

A Re-examination of Biblical Criteria For Demon Possession

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Some twenty year ago I prepared a paper on "The Biblical Criteria for Demon Possession" which was subsequently published in the *Westminster Theological Journal*.¹ In that paper I examined nine propositions as possible criteria for demon possession in the light of relevant biblical passages. The propositions accepted as valid criteria were:

- That demoniacs were readily recognisable.
- That psychosomatic symptoms always accompanied demon possession.
- That the demons possessing demoniacs had distinct personalities.
- That demoniacs had some supernatural knowledge by virtue of their demons.
- That demoniacs were compelled to acclaim the authority of Jesus when confronted by him or one of his representatives.
- That demoniacs never came out of themselves to be cured
- That an authoritative word, spoken in faith, is the only biblical way of exorcising a demon.
- That demon possession only takes place among the unregenerate.

The ninth proposition examined was that demon possession was limited to the time of the ministry of Christ and his disciples. This proposition was rejected as a criterion on the basis that there was no adequate biblical support for such a limitation.

Since that study my insights have been somewhat modified as a result of sixteen years of mission work in Africa. As a frontier evangelist and teacher of church workers I have both observed and heard about interactions between man and the realm of spirits, including cases of alleged possession. I have also come to

¹ "The Biblical Criteria for Demon Possession," in *Westminster Theological Journal*, Spring, 1976, pp. 342-365.

appreciate that, even as God's message of salvation is incarnated in different cultures, so too, Satan will readily adept his strategies to the language, beliefs and thought forms of the cultures of the world. This possibility was raised in my former article, but in the light of new literature and a wider experience I would like to re-examine the biblical incidences of demon possession in order to establish which criteria might be culturally conditioned and which are applicable to all cultural situations.

It may, of course, be asked whether there is a need for biblical criteria. Can we not simply accept a culture's own diagnosis of spirit possession and address it as such? This is a question to which we will return. But first we will examine each of the criteria listed above in turn.

Were Demoniacs Readily Recognisable?

In many societies so-called possessions are diagnosed by diviners, specialists who have certain powers that enable them to recognise these cases. In Africa the diviner himself will frequently seek to be possessed in order to obtain the answer from a familiar spirit. Since spirit possession in Africa is often linked to witchcraft, one who is possessed may not be looked on so much as a victim, as a cause, of evil. In this respect the situation in traditional Africa was not unlike that of Europe in the Dark Ages, where it was believed that the exorcist not only had powers to expel evil spirits, but also had special powers to diagnose spirit possession and witchcraft. It was as much part of his job to disclose the presence of demons and witches as to deal with them.

In the Bible there is no indication that specialists were used to diagnose demon-possession.² If such expertise were needed, we would expect this to rest with the priests, who were appointed to examine people with regard to infectious diseases (Lev. 14:3,4; Mt. 8:4). But no such instructions are given. In fact, the diagnosis of demon-possession does not seem to have been an issue. There is no biblical case on record where a person was

² 1 Cor. 12:10 is sometimes used to prove the contrary. This will be discussed below.

presented because of a psycho-somatic disorder who, on closer inspection, was diagnosed as having a demon. Unlike the sick, who frequently "followed" Jesus and his disciples and came out of themselves to be healed (Mt. 12:15; Acts 28:9), the demon-possessed either met Jesus on the way or were "brought" to Christ (Mt. 8:16, cf. Mk. 5:2). The latter suggests that those who brought the demon-possessed for healing were already aware of the nature of the problem. This would certainly seem to be the case with the Syro-Phoenician woman. Jesus apparently took her word for it that her daughter was demon-possessed when he healed her daughter from a distance (Mt. 15:21ff.). In another instance a father came to Jesus and asked him to cast out a "dumb spirit" from his son (Mk. 9:17). In neither case is there any reason to believe the diagnosis was made by a recognised expert.

There are some instances where people were falsely accused of having a demon, but since these cases involved some other wild accusations it is unlikely that we should take them seriously. When the Pharisees accused Jesus of exorcising by the power of Beelzebub (Lk. 11:15), and of being possessed by him (Mk. 3:22), it is doubtful they really meant it. In John 8:48 we find that hostile Jews, no doubt instigated by the Pharisees (8:13), not only accuse Jesus of having a demon but also of being a Samaritan. Obviously they did not believe Jesus was a Samaritan, since they knew very well he was from Galilee. Similar charges were made against Jesus at the occasions mentioned in John 7:20 and 10:20. Note that John the Baptist was also accused of having a demon (Mt. 11:18). Such a charge was clearly meant as an insult, and the malicious rumours were designed to blacken Jesus' name in the eyes of the crowds.

