

Exorcism in the Bible and Today

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Due to the lack of material in our own circles which has been written on this subject, one comes to the conclusion that this particular subject matter has been left quite alone. No doubt its unpopularity can be attributed to the fact that exorcism has not, in the recent past, been a major issue among the clergy or the lay people. However, this no longer seems to be the case, especially among the laity, in view of the prominence of the occult and the recent popularity of the book, *The Exorcist*, by William Peter Blatty. Naturally, people are asking more and more questions about this subject, questions for which we must be prepared to give a sound scriptural answer. It is not my intention with this paper to cast any new light on some of the hidden aspects of this subject, but simply to acquaint the reader with what the Bible says about it and its use today.

The title for this paper specifically points to exorcism. But when discussing exorcism, a person is taking for granted that demon possession does indeed exist. So as not to be guilty of this we will also include the matter of demon possession in the Bible and today. Although the occult activities such as fortune-telling, magic, spiritism, and Satan worship are closely linked to this subject matter, we will deal only with actual demon possession for it is this with which Christ deals in the New Testament.

Possession in the Bible

We turn, first of all, to the matter of demon possession in the Bible. As a definition of demon possession, Dr. Merrill Unger offers the following:

“Demon possession is a condition in which one or more evil spirits or demons inhabit the body of a human being and can take complete control of their victim at will. By temporarily blotting out his consciousness, they can speak and act through him as their complete slave and tool. The inhabiting demon (or demons) comes and goes much like the proprietor of a house who may or may not be ‘at home.’ When the demon is ‘at home,’ he may precipitate an attack. In these attacks the victim passes from his normal state, in which he acts like other people, to the abnormal state of possession.”¹

But just what is a demon? The terms employed in the Bible to specify demons are essentially two “*daimonion*” and “*pneuma akatharton*.” The term “*daimonion*” is used once in Acts 17:18 to mean a deity or divinity, but in all other uses it has the meaning of demon or evil spirit. In Mt. 7:25, 26 the word is used synonymously with the term “*pneuma akatharton*” which is a spirit being that is unclean, impure, and vicious. Lesser used terms would be the participle form of the verb “*daimonidzomai*” which means to be possessed by a demon, and the term “*daimon*” which is used only once in the New Testament (Mt. 8:31) and has also here the meaning of demon or evil spirit.

As to the origin of these demons many theories have been introduced but must be rejected because of their incredibility. Some feel that demons are simply superstitious designations for certain natural diseases. Some say that demons are the spirits of wicked men. Others suggest that demons are the disembodied spirits of the inhabitants of a pre-Adamic earth. And yet others say that demons are the monstrous offspring of angels and antediluvian women.

The Catholic Church feels this way about it:

“According to the Catholic belief, demons are fallen angels who have rebelled against God. Excluded from friendship with God, they retain nevertheless their natural power of acting upon men and the material universe for their own evil purposes. This power is limited by divine providence, but it has been given wider scope in consequence of the sin of mankind.”²

¹ Merrill Unger, *Demons in the World Today*, Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972, p. 102.

² “Exorcism,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 748.

It would seem wise for us to stop there in stating that demons are fallen angels. However, others have attempted to further describe these as fallen angels that are free over against those that are bound. Dr. Unger offers this explanation:

“But the fallen angels that are bound must not be confused with the fallen angels that are free. The latter, as noted, are in all likelihood to be connected with demons. The fallen angels that are bound, on the other hand, are those described by Peter and Jude, as ostensibly guilty of such enormous wickedness as no longer allowed them to roam the heavenlies with their leader Satan and the other evil angels, but plunged them down to the strictest and severest confinement in Tartarus, ‘to pits of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment’ (II Pet. 2:4).”³

But let it suffice us to leave this mystery of their origin somewhat hidden and turn to matters of more importance such as the actual possessing of a human being. Were a person to read the entire Old Testament, he would not find any record of demon possession. But when we turn to the New Testament, we find a great deal of it recorded. Why this is we don’t know, but certainly Christ’s demonstration of his power over it manifested to the people of His day and to us that he is truly the Messiah who has power over Satan and his hordes.

