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## Demon Possession and Exorcism In the New Testament

Belief in incorporeal beings who interact with human beings was almost universal among ancient peoples, both pagan and Jewish. They were called spirits or demons. These terms were originally morally neutral but came to signify evil forces. A good survey of how the meaning of *daimon* developed is provided by Everett Ferguson (2003:236–238).

### **Pagan and Jewish background**

For Socrates *daimōn* meant something like a conscience. Plato sometimes used the word as a term for divine intermediaries or demigods, sometimes as something like the guardian angel of a person or a city. From this developed the idea that everyone has two demons, one good and one bad. As we approach New Testament times, as seen in authors like Xenocrates, Apuleius, and Plutarch, demons were viewed as malevolent spirits which were everywhere and caused trouble for humans. The idea that the demons are demigods (see *Plutarch Moralia* in Babbitt 1993:63, 65) prepares the way for the identification of pagan deities with demons in 1 Cor 10:20 and other early Christian literature. A demon could take possession of a person, a condition for which the verb was *daimonizomai* (literally “to be demonized”), resulting in physical or mental affliction, and pagans had sorcerers (*magoi*) who performed exorcisms by means of incantations and magical techniques (Ferguson 2003:236–238). “Sorcerers [would] advise those possessed by demons to recite and name over to themselves the Ephesian letters [a magic formula]” (*Plutarch Moralia* in Minar, Sandbach, and Helmbold 1999:55).

Intertestamental Judaism had parallel ideas. Tobit 6:21 speaks of a person’s guardian angel. But the demons are not demigods but fallen angels. In Jubilees 10:5–9 most of the angels who sinned are imprisoned in the netherworld, but a tenth of them are allowed to remain to afflict sinful

human beings. In 1 Enoch 15:11–16:1 they are the disembodied spirits of the dead giants begotten by the angels who copulated with women; their work is to afflict and deceive humankind. An alternative opinion, found in the Qumran literature and some rabbinic literature (see Cohen 1949:260), was that these spirits were created by the Lord during the creation week. Demons could enter into a person (for citations and discussion see Cohen 1949:260–270), and the Jews had exorcists such as one Eleazar, reported by Josephus, who drew out the demons through the victims' nostrils by means of techniques and incantations supposedly passed down from Solomon (*Antiquities* 8.46–49 (8.2.5), in Whiston 1987:214). The Pharisees were thought to be especially adept at exorcisms, though later Rabbis sought to explain the practice away (for citations and discussion see Urbach 1979:98–102). Jesus said to the Pharisees, "If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?" (Matt 12:27). Acts 19:13–16 tells of seven Jewish exorcists in Ephesus who sought to employ the name of Jesus as a magical formula, with disastrous results.

### Terminology

In the Greek New Testament several terms are used apparently interchangeably: *daimōn*, but more commonly its diminutive form *daimonion*; *pneuma*, usually described as *pneuma akatharton* (unclean spirit); and sometimes *pneuma poneron* (evil spirit); and in the plural *pneumata plana* (deceitful spirits), and *pneumata daimoniōn* (demonic spirits, or spirits of demons). We need also to note a verb common in the gospels, *daimonizomai*, meaning to be in a condition of being possessed by a demon or demons.

The interchangeability of these terms is obvious from so many examples that I will cite only two representative instances. In Mark 3:15 Jesus grants his twelve apostles the authority to cast out *demons*, while in Mark 6:7 he gives them authority over the *unclean spirits*. Mark 7:25 tells us about a Greek woman who was possessed by an *unclean spirit*, while in the next verse she begs Jesus to cast the *demon* out of her daughter.

The significance of the epithet *unclean spirit* may be that it had the effect of separating a person from the worship of God.

