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New Testament demoniacal possession

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NEW TESTAMENT DEMONIAICAL POSSESSION.

No doubt can be entertained about the reality of the phenomenon known as the Demoniactal Possession in the early decades of the Christian era, except by such as question the authenticity of the Gospels and Epistles.

The narratives of the evangelists abound with references to unfortunates, who are under the power of those evil spirits. Demons are also referred to four times in First Corinthians, once in the epistle to Titus, once in the epistle to James, and three times in the book of Revelation.

The effect of such possession is too familiar to require any setting forth save as it shall follow incidentally upon this discussion.

Our purpose is to give an explanation of this phenomenon that seems most adequate to the facts given in the New Testament.

The most satisfactory method we find is to consider several questions very naturally asked about this phenomenon. They are

1st, What were demons supposed to be?

2nd, Who were possessed by them?

3rd, What was meant by such possession?

4th, Has such possession been known at any other time or place than that with which our theme leads us to deal?

5th, What about relief from demoniactal possession? !

1st, What were demons supposed to be?

The Greek word for demon is δαίμων, and designated according to Greek Mythology a being holding rank midway between the gods and man, and who had supernatural intelligence. They belonged to the same order of beings as the Roman Genii. These according to the mythology of the times might be either good or evil beings.

The name demon signified nothing at all as to moral character. But as early as the first decades of the Christian era demon came to mean, to the Jews at least, an evil spirit. They are not properly called devils, as the A. V. renders the word δαίμων, for there is but one devil the Greek for which is διάβολος. Demons were subordinate, and inferior to the devil.

The supernatural intelligence of these beings is shown by their unaided recognition of Jesus as the Holy One of God, and their knowledge of His origin and mission, while but few human beings thought Him more than a mere man.

Demons were supernatural in their power also. While Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum one Sabbath day, there was a man in the synagogue, who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, Ah! What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? - - - - - And Jesus rebuked him saying, Hold thy peace and come out of him. And when the demon had thrown him down in the midst, he came out of him having done him no hurt. St. Luke 4:33 - 35. R. V.

In the country of the Gerasenes Jesus found a man possessed with many demons which caused him to break the chains and fetters with which he was bound and to cry day and night, and cut himself with stones. When Jesus cast out the demons, presently the man was found with Jesus sitting, clothed and in his right mind. St. Mark 5:5 - 15.

Demons, then, were a distinct order of beings. Jesus is often represented as rebuking them as he did men. This alone is not conclusive proof of the claim that they were real beings for Jesus rebuked the fever in the case of Peter's wife's mother, and He also rebuked the wind which swept down so terrifically upon Lake Gennesaret when He and His disciples were crossing it. But only in these two instances is Jesus represented as rebuking inanimate forces, while time and again He rebuked demons.

Jesus addressed as though He were speaking to beings who had power to act. In the case of the boy who was brought by his father to Jesus at the foot of the mount of Transfiguration Jesus spoke to the demon saying, "Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I command thee, come out of him and enter no more into him." St. Mark 9:25.

Again in the case of the man possessed with many demons, Jesus asked him, "What is thy name?" And he said, "Legion."

The demons also are represented as speaking to Jesus: for in the case just mentioned, the Legion of demons entreated Jesus to give them leave to enter into the swine. The demon,

whom the seven sons of the chief priest, Sceva, tried to cast out, is represented as speaking to them saying, "Jesus I knew and Paul I knew; but who are ye?" Acts 19:15. These instances furnish sufficient proof that demons were real beings.

2nd, Who were possessed by demons?

They possessed both men and women. Even boys and girls came under their power.

St. Matthew and St. Mark both give account of the Syro-Phoenician woman who came to Jesus in behalf of her daughter, - a child - who was possessed by a demon and was grievously vexed therewith.

At the foot of the mount of Transfiguration a father brought his son ($\pi\alpha\iota\varsigma$), who was possessed by a demon, to Jesus to be cured. St. Matthew 17:18.

The only instance in which we have an account of a woman being possessed by demons is that of Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus cast seven demons. St. Mark 16:9. But this can hardly have been a solitary case of possession of women. Most likely if we knew every case in which Jesus and His disciples cast out demons, we would find a good proportion were women. The other instances of demoniacal possession recorded in the New Testament were men. It is evident then, that demons were not respecters of age or sex, but possessed every one possible.

