



Demon Possession

A FIRST-CENTURY UNDERSTANDING



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JAMES MCLEMORE (13/29/10)

Left: Ruins at Capernaum; when Jesus was in Capernaum, an unclean spirit addressed Him and said, "What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!’ Jesus rebuked him saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’” (Mark 1:24-25, CSB).

spirits seem to indicate some level of belief in demons within the ancient Israelite society.

In the New Testament

The Greek word *daimonion* is the most common term for “demons” in the New Testament; it occurs most often in the Synoptic Gospels.³ The verb form *daimonizomai* signifies a person possessed by a demon. This term referred to the influence or control the demon exercised over the person, thereby causing the individual to express the demon’s mind and consciousness.

Three emphases stand out with reference to demons in the New Testament. First, no definite relationship exists between demon possession and various physical maladies. Demons do not constitute the cause for all sicknesses in the New Testament. Instead, demon-possessed individuals form a category separate from people who suffered from different diseases. For example, Matthew’s Gospel identifies a number of different sicknesses Jesus cured. Among these various maladies is demon possession, a category Matthew carefully set apart from other physical ailments such as epileptic seizures. At times, however, demon possession became the stated cause of a particular malady or physical manifestation. One example is Matthew’s account of two demon-possessed men coming forth from the tombs (Matt. 8:28-34). The narrative clearly states that demon possession was responsible for the men’s extreme violence; demons prevented the men from controlling their actions.

The first-century world, then, treated demon possession as a unique

By Robert E. Jones

THE CONCEPTS OF demons and demon possession are difficult for many people to believe. Indeed, a commonly held view today rejects the very idea of evil spirits. Those holding to this view believe that modern psychology offers a rational, scientific explanation for what others interpret as being demon possession.

Yet the Bible clearly describes the reality of demons (Jas. 2:19). In Ephesians 6:10-12, for example, the apostle Paul identified evil powers of spiritual darkness as forces the church engages when involved in spiritual warfare. Furthermore, the Greek term *daimonion*, generally translated “demon,” occurs more than sixty times in the New Testament.¹ Therefore, regardless of the difficulty that some may have with demons and demon possession, the demonic “cannot be satisfactorily treated as a primitive explanation for various kinds of physical and psychological illness.”²

In the Old Testament

Few explicit references to demons exist in the Old Testament, and then only in a marginal sense. Many interpreters, however, identify in the text two general classes of demons by distinguishing between demons and satyrs, or hairy demons. Deuteronomy 32:17 provides an example of the first class where sacrifices of worship were made to false demons instead of God (see Ps. 106:37). Examples of the second class occur in two declarations of God’s judgment in Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14. In these verses the Hebrew term refers to a hairy demon or goat demon (the Greek translation of the Old Testament has the plural form of *daimonion* here). Most occurrences for this class of demons are in Leviticus 16 and relate to the goat associated with the Day of Atonement festival. While Azazel probably refers to the goat sent into the wilderness, or the wilderness itself, some scholars understand the term to be the name for a particular wilderness demon.

In summary, Bible interpreters disagree concerning the meaning and significance of demons in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, most scholars cautiously conclude that Old Testament references to evil

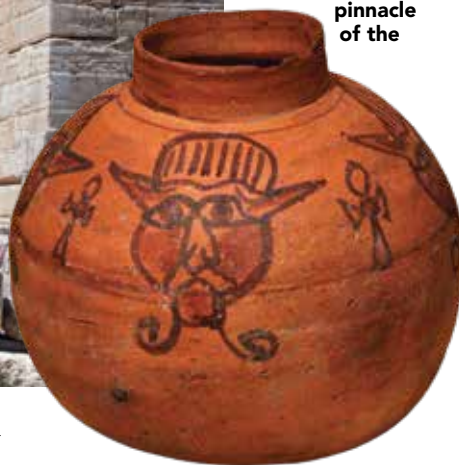


Left: Jesus' ministry focusing on the kingdom of God brought Him into direct conflict with Satan. Shown is the southwest corner of the Temple Mount, which many believe to have been the pinnacle of the

Temple. This corner was a busy junction between the major north-south street that ran through Jerusalem and the plaza on the southern side of the Temple Mount. Had Jesus thrown Himself from this corner, the incident would have

had the greatest possible number of spectators.

