



# The Sword & The Plow

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Commentary on Matthew Four

## **Demons and Unclean Spirits shown to be Madness, Epilepsy, and other Physical Maladies**

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*[Editor's note: Here follows an excerpt from our commentary on Matthew Four, in which we discuss the question of demoniacs and unclean spirits. Following this, there is an article by S. Snobelen showing that attribution of physical and mental maladies to demons was a regional phenomenon, confined to Galilee of the Gentiles, and therefore a question of regional superstition and terminology. However, these articles should not be interpreted as an endorsement of modernistic trends to rationalism or deny of the Bible's inspiration and inerrancy, of which we are firmly committed and convinced. Realizing not all will agree with these pieces, as always, let each man be persuaded in his own mind. ]*

**And they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with diverse diseases and torments,**

Since Matthew already reported that Jesus healed all manner of disease among the people of the Jews dwelling in Galilee, we must conclude that those

mentioned here are Jews from other parts of Palestine together with Gentiles dwelling in Syria.

**and those that were possessed with devils,**

There are two basic views about devils, demons, and unclean spirits. One view has it that they are

supernatural beings, either the spirits of the wicked dead, or fallen angels; that Satan's proper name is Lucifer; that he was chief among the angels, but sought to be equal with God and thus led a revolt in heaven, but was defeated by Michael and his angels and was cast down to earth, where his inveterate hatred for God drives him to wreak havoc, tempt man, and persecute God's people. Further, Adam's sin gave Satan dominion in earth and over death and Hades, where he reigns, tormenting the souls of the damned.

Another view is that the angels do not have free will, but being spirit cannot be tempted with evil, and therefore cannot fall or revolt. The terms devil and Satan are used various ways in scripture. Sometimes they refer to a source of *evil* or *temptation* (Matt. 16:23, *Simon Peter*; Jn. 6:70, *Judas Iscariot*), women guilty of *malicious gossip* (I Tim. 3:11; Tit. 2:3 – where *diabolos* is translated false accuser/slanderer), other times to an *enemy nation* or *persecuting power* (Zech. 3:1; Rom. 16:20), and other times as a personification of an inanimate object such as an *idol* (I Cor. 10:20; cf. Ex. 34:15; Lev. 17:7; Deut. 32:17; II Chr. 11:15), or something abstract, like *sin* (Heb. 2:14; cf. Gen. 4:7). The Hebrew word “satan” is not a proper name, but a generic term that signifies an *adversary* or *opponent*. It first occurs in Numbers 22:22 where it is used of the angel of the Lord when he stood as an “adversary” to Balaam. The same term is used of the Philistines *vis-à-vis* David (I Sam. 29:4); and the adversaries of Solomon are likewise so called several times (I Kng. 5:4; 11:14 – *Hadad the Edomite*; I Kng. 5:4:23, 25 – *Rezon, the son of Eliadah*). When I Chron. 21:1 says that “Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel,” the adversary almost certainly was not a demonic being, but an enemy nation, probably the Philistines (cf. II Sam. 24:1).

In Zechariah, the prophet records a vision thought to confirm the existence of a supernatural agent called Satan: The prophet saw Joshua the high priest in filthy garments and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. However, the passage is symbolic. Joshua represents the children of Israel returned out of captivity; the marginal reading calls Satan “an adversary.” When we consult the historical situation behind the vision, we find that the Jews were attempting to rebuild the temple, but were hindered and opposed by the governing authorities of the region, who persuaded the king of Persia to stop the work (cf. Dan. 10:13; Ezra 4; Neh. 4). However, it was the ministry of the prophets Zechariah and Haggai to encouraged the people to continue the work of rebuilding the temple (Ezra 5:1; Zech. 4:9). Hence, it is almost certain this is the meaning of the vision, and that the Persian monarchy and governing authorities

opposing the work are the adversary represented by “Satan.”

In Revelation, John depicts a battle in heaven in which a dragon and his angels fight with Michael and his angels (Rev. 12:7-11). The dragon is often interpreted as Satan. But here again the passage is symbolic and should not be interpreted literally. The better view is that battle represents the earthly ministry of Christ and that of his disciples. Michael is Christ; his angels are the disciples and messengers of the gospel. The dragon harkens back to the serpent in the garden and is a personification of sin and death; his angels are those who oppose the gospel. Following our first ancestors' fall, God said that he would put enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent; the serpent's seed would bruise his heel, but it would crush the serpent's head. (Gen. 3:15). The seed of the woman was Christ; the seed of the serpent were the children of disobedience (the Romans and Jews) (Jn. 8:44). The serpent would strike the promised Seed in the crucifixion through the Jews and Romans acting in obedience to the impulse of sin and disbelief, bruising his heel; but Christ would crush its head. The sting (venom) of death (the serpent) is sin; the strength of sin was the law (I Cor. 15:56). By his substitutionary death and atoning blood the law was fulfilled and taken out of the way, “spoiling principalities and powers” (Col. 2:13-17). In his resurrection, Jesus delivered the crushing blow to the serpent (II Tim. 1:10). Death, which had ruled from Adam to Moses as the prince of this world (Rom. 5:14, 17; Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), was cast out, and its principality destroyed.<sup>1</sup> Thus, John says Michael and his angels overcame the dragon and his angels “by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Rev. 12:11). This shows that the battle concluded with the cross and preaching of the gospel, and was not a literal battle waged in heaven at all.