Perhaps, the most dramatic and well known account of demon possession is that of the Gadarene demoniac who lived in tombs, had strength to break chains, ran around wildly screaming and shouting while cutting himself with sharp stones. By examining Mark’s account of this demoniac we come up with eight symptoms of possession: 1) Mk. 5:2 The demoniac had an unclean spirit. In other words, he was indwelt by another being. 2) Mk. 5:3 The possessed man exhibited unusual powers of physical strength. No one could bind him anymore. 3) Mk. 5:4 The third characteristic was the paroxysms (the fits of rage). He had wrenched chains apart and broken his fetters in pieces. 4) Mk. 5:6,7 The fourth sign is one of disintegration, the splitting of the personality. (However, Scripture shows only the new personality rather than the constant change back and forth of the two personalities). 5) Mk. 5:7 The fifth sign is that of resistance, an opposition to the Christian faith and spiritual things. He tells Jesus to leave him alone. 6) Mk. 5:7 The sixth symptom is *hyperaesthesia*, an excessive sensibility. The Gadarene had clairvoyant powers. He knew immediately who Jesus was. 7) Mk. 5:9 The seventh sign is seen in the variation or alteration of voice. A legion of demons spoke out of him. 8) Mk. 5:13 The eighth sign is occult transference. The demons left the man and entered into the swine upon Jesus command.

Kurt Koch makes this observation of these characteristic symptoms in his book, *Occult Bondage and Deliverance*:

It should be noted that the second, third and fourth characteristics are similar in many respects to the symptoms of certain mental illnesses. However, I say similar, for in no case are they exactly the same. The remaining five characteristics on the other hand are not to be found within any psychiatric classification. For example clairvoyance itself is never a sign of mental illness, and a mental patient will never be able to speak in a voice or a language he has previously not learned.”⁴

1 Pet. 5:8 tells us that Satan is our adversary who, as a roaring lion, is walking about seeking whom he may devour. Satan’s ultimate object is to gather himself as much company as he can to experience his misery with him. We know how he tempts us to disobey God and disbelieve that Jesus Christ has won the victory over him (I Cor. 15:57), so where does demon possession fit in to his scheme? One would think that this would make people aware of the evil that lurks behind Satan and turn them to God. But when one looks at the growing number of witches in this country alone and the open Satan worship that is practiced, we see that the old evil foe knows what he’s doing. In his commentary on Rev. 16: 13-16, C. H. Little says this about the three unclean spirits that are mentioned:

³ Merrill Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.; 19525 p. 53.

⁴ Kurt Koch, *Occult Bondage and Deliverance*, Grand Rapids; Kregel Publications, 1970, p. 58.

“They are pictured here as going forth to the kings of the whole inhabited world, before whom they perform their signs, by means of which they draw their allegiance to the prince of this world, the master whom they serve. Their purpose in this is to gather together all the antichristian forces of the world into a single vast army for battle against the almighty.”⁵

Certainly demons which possess human beings are part of this vast wicked army of Satan’s, doing its part in that war.

But how is it possible for demons to possess the body of a human being? The Lord must allow it to happen as he allowed Satan to bring all sorts of pestilences on unsuspecting Job. Possession is not necessarily a willful subjection as in the case of openly defying God in unbelief. It would seem that the demons attack any one whom they wish. However, this statement and the one prior to it do need some clarification. One can’t deny that a person is for all practical purposes laying out the red carpet to Satan’s demons by playing around with the occult, Satan worship, drug abuse, sexual excesses and so on.

Well then, is a person, who is a new creature through faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior from sin, death, and the devil, free from these seeming random attacks of Satan’s demons? Whom can they possess? Matt. 16:18 tells us that the gates of hell shall not prevail against those who can be termed as true Christians. When looking at those who were possessed in Jesus’ time, there is nothing that indicated that they were Christians. However, it’s true that they did become followers of Jesus as in the case of Mary Magdalene (Lk. 8:2; Mk. 16:9). So let us take warning anyway, “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph. 6:12).