From the biblical data concerning the exorcisms of Christ and his disciples there is no evidence that the diagnosis of demon possession was considered a matter for experts. It therefore seems unlikely that a special spiritual gift should appear after Pentecost for the discernment of demon possession. Yet this is how some authors would interpret the gift of the "discerning of the spirits" mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:10. Unger even suggests that one who is gifted in this way today may possibly find clear evidence of genuine demonisation in many cases of

so-called physical and mental disease.³ Writing for the Apostolic Church, Cecil C. Ireson similarly proposes that people with such physical maladies as deafness, dumbness and blindness should be examined by those who have the gift to discern spirits to check whether it is not a matter of possession.⁴ But there is little in the text to support such an explanation of the gift. It is more likely that the gift must be explained in the light of what we read in 1 John 4:1, where John suggests that the testing of spirits concerns lying spirits that give rise to false prophecies and heretical doctrines (cf. 1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Tim. 4:1).

We conclude that there is no evidence that in the time of Christ and his apostles the recognition of demoniacs was a matter of expertise. Demoniacs were brought for healing because they were already diagnosed as being demon possessed. Demon possession was readily recognised, and in view of the symptoms of demon possession we are yet to examine, this is not surprising.

Did Psychosomatic Symptoms Always Accompany Demon-Possession?

When we ask why Satan sends his servants to take possession of human beings it is clear that their intent was not to tempt man. It seems to be the purpose of these demons rather to torment those whom they possessed. When Kittel defines possession he observes that possession brings with it a destruction and distortion of the divine likeness which man received at creation.⁵ If this observation is correct it explains the evil purpose of the demon in taking possession of a man. It also accounts for the psychosomatic disorders that seem to have accompanied cases of demon-possession in Biblical accounts. In fact it prompts us to ask, did psychosomatic disorders always accompany demon-possession?

³ Merrill F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology* (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1952), p. 98.

⁴ Cecil Charles Ireson, *Tenets of the Apostolic Church, The Nine Gifts of the Holy Ghost* (1957), p. 12.

⁵ G. and G. Kittel (eds.), "Daimōn," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 19.

Among those who answer in the affirmative there are, of course, those who believe that demon-possession was nothing else than precisely that, a psychosomatic disorder. Jensen comes close to that position when he writes: "It is clear that the N.T. often attributed to diabolical possession some purely natural afflictions".⁶ Yet such an identification is clearly false. For one thing the N.T. itself distinguishes carefully between those who were demon-possessed and had some ailments and those who merely had ailments (e.g. Mt.4:24). While in a sense all sickness was seen as the work of Satan (cf. Acts 10:38), there is a clear distinction between demonic possession and sickness. While Luke describes one sick woman as having a "spirit of infirmity" (*pneuma tes asthenetas*) it is clear that he does not identify this as a case of demon possession, nor is the woman healed through any act of exorcism (Lk. 13:11). The demoniacs clearly had some distinctives not shared by the ordinary afflicted.

When we look at various cases of demon possession described in the N.T. we see that a great variety of ailments accompanied the possession. These include dumbness (Mt. 9:32), dumbness and blindness together (Mt. 12:22), superhuman strength (Acts 19:16), sometimes paired with an uncontrollable urge to inflict pain on the body (Mk. 5:2ff), and lunacy (Mt. 17:15) paired with dumbness (Mk. 9:17, a parallel passage). From the comparison of parallel passages it is clear that the gospel authors did not always tell the whole story. Whereas in one case Matthew mentions only lunacy, Mark mentions dumbness, while Luke puts no name to the disease but describes the symptoms (Lk. 9:39). Similarly the demoniac Matthew describes as blind and deaf (Mt. 12:22), is recorded by Luke as being dumb (Lk. 11:14). Since it is clear that the synoptic authors were not always exhaustive in describing the symptoms that came with demon-possession it is fair to conclude that where no ailment is mentioned we cannot assume that no ailment was present. This should guide us in understanding four cases where no ailment is mentioned by name.

The first case concerns the demoniac who was present in the synagogue Jesus attended (Mk. 1:23ff; Lk. 4:3ff.). There is no mention of a particular disease, but the symptoms displayed by

⁶ Jensen, "Diabolical Possession", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol IV (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1967), p. 839.

the man suggest epileptic hysteria.⁷ In the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter it is clear that the demoniac herself never appeared before Jesus or his disciples, and hence they did not witness the symptoms. The third case concerns Mary Magdalene of whom it is said in passing that she had been possessed by seven demons (Lk. 8:2; Mk. 16:9).