Regarding the term “Lucifer,” this word is derived from the Latin Bible and is a compound made up of “lux” (light) and “fere” (to bear). It occurs in Isa. 14:12 in reference to the king of Babylon (Isa. 14:4), where it translates the Hebrew “*heylel*,” “Venus” or “the morning star.” The same term also occurs in the Latin Bible at II Pet. 1:19: “*We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star (“lucifer”) arise in your*

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<sup>1</sup> “He destroyed the enemy and the avenger, and death the prince of this world, together with the other unseen hostile powers.” Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica*, VIII, cclxxvii; Ferrar ed.

hearts.”<sup>2</sup> Here we see that the term is not a proper name at all and has no reference whatever to a demonic being or fallen angel.

Unclean spirits and demonic possession seem to be no more than physical and mental illness, the Jews having learned to refer to them this way beginning with the Babylonian captivity and the Greek conquest of Palestine. No cases of demonic possession occur in the Old Testament, and those recorded in the gospels occur exclusively in Galilee, the Decapolis, and other areas heavily populated by Gentiles. When Jesus heals men afflicted by physical maladies in those regions, it is often described as casting out an unclean spirit, but the same afflictions and miracles of healing in Judea make no reference to devils whatever. Hence, the whole thing seems to be nothing more than the regional superstition and terminology of those living in areas populated by Gentiles, similar to today where in the West there are no occurrences of demonic possession, but in Africa and other superstitious and uneducated areas of the globe, belief in evil spirits is wide spread and bodily ailments are commonly attributed to this source. This is confirmed by Bishop Lightfoot, who gives the following account of demonic possession:

“There were divers diseases, which, in their own nature, were but natural diseases, which yet the Jews did, commonly, repute as seizure and possessing by the devil; especially those that distempered the mind, or did in more special manner convulse the body: and, according to this common language and conception of the nation, the language of the gospel doth speak exceeding frequently. Examples of this kind of dialect among the Jews, we might produce divers, as that in Maimonides: ‘A man, which is troubled with an evil spirit, and saith, when the sickness [חולי] begins upon him, Write a bill of divorcement to my wife, he said as good as nothing, because he is not *‘compos sui*’: and so likewise a drunken man, when he comes near the drunkenness of Lot,’ etc. he calls the evil spirit [חולי], or ‘a sickness;’ and by it he means lunacy, or distractedness, that had its *‘lucida intervalla.*’ So the Jews speak of a man ‘that is possessed by Cordicus:’ which they interpret to be, ‘a spirit that seizeth on him, that drinketh too much wine out of the wine-press.’ And, to spare more; because the story in hand is of a child, take but this example of an evil spirit, which, when conceived, did seize upon children: ‘Shibta (say


<sup>2</sup> “*et habemus firmiorem propheticum sermonem cui bene facitis adtendentes quasi lucernae lucent in caliginoso loco donec dies inlucescat et lucifer oriature in cordibus vestris*”

they) is an evil spirit, that seizeth upon children by the neck, even upon the sinews behind the neck, and drieth them up from their use and strength, till it kill him. And the time of it is from the child’s being two months old, and the danger of it is till the child be seven years old.’ Which seemeth to mean nothing else but convulsion-fits, or shrinking of the sinews, or some suchlike thing; a natural malady.”<sup>3</sup>

**and those which were lunatic, and those that had palsy; and he healed them.**

The word “lunatic” means “moonstruck,” and describes someone who is insane or suffers convulsions or epilepsy. However, lacking knowledge of medical science, the Jews and other superstitious peoples fell into the error of supposing men were possessed with devils, an error common to this day among the primitive peoples of Africa and other countries. Thus, in Matt. 17:14-21, a father brought his child to Jesus saying he was “lunatic” (v.15), but in healing the child Matthew describes Jesus as having “rebuked the devil” (v.18). In the parallel account in Mark, the father said his son had a “dumb spirit, and wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away” (Mk. 9:17, 18). But who cannot see that the child suffered epilepsy or some form of recurring seizure, and was not possessed by a devil? Indeed, Thayer defines “lunatic” (σεληνιαζομαι) as epilepsy: “to be moon-struck (cf. lunatic); to be epileptic (*epilepsy being supposed to return and increase with the increase of the moon*): Mt. iv.24; xvii:15.”<sup>4</sup>