Exorcism In The Bible

Now that we have looked at the matter of demon possession in the Bible, let us see the power of Christ that cast these evil spirits out. Strictly speaking there are no exorcisms in the Bible, at least not using the verb, “*exorkidzo*.” In Mt. 26:63 it is used in the juridical sense of adjuring. In most instances the word “*ekballo*” is used with the meaning to cast out, or drive out.

First we shall look at the so-called exorcisms of Jesus of which there appears to be ten recorded in the Bible. What strikes the reader of the Scriptures is the simplicity that Jesus employs when casting out demons. It’s a far cry from all the rigmarole that the Jewish exorcists of that time included in their exorcism rituals. It’s also a far cry from all the rigmarole that Roman Catholics go through as recorded in their “*Rituale Romanum*.” When Jesus cast out demons he simply told them to leave as he did with the Gadarene demoniac by saying only one word, “Go!” (Mt.8:32).

We also notice the authority and power with which Jesus cast out these demons. He did so by the power of his own word as Mt. 8:16 points out and even when Jesus wasn’t in the presence of the person possessed He had power to cast out evil spirits, (the case of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter, Mt. 15:22 ff. and Mk. 7:24 ff.). Not only was Jesus involved with this but also the Holy Spirit for Jesus says in Mt. 12:28, “I cast out devils by the Spirit of God.” Jesus’ power to cast out was by the power of His word and we know that every word of Jesus is the product of the Spirit.

The very fear that the demons expressed at the appearance of Jesus also demonstrates His power and authority (Mk. 9:20). In the case of the Gadarene demoniac the demon could do nothing but make obeisance to Jesus instead of running the opposite way, knowing what lay in store for them. Let it also be noted that no demon that Jesus cast out ever returned to plague that man again.

When thinking about the purpose for which Jesus performed these great wonders, three come to mind. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (I Jn. 3:8). Jesus came into the world to fulfill the law, which included obeying His heavenly Father. As a result of this and also his suffering, death, and resurrection, Satan was destroyed. Casting out demons was all part of his battle against Satan. Jesus also performed these wonders to manifest himself among men as the promised Messiah and

⁵ C. H. Little, *Explanation of the Book of Revelation*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950, p. 166.

to prove the power of his word which forgave sins. And certainly we know that Jesus is a merciful God who is touched by the plight of the suffering.

But Jesus also gave this power to his disciples and apostles so that when they would perform exorcisms, it was with authority. (Mt. 10:1, 8; Mk. 3:15; 6:7; Lk. 9:1) This power and authority was likewise given to believers (Mk. 16:17) The validity of this authority is seen especially in the incident where Paul cast an evil spirit out of a girl in the city of Philippi. Paul said to her, "I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her" (Acts 16:18). In a later incident when Paul could not be in the presence of those possessed, he sent a handkerchief or apron of his to them and they were no longer possessed with the demon. Further successes were reported by the 'seventy' (Lk. 10:17) as they returned to Jerusalem after being sent out with the power to heal and to cast out demons.

But there was one failure that is reported in Scriptures (Mk. 9:14-29) and also the reason why they failed is given. Before going to Jesus for help, the father of a possessed boy had gone to the disciples but they failed. After Jesus cast the demon out of the boy, the disciples asked why they could not do it? Jesus replied, "Because of your unbelief." It was because of their lack of faith, their littleness of faith. This was not necessarily their lack of saving faith but their lack of faith in Jesus command recorded in Mt. 10:8. Jesus also tells his disciples that the dispossession of this kind of demon (a stronger kind) requires prayer and fasting as a stimulant to faith. The only other reference to exorcists in the New Testament would be that of the Jewish exorcists who are mentioned in Acts 19:13. The evil spirit's words to them indicates that these exorcists, who were casting out demons in the name of Jesus and Paul, were not true followers of Jesus. Therefore the efficacy of their exorcism or any who are not of Jesus Christ is questionable. It may appear that false prophets (Mt. 7:22) have the ability to do this but according to II Thes. 2:9-12, these are "lying wonders."

