

Some Thoughts on Demon Possession

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Introduction

The ranges for interpreting the concept of Satan and the Demonic world:

Sure/Obvious ==> Possible ==> Opinion ==> Speculation ==> Heresy

Another type of order, but more circular and interwoven:

Exegesis ==> Theology ==> Philosophy ==> Culture ==>

I. Biblical Concept of Demons

A. The Old Testament Concept in Brief Summary

1. Satan

Satan is a minor character in the OT, only being referred to in Job 1; Zech 3:1-2; 1 Chron 21:1. These and other texts are open to interpretation and with debated meanings. Gen 3 does not explicitly say that the serpent was Satan, but this idea comes from Rev. 20:2. The serpent represents something greater than an animal; the description of the serpent matches later descriptions of Satan. Satan is not God's equal, but is created, inferior, and must follow God's will. There are possible allusions to Satan in Isa 14:12-15 and Ezek 28:12-19, but this is not the primary interpretation.

2. Fallen Angels, Demons and Evil Spirits

There are more references to these, but it is even more difficult to interpret and to know what ancient Israel believed about these. These beings are called by different names including "sons of God," "gods," "powers in the heavens above," "princes," "demons," and "spirits." Passages that could refer to fallen angels include Gen 6; Ps 82; Isa 24; Dan 10:13, 20-21; 12:1. Passages about demons include Deut 32:17; Ps 106:37. Demons are clearly inferior and under the control of God (1 Kgs 22:21-23). They are not gods but created beings (see Isa 45:5). Other texts include Isa 13:21; 34:14; Gen 4:7; and others. Evil spirits are referred to in 1 Sam 16:14-16, 23; 18:10; 19:9; 1 Kgs 22:19-23; 2 Chron 18:18-22; Judg 9:23. These evil forces have a corrupting influence on humanity, depriving them of the freedom to act as responsible moral agents. These forces are always subordinated to God. The strong monotheism of ancient Israel kept Israel from taking too much interest in demons; thus, no superstition and fear. This is a model for us today.

B. Non-Biblical and Intertestamental Literature in Brief Summary

1. Dualism developed during this period. The concept of Satan became more prominent. There was an increase in references to Satan and demons in intertestamental literature and late Judaism. This has been attributed by some interpreters to the difficult experiences of the Jewish people during that time.
2. Demons in Greek were thought could be good or evil.
3. The NT shares many similar concepts with other literature of the period; for example, there were common beliefs that demons could possess a person, cause convulsions, screaming, change of voice, etc. See Josephus, Philo, Dead Sea Scrolls.
4. There were two criteria evident in an exorcist in NT times:
 - a. The force of the leader; who the leader was.
 - b. What the person said or did.
5. There were many healers (exorcists) in Jesus' day, both Gentile and Jewish.

C. Gospels

1. Mark has 4 long episodes about Jesus casting out demons: 1:21-28; 5:1-20; 7:24-30; 9:14-29.
 - a. Demon possessed people were on the margins of society.
 - b. In Mark 1:21-28, the man was a participant in society; the demon only revealed itself when it faced Jesus.
 - c. Some remained in their family situations (Mark 7 and 9).
2. Jesus' commands to the demons were common to the period:
 - a. Be quiet (Mk 1:25)
 - b. Come out (Mk 1:25; 5:8; 9:25)
 - c. What is your name (5:9)
 - d. History of the illness (9:25)
 - e. Demon returning (9:25)
3. Jesus did not use other devices common to the period (incense, medicine, laying on hands, magical charms). Demons obeyed Jesus simply by the word from His mouth.
4. Jesus did not use prayer, but relied on His own resources. He commanded and the demons obeyed.
5. Jesus did not use a powerful name or the Holy Spirit.
6. Satan can tempt Jesus, but Jesus can overcome. Jesus is much greater than Satan (1 John 4:4).
7. Jesus' defeat of Satan, demons, and evil is an important and vital part of the Gospel story of salvation.

