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Conducted by  
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*“In an age when our society clearly appears to reject the Gospel of Christ, but it is equally clearly ready to receive anything connected with the 'occult' - (i.e. astrology, witchcraft, spiritism, etc.) - what does the Bible say about demon possession?*

*Is there such a condition? Does it exist today?”*

**An important Subject**

There is a convenient and easy answer, given by some, which would make further

discussion of the subject irrelevant. They casually dismiss it, claiming that in earlier times in their ignorance people mistakenly took epilepsy or some mental ailment for demon possession, but they would claim, today we know better! However, I think that the question is too important to be dismissed in such a cavalier fashion, because it leaves too many other questions unanswered.

For instance, was the Lord Jesus just as 'ignorant' as the people of His day, when He commanded evil spirits to leave their victims? (Matt. 17: 18, Mk. 1:25).

Was He simply 'in error' when He claimed to cast out demons '*by the Spirit of God*'?

Did He deliberately 'deceive' His twelve disciples, when He '*gave them power against unclean spirits*'? (Matt. 10:1), or when He promised them the power to '*cast out devils*' in His name? (Mk. 16:17).

Or was He, in fact, 'self-deceived,' in thinking that He was able to bestow such power?

These are serious matters, because if Jesus *knew no better* than His contemporaries, or if He was *mistaken* when He treated sick people as though they were demon-possessed, or if He *did* know better, but simply accommodated the ignorance of the people by *pretending* that demon-possession existed when He knew that it did not; or if He *deceived* His own followers, when He promised them the power to deal with a problem which did not really exist, how much confidence can we place in His word?

But let us begin with the first part of the question.

#### **What does the Bible say about demon possession?**

Well, so far as the O.T. is concerned, the answer is, virtually nothing!

Last year (September 1999) I dealt with a question about the reason for the extraordinary behaviour of King Saul who tried to kill David, when he was troubled with what is described as 'an evil spirit from the Lord' (1 Sam. 19:9-10). I suggested that the condition from which Saul suffered was 'melancholia' a degenerating mental ailment, characterised by emotional instability and brought on by depression and groundless fears. I also suggested that the only sense in which this might be described as 'from the Lord' is that when God withdrew His support from Saul, he became increasingly insecure and his behaviour more unpredictable. But apart from this isolated case, there is nothing in the O.T. that might be mistaken for demon possession.

On the rare occasions where the phrase '*an evil spirit*' occurs, it merely describes bad feeling between people, as in Jud. 8:23.

#### **Demon Possession - ancient belief**

There is, however, ample evidence to show that, even before the time of Abraham and the birth of the Hebrew nation, among ancient peoples such as the Egyptians, demon-possession was regarded as a major cause of all kinds of illness and ailments.

Because sickness was thought to be the result of the activity of evil spirits, treatment was usually a matter left for the priests to prescribe. On the walls of the temples along the river Nile, I have seen carvings depicting surgical instruments used by the priests in their treatment of their patients.

One surgical procedure they used is known today as 'trepanning'. It involved boring a hole in the skull of the patient, or the cutting out of a disc of bone from the skull. The same sort of procedure is sometimes carried out in our hospitals today, only, of course, in a more sophisticated form, and not for the same purpose! In these days trepanning is used as a method of relieving pressure on the brain, but in ancient times the holes that were made in the skull were too small to produce this result. Since they believed that insanity, headaches, epilepsy, etc., were caused by evil spirits or demons, the trepanning operation was carried out in order to release the demon that had taken possession of

the patient, and the small disc of bone which was cut out of the skull - (if the patient survived!) - Was often worn as a charm, to prevent the evil spirit from returning. The surgery was carried out, in one way or another and for the same purpose, among both primitive and sophisticated ancient peoples alike.

#### Trepanning Not Practised among the Jews

The Children of Israel were notable exceptions. The covenant, which they had with their God, and their acceptance of His law given through Moses, was designed to prevent them from falling into the errors of the idolatrous nations with whom they came into contact, and, it is significant that although trepanned skulls have been found in large numbers in many parts of the world, none has ever been found in Palestine, and there is no reference to the practice in either Jewish literature or the Bible.