So from the Scriptures we do see that demon possession was an actual occurrence in which there are definite symptoms given. We also see that Jesus did have power over these demons, that he gave this power to his disciples and to believers, that faith was a most important part, and that pseudo exorcists did not actually perform effective exorcisms.

Possession Today

What then about today? Is Possession of the human body possible today as it was in the time of Christ? Did God allow people to be possessed only at the time of Christ so that Christ could perform these great wonders in establishing the power and authority of His word and so as to establish His kingdom here on earth? Certainly this was part of the reason why it occurred then, but we must also take into account the fact that Satan is just as active today as he was then. And as men grow farther and farther away from their Lord as seems to be the case today, the invitation to Satan to come and do his dirty work also becomes more and more prevalent.

It would also seem from secular recordings of history that possession was not confined only to the time of Christ's ministry and the apostolic age of the early Christian church. The ancient Egyptians and Babylonians had forms of exorcism, along with the Jews during the inter-testamental period. The *Apocrypha*, particularly the Book of Tobit, mentions possession and exorcism. The remaining portion of history is likewise a secondary testimony to this fact, although a great deal of it was confused with plain superstition and the natural phenomena of various mental illnesses. Unger offers us this argument from reason:

"Certain remarkable phenomena, which properly belong to the field of experimental psychology, call for special mention in connection with demon possession, because they offer corroborative evidence of the reality of such an occurrence and place it in a light which makes it less of a wonder. While telepathy, or thought transference, and mind reading are problems of the psychologist, and are fields of investigation, in many respects still in their infancy, and much remains to be discovered concerning them, yet this much is established: the mind of one person cannot only influence that of another, but can mesmerize, or hypnotize, or take control of it to such a degree as to impart to it a knowledge previously unpossessed. Feelings and emotions are also excited that were absent before the person lapsed into the hypnotized

state, and in some way or other one mind may read or become conscious of, what is in the mind of another.... The deduction to be made from the foregoing facts is this: if the mind of one person can influence or take control of that of another, then what valid objection may be offered why Satan and demons, as the Bible teaches, may not also enter, and take possession of the minds of those who willingly yield themselves slaves to these evil agencies?"⁶

Naturally there are many who oppose the idea that possession exists today or even the Scriptural truth that it existed at the time of Christ and that He actually performed exorcisms. There are essentially three theories that oppose the Biblical truth. First there is the "Mythical Theory."

"The basic idea of this hypothesis, advanced notably by David Fredrich Strauss and the mythical school, is that the whole narrative of Jesus' demon expulsions is merely symbolic, without actual foundation of fact. Demon possession, so-called, is but a vivid symbol of the prevalence of evil in the world, and the casting out of demons by our Lord, a corresponding figure of triumph over evil by His doctrine and life."⁷

The second theory is the "Accommodation Theory."

"The proponents of the accommodation theory say that our Lord and the Evangelists, in making reference to demon possession, spoke only in accommodation to the prevalent ignorance and superstition of their auditors, without making any assertion as to the actual existence or non-existence of the phenomena described, or the truth or falsity of current belief."⁸

The third theory is the "Hallucination Theory."

"Demon possession is explained, under the hypothesis of hallucination, as a mere psychological delusion on the part of the victim, who, diseased and distraught, becomes wrought up to such a high pitch of emotional frenzy or mental excitement that he imagines himself possessed and controlled by another and more powerful being. Under the suppression of human consciousness and the dethronement of reason, he speaks in the character of the fancied demon. The cure of this strange illusion is virtually the same as the ejection from him of a real demon."⁹

It simply must be said that with our view of Scripture which is merely the view that Scripture gives us of itself, all three of these theories can be shot full of holes. It's merely an attempt to deny the existence of God and His divine intervention in man's affairs.