One rather unusual manifestation of demon possession is that of the slave girl in Philippi. Luke records that she had a "spirit of divination" (*pneuma puthoona*) by which she did soothsaying (Acts 16:16). Some exegetes explain this as a mere psychosomatic disorder, but they appear to do so because the interpretation that the girl should indeed have some prophetic ability is one that is dismissed on an *a priori* basis.⁸ According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "in Hellenistic belief, a python was a spirit which possessed certain persons and prophesied unknown to them through their mouths."⁹ It was popularly believed that the god Apollo, who had slain the great python that guarded the oracle at Delphi, spoke through the "spirit of Python" to reveal things known to the gods.¹⁰ In the Septuagint, the same Greek expression is used to describe those who had a familiar spirit, like the witch of Endor (I Sam. 28:7-25).

Since the method Paul used to silence the soothsaying slave girl was in all respects similar to the other exorcisms of spirits described in the New Testament, it would appear that in this incident we have an example of demon possession that adds a touch of local colour. The idea that demons could be exploited for personal gain was prominent in the Hellenistic world,¹¹ but would have been unthinkable in the Jewish context, where possession of a demon made one subject to public suspicion and ridicule (cf. Jn. 8:38).

In the light of what we know of the destructive urge of demons it is tempting to conclude that psychosomatic disorders always accompanied demon-possession, but with the information available we can do little more than conclude that this was the

⁷ See "Demoniac", in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), p. 402

⁸ See e.g. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Vol. VI, pp. 57, 58.

⁹ "Pythons", in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1963), Vol. XVIII, p. 805.

¹⁰ See *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), Vol. III, p. 1307.

¹¹ See Kittel, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6

norm with demon possession in the Jewish setting. In the story of the Philippian slave girl we appear to have a case in a non-Jewish setting that seems to conform to the local culture's understanding and expectations of spirit possession. While this case on its own provides only slender evidence for the conclusion that cultural expectations do play a role in the manifestation of demon possession, it does at least lend itself to such an interpretation.

Did Demons Possessing Demoniacs Have Distinct Personalities?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the exact origin and identification of demons. We will accept the more usual explanation of their origin, namely that they are fallen angels,¹² and that as such they are the subjects of Satan (cf. Mk.3:22,23). In the accounts of demon-possession there are many terms used to designate these demons. They are: demon (*daimoon* e.g. Mt. 8:31, or *daimonion*, e.g. Mt. 7:22), spirit (e.g. Mt. 8:16), evil spirit (Mk. 9:17), unclean spirit (Mt. 10:1), dumb spirit (Mk. 9:17), dumb and deaf spirit (Mk. 9:25), spirit of an unclean devil (Lk. 4:33), and spirit of divination (*pneuma puthoona*, Acts 16:16).¹³ This terminology shows that demons are spirits, that they are evil and unclean, and that they are responsible for various physical ailments.

From the N.T. accounts it is clear that these demons or spirits had distinct personalities. They identified themselves, both in the singular or in the plural, with the first person pronoun (eg. Mk. 5:7; Lk. 4:34), thus showing themselves to be separate entities. We see something of the complexity of the demonic order in Mk. 5:9 where the possessing power calls itself "Legion", and referred to itself both in the singular (*moi*) and in the plural (*esmen*). The fact that the hostile possessing force was quite distinct from the person possessed was clearly illustrated when the exorcised "legion" of spirits took refuge in swine (Mk. 5:12,13). Kurt Koch is incorrect, therefore, when he refers to demon-possession as a "disintegration" and a "splitting" of a

12 See Unger, op. cit., p.13ff. for other theories

13 For an explanation of the phrase "spirit of infirmity" see above.

personality.¹⁴ A more accurate description comes from Foerster who states that the demoniac's "ego is so impaired that the spirits speak through him."¹⁵

When we compare the biblical data of the personalities of demons with that of alleged cases of demon possession in other cultures then we do observe some differences. Whereas the biblical accounts picture the abode of demons as waterless places (Mt. 12:43; cf. Jer. 13:21; Rev. 18:2), other cultures, including many black African cultures, frequently associate demons with swamps and riversides. Even more diverse is the case of possession by animal spirits. Hugh White reports that in Japan demons often take on the characteristics of foxes or weasels, associated with local deities.¹⁶ Now we may agree with H. VanderLoos that "we nowhere find it stated in the New Testament that a man was possessed by an animal",¹⁷ but as we saw above, the "spirit of python" in Acts 16:16 was also an animal spirit representative of a Greek god, namely the god Apollo. I Cor. 10:20 suggests that even idol deities may have real demons behind them.

