

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #110: DEMON POSSESSION

By John Temples

One of the most mysterious and fascinating subjects in Scripture is demon possession. The Bible contains accounts of helpless persons being seized by, inhabited by, and controlled by evil Satanic spirits called demons. It also tells us that Jesus dramatically and miraculously cast these demons out of the unfortunate souls who were possessed of them.

There is no doubt that demon possession was a real phenomenon in the time of Christ, and a significant number of His miracles involved the casting out of demons. Almost all the cases of demon possession occurred during the ministry of Christ. There are no clear cases of demon possession in the Old Testament¹ and none in the New Testament epistles, suggesting that it was limited to the time of Christ and shortly thereafter.

That fact notwithstanding, the widespread frenzy and fascination with demon possession continues unabated today. “Demon possession” has become “demon obsession!” In the 1970s, people were frightened and titillated by the book *The Exorcist*. Later made into a movie, the book dealt with a young woman who was possessed by a demon. In the book, a Catholic priest was able by much effort to cast the demon out. A majority of Americans believe that demon possession is real. The Huffington Post reports: “Over one half (63 percent, to be exact) of young Americans 18-29 years old now believe in the notion that invisible, non-corporeal entities called ‘demons’ can take partial or total control of human beings, revealed an October 2012 Public Policy Polling survey that also showed this belief isn’t declining among the American population generally; it’s growing.” (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/most-americans-1829-years_b_4163588)

¹ Although something similar may be implied in 1 Samuel 16:14, which says “the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a distressing spirit from the Lord troubled him.” If this “distressing spirit” was a demon, then it came by God’s permission, so was said to come “from” Him. Saul’s situation was different from the New Testament cases in that he remained in control of his faculties; he was not overcome by the demon to such an extent that he was powerless to repent and turn back to God. 1 Samuel 16:23 suggests that the “distressing spirit” may have been severe depression or a troubled mind, because music would cause the spirit to depart.

Because of the sensational nature and widespread misunderstanding of demon possession, it behooves us as Bible students to make a careful study of it. We will deal with several questions:

1. What was demon possession?
2. What were the symptoms or characteristics of demon possession?
3. The identity of demons--who were they?
4. Why did God allow demon possession?
5. Do we still have demon possession today? (Has demon possession ceased?)

WHAT WAS DEMON POSSESSION?

Some definitions of terms would be helpful:

- *Demon*--an evil spirit² under the control of Satan. In the King James Version, demons are sometimes called “devils.” The two terms are not the same, however. There is only one “devil”--Satan--but there are many demons.
- *Demon possession*--the involuntary takeover of a human body and/or mind by an evil spirit, resulting in various physical and mental manifestations of suffering.
- *Demoniac*--a person under demon possession.
- *Exorcism*--the removal or driving out of a demon.

So demon possession was a real phenomenon in which a wicked spirit actually entered into and took over the body of a human being, causing great suffering and resisting all means of expulsion.

CHARACTERISTICS OF DEMON POSSESSION

What were the “symptoms” of demon possession? When a person was “possessed,” he or she had experienced a physical takeover by Satanic forces. The demons could enter in, dwell in, and control human bodies and minds. The

² The Bible speaks of evil spirits (Luke 7:21), foul spirits (Revelation 18:2), and unclean spirits (Matthew 10:1). The most often used term in Scripture relating to demon possession is “unclean spirit” (22 times in the NKJV).

demons could speak through the possessed person. They could cause insanity³, physical infirmity, supernatural strength, or antisocial behavior. Wayne Jackson writes, “Some demoniacs were afflicted with blindness and/or the inability to speak (Matthew 9:32, 12:22). Some thus possessed might be prone to violent convulsions. 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)... 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 into pieces, and no one had the power to tame him (cf. also Acts 19:16). Further, he was characterized by both emotional illness and antisocial behavior (e.g., he wore no clothes)....” (Wayne Jackson, “Demons: Ancient Superstition or Historical Reality? In *Reason and Revelation*, April 1998.)

THE NATURE AND IDENTITY OF DEMONS--WHO (OR WHAT) WERE THEY?

Nowhere in God’s word are demons specifically identified. We know they are spirit beings, meaning they have no physical existence, and that they are under the control of Satan. There are three main theories as to their exact identity:

THEORY #1: They are fallen angels, part of the cohort of created beings that rebelled against God at some time in the past, with Satan as their leader. This theory may be rejected for two main reasons:

- “Angel” and “demon” are two distinct words referring to two different beings. If they are angels, they would be called such in Scripture.
- Angels and demons also differ in their interactions with human beings. We read of angels occasionally assuming a human appearance, but they are never pictured as entering an existing human body. However, demons have a marked affinity for physical bodies. In fact, they seem desperate to cling to such, as seen in the case of Luke 8, where demons who were about to be

³ Many people believe that demon possession WAS insanity--that the Bible writers ignorantly “explained” insanity by calling it demon possession. However, the Bible always distinguishes between the two conditions.

“evicted” from a human host by Jesus pleaded that they be allowed to inhabit bodies of pigs.