Lower left: Jar with demons painted on the side; from Nubia; dated about 50 BC-AD 225. The decorations also include ankhs, which indicate an Egyptian influence.



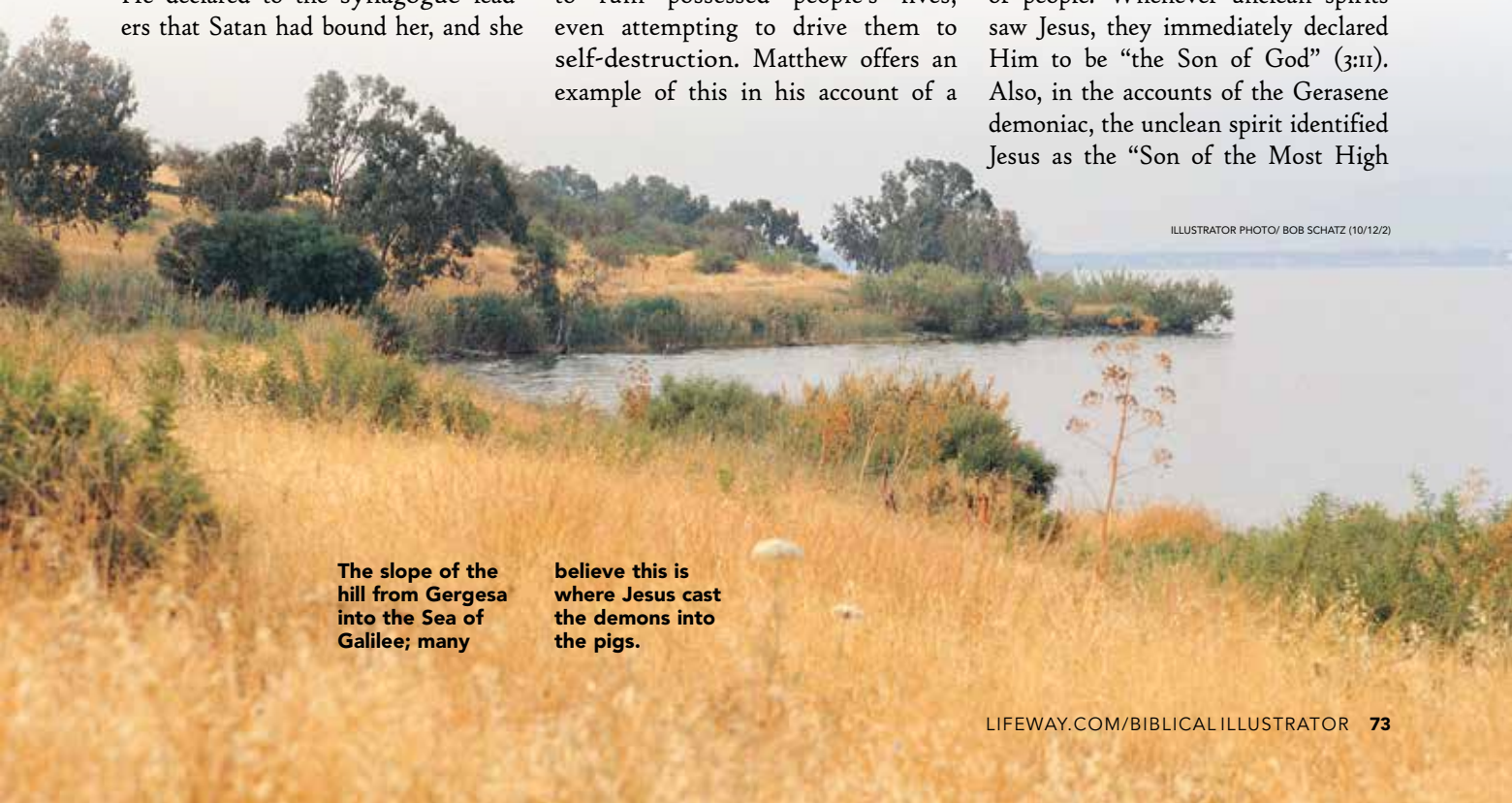
problem and distinguished it from other forms of physical affliction. While demons were connected to some physical problems, they were not seen as the cause for all illnesses. Rather, sickness was more a characteristic of the age in which Satan is the ruler (John 12:31). So, when Jesus confronted a woman with a disabling spirit, He declared to the synagogue leaders that Satan had bound her, and she

deserved to be released from the evil spirit's power—even on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-16). In this sense Satan's work caused her sickness.