#### Demon-possession among the Jews in the New Testament times

Although there are no references to demon-possession in the Old Testament scriptures, we most certainly find them in the New. Why is that? One possible explanation is that, although the Babylonian Captivity certainly cured them of idolatry so that they never turned to it again, the returning Jews were not cured of superstitious beliefs, - (which they may even have acquired whilst living among the idolatrous Babylonians). It is certainly true that, during the four hundred years between the Testaments, there grew up in Judaism the widespread belief that illnesses of all sorts were the result of demon possession. They saw the world as filled with unclean, evil spirits, which used all sorts of methods to enter and take possession of them.

For example, they believed that demons might settle on their food and enter into them in that way.

In his '*Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*,' Edersheim presents a graphic picture of a Jewish world that was obsessed with belief in evil spirits, and reveals a society in which people tried to ward off the demons by wearing charms and uttering incantations or curses, or even creating pungent smells!

Whilst these Jewish superstitious notions were far from the truth, the New Testament nevertheless reveals that, in the time of Jesus, demon-possession *did* occur, was a reality, and that He dealt with it as a reality, as it is recorded in the accounts of His miracles.

Leaving aside the several occasions when great crowds were healed of all kinds of ailments, (e.g. Matt. 8:16), there are, among the cases of individual healing performed by Jesus, seven accounts of people being genuinely cured of demon possession.

#### Josephus's story

I use the word 'genuinely' because it is not difficult to see that this widespread fear of evil-spirits soon created an opportunity for fraudsters and trickery. There were, in Judaism in the time of Jesus, men who went about claiming to have the power to cast out demons' professional 'exorcists' whose claims were taken quite seriously by otherwise intelligent and educated Jews. It is interesting to read the account of Josephus, the Jewish historian who was born about 37 AD and who served as a General in the Jewish army before the fall of Jerusalem. He describes, with obvious seriousness, the methods used by such men.

"I have seen a certain man of my own country, whose name was Eleazar, releasing people that were demonical, in the presence of Vespasian, and his sons, and his captains, and the whole company of soldiers. The manner of his cure was this. He put a ring that had a root of one of those sorts mentioned by Solomon, to the nostrils of demoniac, after which he drew out the demon through his nostrils; and when the man fell down immediately, he adjured him

(*the demon*) to return to him no more, making still mention of Solomon and reciting the incantations which he composed. And when Eleazar would persuade and demonstrate to, the spectators that he had such a power, he set a little way off a cup of water, or basin full of water, and commanded the demon as he went out of the man to overturn it, thereby to let the spectators know that he had left the man; and when this was done, the skill and wisdom of Solomon was shown very manifestly." (*"Antiquities of the Jews" Book 8:ch.2: par. 5*).

Of course, we have no evidence that Solomon ever had anything to do with demoniacs or that he composed the 'incantations' to which Josephus refers. We do know, however, that it was the practice of these itinerant 'exorcists' and 'sorcerers' to make use of the names of great or well-known people in order to frighten off the demon, or more likely, to impress the spectators by their performance.

In Acts 19:13-20 things went badly wrong when a group of these men used the names of Jesus and Paul in Ephesus!

### **The Lord's Miracles**

The difference between the methods used by these men, and the miracles performed by the Lord Jesus is obvious. He did not use spells, incantations or curses, nor did he use the 'bell book and candle' of the present day priest! Instead, he simply issued a word of command, and evil spirits left their victims (Matt. 8 28-33, Matt. 17:15, Mark 1:23-26, Luke 8:2, etc.).

### **Demon Possession = Epilepsy?**

It is sometimes argued that what are described in the New Testament as examples of demon-possession are, in fact, mistaken cases of epilepsy. But in Matt. 4:24, it is shown quite clearly that the New Testament writers were aware of the difference between epilepsy and demon-possession, and they did not confuse the two conditions.

Matt. 4:24 tells us they brought to Jesus *"those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics and paralytics, and He healed them.*

We conclude, therefore, from the testimony of the New Testament scriptures, that demon possession was a condition distinct from common physical or mental illness and that Jesus exercised His power to cure it.

(All questions, please, to Frank Worgan, 5 Gryfebank Way,  
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