It is true by definition that demon-possession involves the presence of a separate personality. There are always two or more personalities present in the demoniac, that of the person who is possessed, and that of the demon or demons who have possessed this person. But how can such distinct personalities be identified? Many authors dealing with demon possession suggest that the distinct personalities can be identified by a change in voice. Thus the list of common marks of possession given by Leahy begins with "speaking in a voice not that of the victim", and he even suggests that the voice may speak in a different tongue.¹⁸ The N.T. authors do not tell us whether the demons they write of spoke in different languages or voices, but as they clearly take their separate existence for granted this is entirely possible. Yet distinct personalities may not in themselves be indicative of demon possession. Strange voices

¹⁴ K. Koch, *Occult Bondage and Deliverance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1970), p.58.

¹⁵ TWNT, II, p.19.

¹⁶ Hugh W. White, *Demonism Verified and Analyzed* (Shanghai: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1922).

¹⁷ H. Van Der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), p. 347.

¹⁸ Frederick S. Leahy, *Satan Cast Out, A Study In Biblical Demonology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 128.

and distinct personalities are also present in such psychological ailments as schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder. There are, of course, some authors who would identify these ailments with demon possession.¹⁹

Did Demoniacs Have Some Supernatural Knowledge By Virtue Of Their Demons?

A fourth century author called Lactantius wrote that the *grammatici* named demons "demons" because they are the "knowing ones" (scios).²⁰ Possibly he was referring to Plato, who at a much earlier date gave a similar etymology.²¹ There is no doubt that both authors refer to a superhuman knowledge, especially concerning future events. In the N.T. instances of demon possession we also find exhibitions of prophetic knowledge. This is very clear in the case of the servant girl of Philippi, who did soothsaying by virtue of the spirit of python (Acts 16:16). We also find that demons were aware of the doom that awaited them (Mk. 1:24), and even had some idea of the time in which this doom would catch up with them (Mk. 8:29).

The superhuman knowledge of the demons is most illuminating in their knowledge of the identity of Christ. When Peter confessed Jesus to be "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16:16), Jesus replied, "this was not revealed to you by man [flesh and blood]" (v. 17). But long before Peter made this confession many demoniacs had already addressed Jesus in very similar terms, calling him "Jesus, Son of the Most High God" (Mk. 5:7), "the Holy One of God" (Mk. 1:24), etc.²² Again it is clear that this knowledge was not revealed to them by "flesh and blood", but by the indwelling demons. Mark observes that the demons knew Christ (Mk. 1:34).

The fact that demons have supernatural knowledge would seem to be the most common reason for voluntary possession. Mediums, diviners and medicine men often resort to possession as a means to contacting the world beyond, either in order to

¹⁹ Hugh W. White, in *Demonism Verified and Analyzed*, identifies schizophrenia with demon possession.

²⁰ Lactantius, *Divine Institutions*, II:5.

²¹ Plato, *Cratylus*, I, 389.

²² The further significance of these appellations will be discussed below.

foretell the future, or for the purpose of diagnosing the cause for a disease or calamity. In Africa it is widely believed that witches make use of spirits to give them information that will allow them to lead a prosperous life.

Yet the possession of knowledge from the world beyond is not an accurate guide to spirit possession, because it is not limited to them. The biblical gift of prophecy, as well as the popular gift of "second sight" or clairvoyance, are possible alternative routes to such knowledge. While such gifts may involve the Holy Spirit or other spiritual beings, they do not represent examples of demon possession. For this reason possession of such supernatural knowledge would be of limited value for diagnosing demon possession if it were not for the fact that with this knowledge demoniacs are compelled to acclaim the authority of Jesus Christ when they are confronted with his power. This authority of Christ appears to be recognised even where it is borne by Christ's servants.

Were Demoniacs Compelled To Acclaim The Authority Of Jesus?