Second, some accounts of demon possession involved more than sickness. In these cases demons sought to ruin possessed people's lives, even attempting to drive them to self-destruction. Matthew offers an example of this in his account of a

father's demon-possessed son. The text reveals that the boy often fell into the fire and the water (Matt. 17:15; see vv. 14-17). The demon possession caused the boy's repeated actions, bringing him harm, and potentially threatening his life (Mark 9:22). This desire to torment and destroy, then, was a destructive characteristic of demon possession.

Third, demons possessed a certain knowledge they apparently had to express in Jesus' presence. So, in Mark's Gospel the demon possessing a man in Capernaum knew who Jesus was and even referred to the Lord as "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24).⁴ This recognition occurred again when Jesus healed many in a large crowd of people. Whenever unclean spirits saw Jesus, they immediately declared Him to be "the Son of God" (3:11). Also, in the accounts of the Gerasene demoniac, the unclean spirit identified Jesus as the "Son of the Most High



The slope of the hill from Gergesa into the Sea of Galilee; many

believe this is where Jesus cast the demons into the pigs.

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Above: The Roman forum at Philippi. While Paul was ministering in Philippi, a girl with a spirit by which she predicted the future followed him for several days. Annoyed, Paul turned to the spirit and said, “I command you in

the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!’ And it came out right away” (Acts 16:18, CSB).

Right: Bronze amulet dated about 800–500 BC depicting Pazuzu, an Assyrian demon who supposedly brought disease.

Mesopotamians believed Pazuzu to be king of the evil wind demons; they depicted him with a lion or dog-like face, the horns of a goat, a human torso, the front paws of a lion, a scaly lower body, a scorpion’s tail, and the talons and wings of a bird.



God” (5:7; Luke 8:28). These were not confessions of faith, but rather declarations of fear and even opposition. Jesus, therefore, repeatedly disallowed the demonic use of these titles, possibly because the content of Jesus’ death and resurrection was necessary to properly understand them. Additionally, in the Lord’s presence demons seemed to recognize their imminent fate. So, in the case of the Gerasene demoniac, the demons, aware that Jesus was about “to banish them to the abyss,” sought Jesus’ permission to enter some nearby pigs (Luke 8:31–32). Jesus allowed them to do so, resulting in their presumed destruction, along with the pigs (v. 33).

Apart from the Gospel records, references to demons appear to focus more on spiritual opposition

to believers rather than on physical afflictions (Acts 16:16–24). Demons are also presented as the spiritual reality behind idol worship (1 Cor. 10:20–21; Rev. 9:20), and the source of false teaching that enticed believers to stray from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1).

Casting Out Demons

The Gospel accounts indicate that casting out demons was a significant aspect of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus did so not by outwitting the demons but by dominating and defeating them.⁵ Furthermore, He did so without any difficulty. Demonic forces had to obey Jesus’ commands, which emphasized His authority over them.

Additionally, the Beelzebul narratives show that Jesus’ power

over demons indicated the arrival of God’s kingdom. When some accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of “the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15), Jesus indicated that the kingdom of God had come (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20), bringing Jesus into immediate conflict with Satan. Jesus’ exorcisms, then, were more than acts of compassion; they were direct confrontations with Satan’s power. In this sense, Jesus’ casting out demons

was a part of His liberating work to deliver people from Satan’s oppression, and He did so by a direct command He expressed through God’s power alone.

Finally, Jesus extended this same power to the disciples. In all three Synoptic Gospels, the disciples’ commissioning accounts connect their casting out demons with the ministry Jesus sent them forth to perform. They need-

ed no specific formula in order to cast out demons, for Jesus Himself had endowed the disciples with His power and authority to do so. ❖

1. David George Reese, “Demons,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:140.

2. James A. Brooks, *Mark*, vol. 23, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 50.

3. The term Synoptic Gospels refers to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The term *daimonion* is found 45 times in these 3 Gospels; see Werner Foerster, “δαίμων, δαιμόνιον” (*daimon, daimonion*; demon), in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 16.

4. All Scripture quotations come from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

5. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 259.

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