Another question that can be raised is this: Why does there seem to be an increase in possession today or is it an actual increase. In quoting Richard J. Woods who wrote an article concerning this subject matter in the Catholic magazine, *Chicago Studies*, we hear his reason for doing so:

"In particular, I am writing as a minister who has found himself with fourteen such cases referred to him in less than nine months, about half of them traceable to *The Exorcist*."¹⁰

No doubt, he is *not* the only one who has found this true. He adds to the comment previously made by saying this:

"The *The Exorcist* is not, of course, the cause of all this; it is itself a symptom of a spiritual agitation in Western society that began long before 1969. The possession problem is the manifestation of spiritual disintegration, not the least danger of which is the emergence of a secret cult of the devil in the midst of the Church itself."¹¹

I would not call this man an alarmist but someone who has his eyes open and is witnessing, as we all are, an open vicious attack against the kingdom of God, being waged by the children of darkness. At least years ago people who claimed to be witches kept it a secret for fear of their safety, but with our 'do your own thing' type

⁶ Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, p. 77,78.

⁷ Ibid, p. 90.

⁸ p. 91.

⁹ p. 92.

¹⁰ Richard Woods, "The Possession Problem," *Chicago Studies*, 1973, p. 93.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 94.

of society that tolerates almost anything, they boldly and proudly profess their allegiance to Satan and their opposition to the Lord God in Heaven. No doubt demon possession has its part in there somewhere too.

The only problem is identifying it today. We have the description of demoniacs in the Bible which sets up for us symptoms to guide us. The Catholic Church says that the physical or corporeal indications of possession such as spastic movements or hysterical convulsions are not decisive criteria symptoms; but knowledge of secret things, knowledge of languages never learned by the possessed individual. But even with these they are cautious to stick out their neck.

In spite of the problems one finds in trying to identify possession, the authors of the books that were read in connection with the writing of this paper supply a wealth of seeming documented evidence of possession. It's interesting to note that most of these cases take place in heathen lands where superstition is not uncommon by any means. I quote from an article in the *Concordia Theological Monthly* by Theodore Graebner:

“A missionary in the Methodist Church is quoted by the author of *China Inside Out*, a narrative of Chinese religious conditions at the present time, as authority for the existence in China of cases of demoniac possession similar to those described in the Gospel narrative. In a remote village a Chinese missionary was called to a house in which a Chinese woman lay upon a couch, writhing in rage and fury, frothing and screaming in a terrible fashion. For three days previous to the coming of the missionary she had repeatedly exclaimed, ‘someone will come to drive me away.’ After looking earnestly at the poor woman for a few minutes, the Chinese pastor said very emphatically, ‘You must leave in the name of the Lord Jesus.’ where upon he sang a hymn, read a passage of Scripture, and began to pray. During the prayer the woman became suddenly quiet and after the prayer was perfectly normal. So far as is known, the woman never relapsed.”¹²

We could go on with many more such examples. But all the authors feel without a doubt that possession does exist today, especially in heathen lands where it seems to be widespread.

Our major problem then in identifying possession is its similarity to mental disorders. Are some of the people in institutions possessed with demons or are some of the people treated as demoniacs merely mentally ill? I doubt if there will ever be a clear-cut answer to that. Let us consider some of the scientific feelings regarding this matter:

“Since 1921 studies of possession and trance states made with the aid of electroencephalographic and other instruments indicate that most possession cases are a variety of hysterical attacks or psychomotor epilepsy. It remains true that as a species of what is now called ‘altered states of consciousness,’ possession states can be voluntary or involuntary, pathological or beneficial, dreaded or welcomed. A great many alleged possession states, however, are true schizophrenic reactions, a fragmentation of normal consciousness accompanied by amnesia and apparently, on occasion, paranormal phenomena. Such a state is theologically termed pseudo-possession, but need not imply deliberate fraud.”¹³

In consequence of modern-day study in mental disorders the Catholic Church has been cautious in dealing with this problem. To once again quote Woods:

Thus, the Church demands that the final judgment be made only with expert consultation (which today would necessarily include medical, psychiatric and para-psychological tests) and after a careful consideration of the evidence as a whole. Importantly, the *Ritual* prescribes that a priest called to investigate a claim of possession ‘should not believe too readily that a person is possessed by an evil spirit; but he ought to ascertain the signs by which a person possessed can be distinguished from one who is suffering from melancholy or some other illness.’”¹⁴

We too should be cautious in jumping to any quick conclusions in the matter. Whether possession exists today or not is a question of Christian judgment so that some of us feel that it exists and some of us don't. I myself

¹² Theodore Graebner, “Demoniacal Possession,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 1933, Vol. 4, p. 593.