3rd, What was meant by such possession?

This can have meant but one thing, namely; being under the overpowering sway of these superior beings, so that instead of

human beings following their own natural inclination, they submitted to the dictates of those evil spirits. The Greek verb translated "possessed with demons" δαιμονίζομαι, and simply means demonized or exercised by a demon.

This is parallel with the case of the devout Christian who is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, through good spirits subordinate and inferior to the Divine Spirit.

This theory is scriptural, for Jesus Himself, speaking of little children, said "See that ye despise not one of these little ones, for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father who is in heaven." St. Matthew 18:10. And in Hebrews 1:13 - 14 we read-- "But of which of the angels hath He said at any time, Sit thou on my right hand till I make thy enemies the footstool of thy feet? Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation. R. V.

In Jesus sermon on the last Judgment He represents the wicked as being banished into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, which angels, it seems most probable are these very demons who have been the emissaries of Satan.

From many instances of demoniacal possession given in the New Testament bodily infirmities and mental diseases seem to have been the ordinary outward manifestation, such as deafness, dumbness, blindness, epilepsy and violent insanity. This would seem to indicate that demons exerted their power over the body and mind of man, and that these things were the result.

← But this is not so, for Jesus is often represented as healing sick, of whom it is in no wise intimated that they were possessed with demons. And when He sent out His twelve disciples, He commissioned them to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons." Hence physical and mental phenomena were only incidental to demoniacal possession. There was a deeper significance to such possession.

It was the overpowering of the individual so that he could not use his own faculties, or if he did, it would be in an abnormal way, which would harmonize with the evil purpose of such spirits, or at least, as nearly so as the demons could make them.

There were apparently degrees in demoniacal possession. Some are said to have been possessed by a dumb spirit, or a deaf spirit. Mary Magdalen had seven demons cast out of her and she loved Jesus greatly because much had been forgiven her.

The incident of a demoniac who was blind and dumb is mentioned by St. Matthew 12:22. This victim was apparently more fully possessed than one possessed by a dumb spirit or a blind spirit alone. The man possessed with many demons so that they gave their name as Legion was well nigh completely possessed.

4th, Has such possession at any other time or place than that with which our theme leads us to deal?

Trench, quoted by Conybeare and Howson in the "Life and Epistles of St. Paul," P.158, Note 1, says "If there was anything that marked the period of the Lord's coming in the flesh

and that immediately succeeding, it was the wreck and confusion of men's spiritual life - - - the sense of utter disharmony - - - the whole period was the hour and power of darkness, of a darkness which then, before the dawn of a new day was darkest. It was exactly the crisis for such soul maladies as these in which the spiritual and bodily should be thus strangely interlocked; and it is nothing wonderful that they should have abounded at that time."

"Neander and Trench however both refer to modern missionary accounts of something like the same possession among heathen nations and of their cessation on conversion to Christianity."

In a volume, "Demon Possession and Allied Themes" by Nevins, the author gives account of many cases almost exactly parallel with those recorded in the Gospels, of persons possessed with demons. The instances he mentioned are of Chinese, some of which came under his own personal observation, where Christianity had not yet been introduced. And in every instance when the unfortunate believed on Jesus the demoniac power was broken and the demoniac cured from that very hour.

Others have explained demoniacal possession even in the time of Jesus earthly ministry, as insanity, partial or complete according to the degree of possession.

If either of the above theories be true there is no occasion to question the claim that demoniacal possession has been known in modern times, and even in all times since the Christian

← Era began. But neither of the above theories are satisfactory to the writer.

The latter theory, that this phenomenon was identical with what we call insanity, seems plainly inconsistent with points especially emphasized in the New Testament concerning demoniacal possession. For Jesus is said to have questioned them as to their name, in at least one instance, and they replied. St. Mark 3:9.

In the same instance they spoke as beings having a choice for they asked permission to enter into the herd of swine.

And in many instances the outward manifestation of this possession did not in the least resemble those of insanity, e. g., blindness and deafness.

The other theory, that of Trench does not seem adequate; for while we admit the truth of what he says about the hour and power of darkness, and the confusion and wreck of men's spiritual life, such a crisis does not seem to be past with millions of men and women today.