There is a remarkable and consistent difference in the way the sick address Jesus and the form of address used by the demoniacs. The most common appellation used by the sick was simply "Lord" (eg. Mt. 8:2,8), but they also called him "Lord, son of David" (Mt. 15:22; 20:30-31), "son of David" (Mt. 9:27; Mk. 10:48; Lk. 18:39), "Jesus, son of David" (Mk. 10:47; Lk. 18:38), "Teacher" (Mk. 9:17; Lk. 9:38), "Jesus, Master" (Lk.17:13), and "Rabboni" (Mk. 10:51). These are all lofty titles, but they do not compare to what the demoniacs called him. The latter addressed him: "Son of God" (Mt.8:29), "Jesus, Son of God Most High" (Mk. 5:7; Lk. 8:28), "You are the Son of God" (Mk. 3:11, Lk. 4:41), and "Jesus of Nazareth ... I know who you are - the Holy One of God" (Mk. 1:24; Lk. 4:34).

We have already noted that the demoniacs recognised Christ by virtue of the supernatural knowledge of demons. But that does not explain why they should publicly acclaim Jesus' high status and authority. From Mark 1:34 and 3:12 we learn that they did so without fail. The same passages show that Jesus did not want this public recognition from the demons, so that he "would not

let the demons speak". The reason for this rebuke of Christ is not given, but Calvin is probably correct when he suggests that the time for Christ's public identification was not yet ripe, and also that he would not be praised by those who would defile him.²³ Yet it is unlikely that the demons were deliberately trying to give away Jesus' messianic secret, or that they sought to defile him by praising him. The fact that they "fell down before him" (Mk. 3:11) shows that there was an attitude of subjection, Unger identifies it as the "bending of a lower to a higher will, in hate and resentment".²⁴

Somehow the demoniacs were under a compulsion to acclaim Christ's greatness, whenever they met him. But did the same thing happen when it was not Christ, but one of his followers, who confronted the demoniac? There is only one detailed example of someone other than Christ confronting a demoniac, the case recounted in Acts 16:16ff.. Here we read that the slave girl possessed by the spirit of divination followed Paul and his followers around for "many days" crying out, "These men are servants of the most high God, who are telling you the way to be saved". From this one case we cannot draw the conclusion that such an acclamation is the norm, but we strongly suspect that when a demoniac is confronted with the name and the claims of Jesus Christ by one of his followers, he will show some signs of recognition. James reminds us that not only do demons believe in God, but this knowledge makes them tremble (James2:19).

Did Demoniacs Ever Come Of Themselves To Be Cured?

On a number of occasions I have heard pastors assert that they became aware of a possessing force when helping a person who came to be counsellèd. But how does such a claim compare to the biblical record? When we study the biblical incidences of demon-possession to find out what led to the confrontation between the demoniac and the exorcist we find no example in which the demoniac came to be cured of his own volition. In most cases we read that the demoniacs were "brought" to be cured (*prospheoo*, Mt. 4:24; 8:16; 9:32; 12:22; 17:16; *phero* Mt. 17:17; Acts 5:16; cf. parallel passages). In the case of the Syro-

²³ John Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), Vol. I, p. 252.

²⁴ *Biblical Demonology*, p. 67.

Phoenician woman her daughter never came at all (Mt. 15:22ff.). Then there are also cases in which the demoniacs and their exorcists met in passing, at which occasions the demoniacs were compelled to acknowledge the authority of Christ (Mk. 1:24; 3:11; 5:2,6; Acts 16:16ff., cf. parallel passages). In Mark 5:6 we read that the Gadarene ran to Jesus, to which Koch gives the interpretation, "the demoniac runs to Jesus for help".²⁵ However, the Greek text ties the running very closely to the act of "worship" (*edramen kai prosekuneesen*, lit. "he ran and prostrated himself before..."), which suggests that he ran to Jesus in order to "worship" him.

The consistency of these accounts strongly suggests that no demoniac came of himself to have the demon cast out. In view of the strong claim that demons seem to have on those possessed, this is not surprising. The demons obviously wished to maintain the hold they had on their victims. In every instance of exorcism demons were reluctant to leave their host (eg. Mk. 5:7; Mt. 12:43 etc.). We have also observed that we have no example of someone coming to Jesus for help who was then diagnosed as having a demon.

Yet some modern authors have claimed that there are also cases of possession where the influence of the indwelling spirit is of a more intermittent nature, so that the possessed may seek counselling and healing during their more lucid moments. Here it is suggested that demon-possession is not necessarily an instant change, but can take the form of a gradual development. Such a development is frequently explained as the result of dabbling in the occult, or actively seeking mediumistic experiences.²⁶

Perhaps it is because such an explanation clashes with the Bible record, which is consistent in portraying the demoniac as completely under the sway of the indwelling demon, that many authors identify a milder form of demonic activity, called "demonic influence", "demonic oppression", "demonic obsession", "demonization", or the like. We will deal with these distinctions at a later stage.