### Occurrences in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts

The Synoptic Gospels are replete with stories and references to demon possession and exorcisms, in fact more than sixty. In Mark, commonly considered the first Gospel, the first recorded miracle of Jesus is the exorcism of a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue of Capernaum (Mark 1:21–28). In the first half of this Gospel the only ones on earth who know the identity of Jesus are the demons. This man is made to cry out,

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

There are several points to notice. The speaker uses both a plural pronoun and a singular one. Is the speaker the man or the demons? That the possessed person could be under the spell of multiple demons was common. Luke 8:2 tell us that Jesus cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene, and when Jesus asked the Gerasene demoniac his name, the reply was Legion, “for many demons had entered him” (Luke 8:20). It seems that when a person was possessed a distinction could not always be made between his own voice and that of the demons. Also noteworthy is what has been called the Messianic Secret, which here is really the Son of God Secret. Jesus commands the demons to be silent and not disclose his real identity. The title Holy One of God was not the self-designation that Jesus preferred, which was Son of Man. Finally, it is worth noting that Jesus employed no incantation or magical technique, but rather gave the simple command: “Come out!” According to Mark 1:28 Jesus first became famous as an exorcist.

In Mark 3:13–19 Jesus called to him the twelve men who would become his apostles. “He appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons” (v. 15). When Jesus sent them out on their first mission “they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them” (Mark 6:13). Throughout the Synoptics sickness and demons are closely associated.

The apostles continued to have the authority to cast out demons after Christ’s ascension, and several incidents are recorded in the book of Acts, some of which may reflect the superstition of the multitude. Acts 5:12–16 tells us that people thought they could be healed if Peter’s shadow fell on them. The people brought “the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all *healed*” (v. 16). The terminology is worth noting: they were healed (Greek *therapeuō*). This usage is not found in Mark, who never uses this term for demonized persons, but in Luke exorcism is a healing. Another curious incident is narrated in Acts 19:11–12. People thought that if they could be touched by cloths that had come in contact with Paul’s body, diseases would leave them and evil spirits would come out of them, and indeed it seemed to work. Consequently some Jewish exorcists, the seven sons of Sceva, sought to do their work by using the name of “Jesus whom Paul preaches” as a magic formula, but the demoniac man leaped on them and injured them (vv. 13–16). The power to cast out demons was from God, not in the words used.

How was the mistake of these sons of Sceva worse than that of the man in Mark 9:38, who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus without being a follower of Jesus? We cannot be sure, but perhaps the sons of

Seva were closer to using the name of Jesus as a magic formula that they thought would work *ex opere operato*. One clear difference between Jesus's exorcisms and those of pagans and Jews is that Jesus did not use incantations and magic. To cast out a demon he simply said: "Come out!" Matt 8:16 says that Jesus cast out the demons "with a word." Disciples expelled the demons in the name of Jesus (Luke 9:17). What was important was not the words used, but the spiritual state of the exorcist. When the disciples were not able to cast out the demon from an epileptic boy and asked Jesus why they had suffered such a humiliating failure, he replied, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything except prayer [some manuscripts add "and fasting"]" (Mark 9:29).

Since casting out demons was such an important part of the apostolic mission, it is surprising that this function is never explicitly listed among the spiritual gifts (*charismata*) in the Epistles. It may quite legitimately be asked whether exorcism is subsumed under the gift of healing (*charismata iamatōn*) in 1 Cor 12:9, 28. The answer is not completely clear, because the distinction between naturally occurring illness and the disability arising from demons is often unclear, as will be noted below. In some texts the casting out of demons and the healing of diseases and infirmities are mentioned side by side as if distinct activities, as for example in Matt 8:16, 10:8, and Luke 13:32. In other texts the casting out of the demon is called a healing, as in Luke 7:21, 8:2, and 6:18. For example, in Matt 15:28 the Syrophenician woman says that her daughter "is severely possessed by a demon," but in v. 28 it says "her daughter was healed instantly." Luke 6:18 tells of people who came to be healed (*iaomai*) of their diseases," and "those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured (*therapeuomai*)." Notable also is Acts 10:38, where Peter declares that Jesus went about "doing good and healing (<*iaomai*) all that were oppressed by the devil." Sometimes the healing and the exorcism may be yoked together like a hendiadys. In view of all this the inclusion of exorcism within healing is not certain but certainly possible. It is also worth noting that among the gifts of the Spirit is the ability to distinguish between spirits (1 Cor 12:10), something also mentioned in 1 John 4:1, where believers are admonished to "test the spirits" (cf. 1 Thess 5:21).