Nor do I understand that the devil of Christ holds sway over nations as such, as Neander and Trench intimate. The kingdom of heaven does not, for example, include every soul, in what is known as a Christian nation, for there are men in the most nearly Christianized nations of the world that are as antagonistic to Jesus as any benighted heathen can be. Hence if cases of demoniacal possession have been known in modern missionary accounts of heathen nations there is no reason why

the same phenomenon may not be found in wicked men in Christian lands. The conflict between Jesus and Satan is in the souls of individual men, and not in multitudes of people as such.

If there ever was such an order of beings as demons, there is no reason to think that they have been annihilated, nor have we reason to believe that they have been withdrawn from this world, and sent to disturb the peace of souls of fallen beings in other worlds, especially while Satan still has such a strong hold on this world as he has.

The probability is, if we understand the disposition of the arch-fiend, that he would retain all his emissaries - the demons - and make as stubborn a fight and stand out against the Almighty as long as possible.

Because men are more highly educated and have access to more of the truth now than in those primitive gospel times, we are not to suppose demons cannot hold sway over them. In none of the instances of possession given in the New Testament, was ignorance attributed to the unfortunate as having anything to do with the phenomenon. The only cause we can attribute to demoniacal possession in any case, in the light of all we can learn of it, was the individual's surrendering his will to the demon or demons, and submitting to the sway of such evil spirits. This is just as possible today as ever. Today it may as truthfully be said as in the first century; "to whom ye present yourselves as servants unto obedience, his servants ye are whom ye obey." Romans 6:16. R. V.

What but such possession can induce men to drink the intoxicating cup which they know will fit them for doing the awful deeds they do? What but demons can lead men to rob their fellowmen of their hard-earned money?

What but such evil beings can cause men who have ability to accumulate wealth, to oppress their less-gifted fellows almost beyond endurance, simply that they may pamper their own lusts or win the applause of men?

What but emissaries of Hell can lead a man, though intoxicated, to strike down his starving companion, because she asks him for a few cents to buy some bread for her hungry children and herself? and while lying unconscious the brute husband to stand over her and with heavy heel stamp her in the mouth till she was almost dead. And when her little boy, hearing his mother's faint cry for water, brought her a drink, upon which his enraged father picked him up and dashed him against the wall nearly crushing his life out. But this awful tragedy occurred in Boston, and hundreds of others similar are occurring everywhere.

What but such agents of the devil can impel a man to take his own life to which he clings naturally more tenaciously than to anything else whatsoever?

We conclude readily then that there is such a phenomenon as demoniacal possession and that millions of human beings are under the power of evil spirits, and from such possession, result the awful things brought to our notice every day.

5th, What about relief from demoniacal possession?

When Jesus was casting out demons, on one occasion the Pharisees said, "He casteth out demons through Beelzebub, the Prince of demons." But Jesus answered, every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation - - - If Satan is also divided against himself how shall his kingdom stand? But if I by the finger of God can cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you." St. Luke 11:15-20.

Again He said "But if I by the spirit of God, cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you."

In His sermon on the mount St. Matthew 12:28, Jesus said, "Many shall say to me in that day Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in thy name and in thy name cast out demons." St. Matthew 7:22.

And when even was come they brought Him many demoniacs and He cast out the spirits with a word. St. Matthew 8:16.

And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out demons. St. Mark 16:17.

And He said unto them go and say to that fox Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today. St. Luke 13: 32.

And He called unto Him His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out. St. Matthew 10:1.

In every one of these cases the power to cast out demons obviously belonged to Jesus, except these in which He spoke of casting out demons by the finger of God, or by the Spirit.

of God. And these plainly refer to Himself, when we remember Jesus' claim that He and the Father are one.

He was able even to empower His disciples to cast out demons in His name, and He Himself never failed in any case to cast out evil spirits whether the victim was possessed with one or a Legion.

No case has been reported in the intervening centuries where His name through faith in His name, has not proved sufficient to liberate those who were hopelessly bound by evil spirits. Multiplied thousands of helpless victims have in Jesus name sought and found complete deliverance from hot-breathed demons and have been "found sitting, clothed, and in their right minds."

"Jesus the name high over all
In hell or earth or sky
Angels and men before it fall
And devils (demons) fear and fly."