²⁵ Koch, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

²⁶ Leahy, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

Was an Authoritative Word, Spoken in Faith, the Only Biblical Form of Exorcism?

"Probably the most striking feature of the exorcism performed by Jesus was the fact that they were without any accompaniment of the ritual or incantation. He simply commanded, and the demons came forth", writes Edward Langton.²⁷ In Matthew 8:16 we read that Jesus cast out demons "with a word", and it is clear that this word was a word of "rebuke" (*epitimaoo*, Mt. 17:18; Mk. 1:25; etc.). This clearly shows us the authority that Jesus had over demons, a fact which is highlighted by the response of the demons, who fell down before him (Mk. 5:6).

Christ's disciples followed his example, commanding demons to come out of their victims. But their commands were made in Jesus' name, and not on their own authority (eg. Acts 16:18). It is clear, however that the disciples did not use the name of Jesus in a ritualistic way. Rather, they regarded him as the power and the authority by which they could cast out the demons. The error of using Jesus' name ritualistically is clearly demonstrated in Acts 19:13ff., where we read that the sons of Sceva tried to exorcise a demon using the name of Jesus. It ended up a disaster because the demons refused to recognise any authority in the words of the exorcists.

The disciples also had to learn that using the name of Jesus was not enough by itself. One day their attempt to cast out a demon failed, so that the father of the demoniac had to appeal directly to Christ for help. When later the disciples asked for the reason of their failure Christ answered that it was "because of your little faith" (Mt. 17:20). Christ also added, "this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer" (Mk.9:29). There is a textual problem here, in that some manuscripts add "and fasting". But for our purposes this is not so important, because what Jesus is saying here is not that prayer and fasting will drive out the demon, but that prayer and possibly fasting are necessary for a strong faith.²⁸ The faith that is needed for exorcism is not just a saving faith, but a charismatic faith of the kind mentioned in 1

²⁷ Cited by Sydney H.Y. Page, in *Exorcism in the Synoptic Gospels* (Princeton: Ph.D. Thesis, 1971), p. 53.

²⁸ For this interpretation see the commentaries of Calvin, Lenski and Van Leeuwen, *in loco*.

Cor. 13:2, a faith that is kept strong through the believer's close communion with God through prayer.

It may be argued that religious relics can legitimately be used in exorcisms, since we read that Peter's shadow healed demoniacs (Acts 5:15), as well as Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons (Acts 19:12). But surely we must interpret this in the light of what we read in Mark 5:25ff., where we read of the woman who was healed by touching Christ's garments. Christ made it clear that it was not her touching of his garments that healed her, but her faith. He explained to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well" (v. 34). Note that Christ did not demand faith of the demoniacs themselves, since they were in no position to have faith. He did demand faith of the demoniac's father in Mark 9:23-24 and in another case of the demoniac's mother (Mt. 15:28). But above all he demanded faith of those who sought to cast out demons in his name.

It is clear that many so-called exorcisms, both in the history of Christianity and in paganism, do not measure up to the biblical norm of faith in Christ. There are wide cultural variations in the methodology of exorcism. Unger cites a case from India, of a woman sinking into deep melancholy and being possessed by a demon after the death of both her parents. At a local shrine the girl is subjected to beating, questioning and enchantments. When that failed burning wicks were inserted into her nostrils, and this apparently had the desired effect.²⁹ But was this a real case of demon possession? Not only does such a mode of exorcism defy the scriptural norm, but the circumstances of the case and the method of healing suggest that this could have been a psychological ailment.

When we look at contemporary accounts of "Christian" exorcisms we often note a similar use of symbolic objects and acts to effect an exorcism. In Catholic circles crucifixes, Latin chants and other rituals still play a great role.³⁰ In the High Church wing of Anglicanism there is a similar emphasis on

²⁹ Merrill F. Unger, *Demons In the World Today* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), pp. 118, 119.

³⁰ See R.H. Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1959), p. 395.

rituals, especially the Eucharist.³¹ Neo-pentecostalism frequently uses the laying on of hands, ecstatic praying and singing, and other awe-inspiring rituals, coupled with an authoritative word of rebuke and an appeal to the protecting power of the blood of Christ.³² Yet again we note that the ritual of exorcism itself is such that it would have a strong effect on psychologically disturbed people. And so we may well ask, are the cases where such means are employed genuine demon-possession?