This section cannot end without giving special attention to Mark 3:22–30 and especially its parallel in Matt 12:24–32. The Pharisees declared, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." Beelzebul, originally a title for the Canaanite god Baal, had come to be a name for Satan, the supreme demon. Jesus had healed a blind and dumb demoniac, and the response of the people was amazed admiration. The assertion of the Pharisees was their response to that. Then Jesus responds, first making the argument that it is illogical to think that Satan would attack his own realm, for a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.

Furthermore, how can Pharisaic exorcisms be acceptable if those of Jesus are not? Then Jesus declares: "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (v. 28), thus declaring that the plundering of the house of Satan is a sign of the in-breaking of the reign of God by the coming of Jesus. Gerd Theissen has remarked that no other charismatic miracle-worker ever claimed that his miracles portended the end of the old world and the beginning of a new age (in Reese 1992:2:141a). Jesus's exorcisms were an eschatological sign.

Finally, Jesus warns that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. This implies that the Pharisees in making their accusation were in danger of committing that sin, which was ascribing the work of God to Satan. Davies and Allison observe:

In 12.22–37 Jesus' ministry of exorcism is subject to two radically different interpretations. That is, the one undeniable fact is ambiguous and capable of bearing antithetical meanings. How, then does one get to the truth? The text implies that there are good reasons for embracing one view of Jesus rather than another (12.25–39). . . . Faith cannot abide with ill-will and disagreeable natures: for good fruit cannot be found on a bad tree (12.33). (Davies and Allison 1991:2:365, 366)

Jesus's warning should make us very careful about attributing good works to the devil.

### The Works and Effects of the Demons

The picture that the Synoptic Gospels and Acts gives us of the work of the unclean spirits does not seem to differ greatly from the popular beliefs of the time. It was believed that evil spirits favored certain kinds of location, such as dark places and ruined buildings. Everyone believed that these spirits especially liked to be where there is water (Cohen 1949:262, 264). Jesus utilized this belief in Luke 11:24–26 (see also Matt 12:43–45):

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest; and finding none he says, "I will return to my house from which I came." And when he comes he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.

We note that exorcism was reversible. We also note that, if the words are more than colorful rhetoric, some demons are worse than others.

It was also believed that evil spirits attack not only people but animals, which then become dangerous (Cohen 1949:266), thus mad dogs were believed to be the victims of demons. When Jesus exorcized the Gerasene

demoniac (Mark 5:1–20 and parallels) the demons begged Jesus to let them enter a herd of pigs, “And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea” (v. 13).

Quite in line with what is found in the Greek and Jewish traditions, the people of the New Testament believed demons to be the cause of most physical problems and most or all mental problems. These include epilepsy (Luke 9:39), loss of speech (Luke 11:14, Matt 9:31), inability of an old woman to straighten her back (Luke 13:10–13), inability to hear (Mark 9:25), blindness (Matt 12:22), and a tendency to self-destruction (Matt 17:15). But the distinction between naturally occurring illness and disability arising from demons is often unclear. The same symptoms are ascribed to sickness in Matt 4:24, where demon-possession is listed separately from other illness, and to a demon in Matt 17:15. But it is of interest to observe that, whatever the nature of the affliction, and especially in the case of demon-possession, the victim was never blamed for it.

Most mental aberrations, including unconventional opinions, were ascribed to demon-possession, which is most clearly illustrated in the Gospel of John, as we shall see below. However, in Mark 3:21 Jesus’s family, concerned about his mental state, says “he is out of his mind (Greek *exestē*).” The Greek term used here is *existēmi*, which means being in a state of confusion, which may or may not have demonic causation. The scribes, however, in the same pericope, do not hesitate to accuse Jesus of demon-possession of the highest order (v. 22).