THEORY #2: This theory says that demons are the monstrous offspring of angels and earthly women. The theory is based on Genesis 6:1-4, which says that “sons of God” took for themselves wives of the “daughters of men.” Their offspring were--wait for it--“little demons.” The most serious objection to this theory is the statement of Jesus that angels are sexless beings that do not marry (Matthew 22:30). By implication, neither do they have offspring. Here is brother Guy Orbison’s explanation of the Genesis text: “The Genesis passage is best explained in its context. The ‘sons of God,’ we are forced to conclude, are the [human] descendants of Seth and the ‘daughters of men’ are the wicked descendants of Cain. When the righteous intermarry with the unrighteous, the resulting humanity becomes exceedingly wicked, demanding the judgment of God. The Great Flood is the result” (Guy Orbison, “Demons--Just Who Are They?” in *Working In The Word*, March 2000).

THEORY #3: This theory is sure to raise some eyebrows, but seems to me to be the correct one: the demons are the disembodied souls of wicked men who have died. This was the definition of a demon accepted by the people of Jesus’s day, and unless a Bible writer (or Jesus) redefined it to mean something else, that meaning must be accepted. Note:

- Josephus⁴, Justin Martyr, Plutarch, Philo, and other ancient historians all testified that demons were the spirits of deceased, wicked human beings.
- Alexander Campbell, after an exhaustive study of ancient Greek writings, came to the same conclusion.
- J. W. McGarvey, eminent scholar among churches of Christ, said: “In the Jewish usage of the term it is applied exclusively to the departed spirits of wicked men. This usage was adopted by Jesus and the Apostles, and consequently all that is said of demons in the N.T. agrees with it.” (Commentary on Matthew and Mark, quoted by Guy N. Woods in Questions and Answers/Open Forum, p. 232.)

⁴ Josephus, the famous Jewish historian, wrote: “Demons are the spirits of wicked men, who enter into living men and destroy them, unless they are so happy as to meet with speedy relief.” (Quoted by John Waddey, *Gospel Advocate*, June 20, 1974, p. 395.)

If demons are indeed the souls of wicked men, that would explain their affinity for physical bodies--as disembodied spirits they crave a host. They want to escape their spiritual state of punishment at any cost (cf. Luke 8:31 and 16:22b-24).

WHY DID GOD ALLOW DEMON POSSESSION?

On several occasions, God allowed Satan temporary supernatural power to afflict human beings (e.g., Job). The explosion of demon possession in Jesus's time seems to have been similar, for the express purpose of demonstrating the Lord's power over Satan.

Brother Wayne Jackson writes: "If the mission of Jesus Christ, as the divine Son of God, was to be effective, the Lord's absolute authority had to be established." He goes on to cite numerous examples of the Lord's power over nature, then says, "It is not unreasonable to assume that, just as the Savior had displayed His marvelous power in all these [natural] realms, it likewise was appropriate that He be able to demonstrate His authority in the spirit sphere as well.... These passages, I believe, help us to understand the purpose of demon possession in the first century. It established the comprehensive and supreme authority of the Son of God." (Wayne Jackson, *ibid.*) The casting out of demons by Christ showed conclusively that He was superior not only to nature but to Satan.

HAS DEMON POSSESSION CEASED? DO WE STILL HAVE DEMON POSSESSION TODAY?

This is the most important and relevant aspect of the matter, and we have strong historical and Scriptural evidence that miraculous demon possession is NOT a present phenomenon. In fact, it likely ceased by the middle of the first century.

As we pointed out earlier, there are no clear cases of demon possession in the entire Old Testament period. The majority of cases were during the ministry of Christ. There are only four or five cases in the book of Acts and none in the epistles.

There were only three parties in the first century who possessed the power to cast out demons: Jesus Christ, the apostles of Christ, and persons on whom Jesus or an apostle had laid hands to impart such power. Christ has returned to heaven, so His power is unavailable. The apostles are all dead, so their power is unavailable. And all persons on whom an apostle laid hands are dead.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians about the midpoint of the first century, AD 55 or 56. In chapter 12, he listed the miraculous powers possessed by members of the Corinthian church--nine gifts in all. It is significant that casting out of demons is not in the list. This is strong proof that by that time--only 22 or 23 years after Pentecost--the gift of casting out demons was no longer a part of New Testament Christianity.⁵

The bottom line is this: Demon possession seems to have been a temporary power granted to Satan during the ministry of Jesus for the purpose of demonstrating Christ's superior power and authority. Satan can no longer attack or control you supernaturally, but he can still tempt and influence us to evil through various media. The devil can knock on your door, but you are not under compulsion to let him in. A person can allow himself to be used by Satan to do evil, but Satan cannot directly, physically overpower him against his will. James 4:7 assures us that if we resist Satan, he will flee. What Christians need to worry about today is not possession, but temptation. --John Temples

⁵ Later--certainly by the end of the first century--all the miraculous gifts had ceased. See 1 Corinthians 13:8-10. See also Biblical Insights article #73 on the cessation of miracles.