Also in the counselling method of demon-possessed recommended by Kurt Koch and Dr Calvin Katter we must ask whether the inclusion of a confession of sin does not point to a malady other than possession. Since both authors fail to define the difference between demoniacs and those whom they identify as "demonised", "oppressed" or "obsessed" it could be that they look for a confession of sin from the latter categories rather than the demoniac.³³ We note that, whereas Christ's healing of physical sickness sometimes required a confession of sin, or came with the promise that sins were forgiven, such is not the case in his dealings with demoniacs. There is no indication that Christ held the possessed responsible for their misfortune, other than in the general sense that man has brought evil into the world. Kurt Koch also introduces the concept of "loosing from the powers of darkness",³⁴ based on Matthew 18:18. However, we doubt that this is the import of the verse, which clearly refers to the matter of discipline, and not to a loosing of a person from the grasp of a demon.

From the above it would seem that there is a tendency to embellish on the Scriptural mode of exorcism. One cannot help but wonder whether some of the additions are designed to have a psychological impact on the person on the receiving end. The latter suggests that the examples are dealing with psychological disorders rather than true demon possession. In other words, in those cases where the exorcism does not follow the Scriptural pattern, we must seriously question whether there really was a case of demon-possession in the first place.

31 See Kenneth McAll, *Healing the Haunted* (London: Darley Anderson, 1984), pp. 92ff.

32 See Katter, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-69.

33 Koch, p. 89, Katter, p.68.

34 Koch, p. 103.

Of course another possibility is that the method of exorcism may be culturally conditioned. But would this also count for Christian exorcism? Whatever local embellishments come out of the cultural situation, we must conclude that Scripture gives only one valid method of exorcism, and that is an authoritative word spoken in faith in the name of Christ. Where the exorcism excludes or minimises this element we must conclude either that we are not dealing with a genuine case of demon-possession, or that we are not dealing with a Christian exorcism.

Does demon possession only take place among the unregenerate?

Since the matter of demon possession is not raised in the epistles it is tempting to conclude that demon possession does not affect the Christian community. Yet such a conclusion meets with so much opposition from those who have dealt with demoniacs in the Christian community that it caused at least one author, Merrill Unger, to change his mind. In his earlier book, *Biblical Demonology*, Unger wrote:

The very nature of the believer's salvation, as embracing the regenerating, sealing, indwelling, and filling ministry of the Holy Spirit, placing him "in Christ", eternally and unforfeitably, is sufficient explanation why he is not liable to demon inhabitation.³⁵

After the publication of this book Unger received so many reports from missionaries claiming to have witnessed re-possession that in his later book, *Demons in the World Today*, he writes:

The claims of these missionaries appear valid, since Christians in enlightened lands where the Word of God and Christian civilisation have restrained the baser manifestations of demonism can sometimes become victims of demon influence and oppression.³⁶

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 100.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 117.

Unger stops short of saying that a Christian can be repossessed, preferring to use the milder terms "demon influence" and "oppression".

Kurt Koch is also hesitant on the question of the extent to which demons can control Christians, though he is willing to admit: "I am more inclined to take the side of those who believe in the possibility of a Christian being possessed".³⁷ But like Unger, Koch wonders if "possession" is not too strong a word and states:

Perhaps we are confusing the two ideas of possession and obsession. It may be that a Christian we consider to be possessed is actually obsessed, and that instead of indwelling him, the demons are only surrounding him."³⁸

This concept of a milder form of demonic influence, by whatever name, is not one that we meet in Scripture, unless one identifies this with the unbeliever's bondage to Satan (Rom. 6:16; I Jn. 3:8) or the believer's "sifting" by Satan (Lk. 22:31). Definitions of these terms tend to be vague, and by no means uniform. Katter gives us three definitions, of which the first two are:

Oppression - Those who reject Christ are without God's protection and open to Satan's activity through sin. These people can experience fear, doubt, depression, neurosis, depravity, seduction and many other problems of oppression...

Obsession - Paranoia, wrong thinking, jealousy, rage, hatred, wicked thoughts, seared conscience, loss of control, are indicators of the presence of obsessions which are of the Evil One. King Saul's jealousy of innocent David led to his own destruction.

A third definition deals with possession, which is said to take place "where sin prevails".³⁹ The distinctions are not very useful, especially as it is "oppression", and not "possession", which is limited to those who reject Christ. And yet the definition mentions symptoms that we do find amongst many Christians.

³⁷ Koch, *op. cit.*, p. 68, 69.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Katter, p. 54.

The definition of "obsession" seems to do little more than to list the "works of the flesh" that Christians struggle with in their life of sanctification (Rom. 7:18; Gal. 5:19). "Obsession" may be too strong a word for such sins, although specific sins can at times become an obsession that will hinder the Christian's spiritual life.