Another striking effect of demon-possession, at least in some cases, was the impartation of superhuman strength. Mark 5:3, 4 tells us that the Gerasene demoniac “had often been bound with fetters and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the fetters he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him.” Demons also bestowed other abilities, such as in the case of the slave girl who had the spirit of divination and foretelling the future (Acts 16:16). When the demon left her, so did the ability (v. 19).

### The Gospel of John

When we turn to the Fourth Gospel we find ourselves in many ways in a different world from the Synoptic Gospels. We find no exorcisms and no one possessed by demons. But we see Jesus himself accused of having a demon. We already saw this in the Synoptics, in Mark 3:20–27 and parallels, that the Pharisees and scribes accused Jesus of being demon-possessed. But whereas in the Synoptics the Pharisees said Jesus was demon-possessed because he successfully performed exorcisms, in the Gospel of John the charge is based upon what Jesus says.

In John 7:20, after Jesus tells “the Jews” that they were plotting to kill him, thus disregarding the commandments, they retort: “You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?” In this instance “You have a demon” is essentially a way to say “You are crazy.”

Again, after an unpleasant interchange “the Jews” replied, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” Samaritans were heretics, so here having a demon basically means holding to an outrageous opinion. Jesus denied the charge (John 8:48, 49), and made an even more sensational claim: “If any one keeps my word, he will never see death,” to which “the Jews” replied, “Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, as did the prophets; and you say, ‘If any one keeps my word, he will never taste death’” (8:51–52). In their minds, heretical opinions are prompted by indwelling demons.

In John 10:20, 21 we find the same division of opinion noted in Matt 12:24–32: “There was a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, ‘He has a demon, and he is mad; why listen to him?’ Others said, ‘These are not the sayings of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’” Once again what Jesus did and said could lead the hearers to diametrically opposite conclusions about the speaker. To some Jesus’s claim that he had the power to lay down his life and to take it up again (v. 18) was nonsense. To others it seemed that one who could perform such miraculous works of mercy should be taken seriously. But what is of interest is the belief that seemingly nonsensical claims are the result of demon-possession.

If there is an exorcism in the Fourth Gospel it is only the casting out of Satan from the world through the Passion (John 12:31). A reading of the fourth Gospel has the effect of discrediting the concept of demon-possession, because the only One so described was manifestly innocent of it. The contrast with the Synoptic Gospels is dramatic.

### The Epistles and Revelation

The mention of demons in the rest of the New Testament is sporadic, and none of the instances are cases of demon-possession in the Synoptic sense. Paul call his “thorn in the flesh” a messenger of Satan (1 Cor 12:7), but he hardly considers himself to be demon-possessed. But “Babylon” is demon-possessed (Rev 18:2).

We see agreement with the idea that the pagan gods and idols are demons (1 Cor 10:2, 20–21; Rev 9:20), and with the idea that heretical opinions are propagated by deceitful spirits and demons (2 Tim 4:1), yet they believe correct doctrines (“Even the demons believe and shudder,” Jas 2:19). Unclean spirits deceive the rulers of nations (Rev 16:13, 14).

### Conclusion

Demon-possession was an almost universal belief of all peoples in the Mediterranean world of New Testament times, and it is a prominent feature of the Synoptic Gospel narratives and the book of Acts. The Gospel of John witnesses to Jewish belief in the phenomenon but strikingly lacks mention of actual demon-possession or exorcisms. In the rest of the New Testament we do not find these things at all, though there are several mentions of demons. But a robust belief in demon-possession as a cause of physical or mental afflictions, or even of heretical doctrines, seems to have evaporated from Christian literature in later years, at least for a time. A search of the Apostolic Fathers turns up a few mentions of demons, but nothing approaching demon-possession of the Synoptic kind .

As we move from the Synoptics and Acts into the rest of the New Testament, we seem to move from exorcism of individuals to a focus on the exorcism of the planet, from the inauguration of the Kingdom of God to its consummation.

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