

DEMON POSSESSION, THE BIBLE, AND SUPERSTITION

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How does one respond to the charge that the New Testament endorses superstition by its occasional references to demon possession?

Demon possession was a real, historical phenomenon of the first century. Spirit entities, known as demons [the KJV's "devils" is an incorrect translation], did inhabit and afflict human bodies during that age.

The question of the origin of demons is not spelled out in the Scriptures, although several theories have been proposed by Bible scholars (some of which may be dismissed out of hand). A few writers have suggested that demons were the disembodied spirits of a pre-Adamic race of men who lived upon the Earth in an alleged "gap period" between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. There is, however, no evidence of any such gap period. Furthermore, Adam is identified clearly as the "first man" (1 Corinthians 15:45). Others have speculated that demons resulted from the cohabitation of angels with antediluvian women (based upon a misunderstanding of Genesis 6:1-4), even though Christ plainly taught that angels are sexless beings incapable of such unions (Matthew 22:30).

The two more plausible views surmise that: (a) demons may have been the spirits of wicked dead men whom God, in harmony with His divine purpose, permitted to leave the Hadean realm to indwell some people (see, for example, Alexander Campbell's "Demonology," *Popular Lectures and Addresses*); or (b) demons may have been fallen angels who were allowed to escape their confinement (Jude 6) for a similar purpose (see Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*). Regardless of their origin, the existence of demons is recognized within the pages of the New Testament.

In regard to their nature, demons are portrayed as spirits (Matthew 8:16), and thus did not possess a corporeal existence (Luke 24:39). In regard to their character, demons are portrayed as unclean spirits that were evil, and under the immediate control of Satan (Matthew 12:24,43,45). Demons also were intelligent beings (Mark 1:24), and could exercise both volition and locomotion whenever permitted (Matthew 12:44-45). Demon possession of human bodies frequently resulted in physical and/or mental illness (although these ailments clearly were distinguished from the demon itself (see Matthew 4:24). Dumbness (Matthew 9:32), blindness (Matthew 12:32), and supernatural strength (Mark 5:4; Acts 19:16) sometimes were characteristic of demoniacs.

The New Testament supplies no reason as to exactly why demons entered particular individuals, but it does make clear the fact that they inhabited men (Matthew 9:32), women (Luke

8:2), and children (Mark 7:30). Apparently, demon possession was permitted temporarily by God in order that the authority of Christ might be made manifest. As the Lord revealed control over nature (Mark 4:30), disease (Mark 1:12), material things (John 2:9), and even death (John 11:44), so also did He demonstrate power over the spirit realm (Luke 11:20). In fact, the authority of Jesus over evil spirits amazed His contemporaries, who exclaimed: "What is this? a new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). Christ's disciples, by His authority, also could expel demons (Luke 10:17), except on one occasion, during which they were hindered by their weak faith (cf. Mark 9:28, Matthew 17:20).

With the termination of the supernatural era of the early church, demon possession, and the corresponding gift of expulsion, ceased. Satan's supernatural power was bound (Matthew 12:29). Certainly, the Devil exerts great influence today. However, just as God no longer works miraculously, but influences men through His word and providence, so also, Satan wields his power indirectly and non-miraculously through various media. Modern cases of supposed demon possession are doubtless the results of psychosomatic problems, hysteria, self-induced hypnosis, delusion, and such like. They have natural, although perhaps not always well-understood, causes. When the Bible discusses demon possession, it always is from a specific, historical vantage point. As such, it does not endorse myth or superstition.

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