There is, of course, ample warning in Scripture that Christians must continue to be vigilant with respect to the activities of Satan. Hence Christians are encouraged to put on "the whole armour of God", which includes truth, righteousness, peace and faith, and to live by the Word of God with prayer and supplication (Eph. 6:10-18). But the Christian's sanctification will never be complete in this life, and therefore daily repentance and confession of sin are urged on all God's children (Mt. 6:12; I Jn. 1:8-2:2).

However, there is no indication that a Christian can become so beset with evil that it is not a confession but an exorcism that is needed. Christ's promise to his people is that he will protect them, so that no one can snatch them out of his hand (Jn. 10:28,29). God, who has chosen his people, will protect them to the time of their glorification (Rom. 8:28-30), and nothing can separate God's children from their Father's love (vv. 37-39).

Repossession is indeed something that Christ warns against. But this is the repossession of those who do not let God's Spirit take residence in their hearts, so that the evicted demon will find the heart empty and return in force (Mt. 12:43-45). The very presence of God's Spirit is a guarantee that the person belongs to Christ, and a seal of the promise of God (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13,14; 2 Tim. 1:14).

From the above we conclude that no Christian can be demon possessed. Hence it is not fitting that an exorcism should take place unless the Christian identity of the victim is in question. When a Christian is suffering some evil influence, whether it be sin, doubt or temptation, those who seek to help him must deal with him directly, and not with some evil spirit. All sin must be confessed and repented of (Mt. 6:12; I Jn. 1:8-2:2). Satan must be resisted, so that he will flee (James 4:7; I Pet. 5:9).

Conclusion

In re-examining the biblical criteria for demon possession we have recognised that a number of these criteria may reflect the cultural understanding of the phenomenon. That is not to say that it is culture which determines the nature of demon possession, but rather it is a recognition that Satan and his demons do adapt themselves to the local situation. The clearest indication of such an adaptation in the biblical accounts appears to be the case of the slave girl at Philippi. We noted that the demoniac in this case exhibited none of the psychosomatic disorders found among the Jewish demoniacs, and that the very concept of possession by the "spirit of python" is thoroughly Hellenistic. Hence we must be open to the possibility that demon possession in non-biblical cultures may take on some local colour.

Another area where there was some discrepancy between the biblical accounts and alleged cases of demon possession in other cultures was in the matter of diagnosis. There was no indication in the scriptural accounts that diagnosing demon possession needed expertise. Nevertheless we should be open to the possibility that in other cultures recognised experts, including diviners who are themselves demon possessed, can diagnose forms of demon possession among those who consult them. While it is true that Christ says that we cannot expect Satan to drive out Satan, we take this to mean that Satan is not going to promote the Kingdom of God by doing the works Christ is doing. Here we agree with Unger that:

Upon closer scrutiny, however, it will be discovered that Jesus' reference is solely to the hostile invasion of the kingdom of darkness by the actual and effectual power of light, wherein Satan suffers real and permanent injury. There is no illusion to Satan's own deceptive, and seemingly self-injurious methods...⁴⁰

Satan will pretend to liberate people from bondage through the agency of diviners, witch doctors and other pagan means, but this will only lead to greater bondage. Not only do the diviners open themselves up to the influence of demons in order to

⁴⁰ *Biblical Demonology*, p. 104.

diagnose the power of demons, but through their arts they bind their patients more strongly to the pagan life style.

Despite such cultural variations, we noted that there is also considerable similarity between the biblical accounts and those from other cultures. Here it is interesting to compare our list of biblical criteria with that of Leahy, who bases his list on reports by missionaries. He lists:

- Speaking in voices not that of the victim
- Unusual physical strength
- Obvious conflict within the person
- Hostility and fear in the presence of Christ when proclaimed in His Word
- Greatly heightened insight and sensitivity
- Speaking in tongues
- ... The same physical and mental disturbances as are described in the New Testament⁴¹

The phenomenon of demon possession is widely known among the peoples of the world. There may be some cultural variations in how this is manifested. But where such marks as are listed above are present there may indeed be reason to suspect the presence of a demon.

In conclusion we repeat our conviction that no Christian can be demon possessed. The presence of the Holy Spirit is our guarantee of God's protection. But where there is sufficient evidence based on the above criteria that a non-Christian should be demon possessed, it is fitting that the suspected demoniac should be challenged in the name of Christ.

⁴¹ Leahy, *op cit.*, p. 128. Note that Leahy also includes other marks for voluntary possession.