II. Post Enlightenment Developments

- A. **Anti-supernaturalism has been common in Western thought since the Enlightenment.** This has infiltrated modern Biblical studies among those who attempt to take all the supernatural or “myth” out of the NT. Many biblical scholars today attempt to be scientific in interpretation.
- B. **The spiritual world is non-scientific.** It is a dimension that scientific evidence cannot prove or validate.
- C. **Psychological Considerations**
Demons in the NT are always connected to the human psyche. The OT view of the person is as a unity. Psychosomatic illness is where the health of the body is influenced by the mind. It is reductionistic to say that all demon possession is psychiatric. Yet, the fall of humanity had its impact upon creation. How does human fallenness and sin empower demonic forces?
- D. **Cultural Considerations**
There seems to be more demon possession in the less developed areas of the world. Why is this so? Is there some cultural condition such as deeply held superstitions that influence people’s psyche? Or, does the evil force in the world take on more “primitive” forms in less developed countries? Thus, in more developed countries, is evil (and demon possession) still present, but only in more “sophisticated” forms (music, games, secularism, humanism, entertainment, etc.)?

III. The Presence of Systemic Evil

There are two importance considerations regarding systemic evil:

- A. **The unaccounted for evil in the world beyond human free will:** It is undeniable that there is an evil in the world. Can this evil be attributed to human sin, or is there another force at play? Most Christian theologians say both. The fall did impact creation, but there is also an evil force taking advantage of human evil.
- B. **A good, sovereign God:** How can a good God allow such evil to continue? Where did evil come from if God created everything? It is absolutely vital in Christian theology to see all evil forces as being under the sovereignty and ultimate control of God. There is a difference in saying that God is the source of evil and that God has authority over the forces of evil. God is not the source of evil. There is NO room for dualism in Christian theology. Evil is not equal to good; Satan is not as powerful as God; demons are not equal to angels.

IV. Dangers of Over-emphasizing Demonic World (see Page, *Powers of Evil*, 267-71)

- A. **Naive views of human progress or trivializing moral lapses.** Humans need to accept responsibility for their decisions. The Bible attributes problems with demonic forces to human choices.
- B. **Dualism:** Demons and Satan are not as powerful as Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is victorious over sin, Satan, and hell.
- C. **Breeding Fear and Paranoia:** Christians are victorious with Christ over sin, Satan, and the forces of hell.
- D. **Exaggerating the power of the devil:** Don’t attribute more power to Satan and demonic forces than they have. There is no reason to fear.
- E. **Appealing to Satan, demons, or fate for human problems.** We should not attribute everything to the devil or to fate: “The devil made me do it.” Human freewill significantly impacts the course of history.
- F. **Accepting superstitious practices and the world of magic.** We need to see the world through the Bible and carefully examine the deeply held cultural beliefs we come in contact with.
- G. **Unrestrained speculation, trying to answer the questions the Bible does not.** We need to stick to the facts and carefully interpret the Bible with the best tools and methods we can. Be carefully of presuppositions (colored by culture), the false assumptions of tradition, and the speculations of popular writers.
- H. **Imbalance:** Focusing on the sensational and neglecting the more important religious and moral battle in the minds of people.

Put on the full armor of God and remember why we are here—to lead people to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

V. Dangers of Under-estimating the Demonic World

- A. **Power of Black of Magic:** Carefully discern the forces of evil from the forces of good.
- B. **Emptiness of Superstition:** There is no place for superstitions of any type with Christians.
- C. **We must not accommodate the modern world so much that the Gospel is lost.**
- D. **Distinguish fact from fiction:** Don’t believe everything you hear or read.
- E. **Don’t give demons more power than they have.** Satan and demons are parasites and attach themselves to those willing to receive them. “Demon possession, like other forms of sin, must include the element of consent, if not choice, except in cases of insanity or mental irresponsibility” (Harvey S. J. Blaney, *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, 156).

Finally, *Remember that we have the Holy Spirit. Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world!*