¹³ Wood, p. 96.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 99.

feel that it still exists, but am perplexed by the problem of identifying it. Perhaps the Lord will never bring me such a case and if He does I know that He will guide me in what I do.

Exorcism Today

This then brings us to what is being done today in the area of exorcism and what we should do if confronted with the problem. As in the day of Jesus there probably exists pseudo-exorcists who claim to have the ability to cast out demons. The danger with these is that they are not of God. Remember, their works are lying wonders, designed to deceive and mislead. The bulk of these exist in heathen lands today, but with the popularity of the already infamous book and movie, no doubt some one will get it into their head that he can exorcise too.

Among the ancient and primitive people it is noticed that the seemingly efficacy of their rites of exorcism depended greatly, in their own minds, on the correct use of their magical formulas. It was believed that the power to cast out demons lay in the words themselves so that as a consequence, great importance was given to the correct recital of the right formulas and the proper performances of the ritual that was prescribed.

In the present-day Catholic Church recognition is made of the possibility of demon possession so that it regulates the manner in dealing with it. *The Code of Canon Law* allows authorized ministers to perform exorcisms over the faithful and also over non-Catholics and those who have been excommunicated. As in the early days of this Church body, exorcism continues to serve as a preparation for baptism. It also forms a part of the blessing of such things as water, salt, oil; and these in turn, are used in personal exorcisms and in blessing or consecrating places and objects connected with public worship. The Catholic Church also feels that the faith and integrity of the exorcist play a determining role in the outcome of the exorcism. However, it is interesting to note that they have now since dropped the rank of exorcists from their ordinations of priests. Only certain individuals are considered appropriate for the job.

Outside the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church has adopted a new exorcism ritual in their midst and also Richard J. Woods makes mention in his article that recently there has been an emergence of lay exorcists (They must have read the book).

But now comes the question that we must answer. How would we handle someone who claimed that he was possessed by an evil spirit? Answering this becomes especially touchy when considering what Richard Woods has to say.

“There are times, such as the early seventeenth century and as late as 1692 in America, when the belief in possession seems particularly epidemic. The resort to exorcism in such cases has proved not only to have been useless but damaging; since the causes are often other than spiritual, the symptoms soon reappear, if they abate at all, as was the case in Salem. When exorcism fails, the likelihood of despondency is enormous. Further, the dramatic nature of public exorcisms in particular adds fuel to the fires of social mania, such as those that racked Europe for over two centuries. Imprudent exorcisms increase rather than decrease the spiritual and mental damage of demonomania.”¹⁵

First of all it would be most wise to seek professional help, even if we don't understand everything that they're saying. If nothing seems to help and the symptoms persist, then the soothing application of God's word and prayer are in order. Might I add that they are also in order if also it is mental illness. Naturally, a true and strong faith is required and perhaps it would be helpful if the one dealing with the matter had good control of his senses. It would be foolish also for a person to go looking for such cases, rather dealing with them if they were to come along.

In closing this essay I would like to make these observations and comments. Not that many actual cases of demon possession have been documented, (that is if they can be proven). Still the possibility exists and we as spiritual shepherds are there to help with God's saving word. We must also remember that our foremost concern

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 100.

is with the freeing of souls from Satan's spiritual grip. Our primary task is to pronounce and remind people that Jesus has won the victory of that battle with Satan. We are not to get carried away with some secondary concern. But if it should happen that any of us are confronted with this problem, let us pray God that he give us the guidance that we need.

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