to be led by the Spirit are going in different directions doctrinally. Surely, "... God is not the author of confusion ..." (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Conclusion. As we have seen, demon possession does not exist in our time, but people can still be under Satan's influence. Actually, any time people allow sin to rule in their lives, they are bowing the knee to Satan and becoming a part of his realm of darkness. As the late Kelly Ellis used to say, "The only power Satan has over you is whatever power you give him." We cannot simultaneously have it both ways (Matthew 6:24). We cannot have one foot in the kingdom of light, while the other is in the kingdom of darkness.

Satan certainly exerts great influence today. However, as God does not work miraculously in this age, but influences through His word and through the events of providence, so also, the devil wields his power indirectly, and non-miraculously, through various media. Current cases that are being associated with demon possession doubtless are the results of psychosomatic problems, hysteria, self-induced hypnosis, deception, delusion, and the like. They have natural, though perhaps not always well-understood, causes.