**The Shadow Ends where the Body Begins**

| Shadow   | The Shadow Ended at the Cross   | Body & Substance   |
|--|---|--|
| First covenant<br>Worldly sanctuary<br>Priestly service<br>Appointed days and feasts<br>Animal sacrifices<br>Diverse washings<br>Dietary restrictions<br>Misc. carnal ordinances |  | New Covenant<br>Heavenly Sanctuary<br>High Priesthood of Christ<br>His own Blood<br>Atonement<br>Eternal Redemption<br>Perfected Forever |

<sup>3</sup> John Lightfoot, *Harmony of the Gospels, Complete Works* (1684) Vol. 3, pp. 102, 103

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon (Fourth Edition)*, p. 573

# The Geographical Distribution of Demon-Possession

## Mapping Demon Belief in the New Testament

S Snobelen

### Abstract

Demon-possession in the Gospel accounts is not a geographically-uniform phenomenon. Specific cases of demon-possession in the synoptics occur in regional clusters, always in northern environs such as Galilee, rather than occurring throughout every location through which Christ travelled and performed healings.

Conversely, not a single case of demon-possession in Judea or Jerusalem is recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Moreover, the Synoptics include several quantitative summaries of demon-possession that imply that demon-possession was a common and even characteristic phenomenon in Galilee and the northern regions. No comparable statements for Judean areas are found in the Gospel records.

Finally, certain ostensibly physical pathological conditions, such as blindness, deafness and muteness, which are sometimes attributed to demon-possession in the north, are never so characterized in the south, even though descriptions of these conditions do occur in texts commenting on the Judean ministry.

### The evidence: a geographical survey of demon possession in the synoptics

Jesus was raised in Nazareth, a town in the Roman province of Galilee. Aside from the intense period leading up to his crucifixion, the synoptic Gospel accounts show that Christ spent most of his three years' ministry in the north, particularly, but not exclusively, in Galilee. The records themselves attest to a great number of cases where Christ healed demoniacs, although only a few of the cases are commented upon in detail. The following will summarize the data.

First, we find evidence from particular statements in the synoptics that demon possession was common in Galilee and the north. A few examples will reveal the general tenor of these statements. In the opening chapter of Mark we are told that Jesus "cast out many

demons" (daimonia polla) and that "he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues

and casting out demons" (1:34 and 39; all quotations from the RSV).

Mark also recounts that the twelve disciples both healed many who were sick and "cast out many demons" (daimonia polla; 6:13). Matthew records the same occasion as that described in Mark 1, and mentions the locals in Capernaum bringing "many who were possessed with demons" (daimonizomenous pollous; 8:16; cf. Luke 4:41).

On another occasion in Luke 7:21, we find Jesus, while near Nain, curing "many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits." These examples, with their deliberate emphasis on the great number of demoniacs, demonstrate that whatever the situation elsewhere, demon possession was common in Galilee—even endemic.

As with these quantitative summaries, when we turn to examine specific examples, we see that all such cases of demon possession occur in the north, and usually in Galilee. For example, the first healing of a demoniac recorded in Mark occurs in the synagogue of Capernaum (1:21-8). Mark also mentions the case of a demon-possessed girl from Syrian Phoenicia in 7:24-30, another northern region. Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons were cast out, was from Magdala, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The most celebrated case of demon possession in the New Testament—that of the Gadarene demoniac—occurred in the north as well, beside the Sea of Galilee (Matthew; Mark; Luke).

When we turn to the fourth Gospel account, we discover that John does not record a single case of demon possession, although he does mention people with sickness. Many scholars have noticed this and have offered suggestions as to why this should be so.

One theory is that John came from a Sadducean background and, since Sadducees did not believe in demons, he refrains from mentioning them. Aside from the fact that there is no strong evidence for this theory (and in any case, the Book of Revelation tells us that John certainly believed in angels), a better explanation of this apparent anomaly lies in the fact that John,

unlike the synoptics, concentrates almost entirely on the south.

The disproportionate ratio of coverage between north and south in the synoptics is reversed in John. With John we have almost an entire Gospel account devoted to the Judean ministry in which demons could appear. Yet, they do not. This is further evidence for the clustering of demons in the north.

In order to confirm the northern bias of demon-possession during the ministry of Jesus, I analysed every reference to demons and evil spirits in the Gospel accounts, paying close attention to the location of each occurrence. The results of this survey are displayed in the accompanying table and map.

To strengthen the above-outlined pattern even further, we can take an additional step and note that there is a difference between the way some examples of physical ailments are described in the north when compared with the south. Illnesses mentioned in the south are always treated as purely organic conditions, while in the north they are sometimes treated as afflictions caused by demons. Thus we see some cases of blindness, deafness and muteness in the north attributed to demons. In Mark 9:14-29 we are provided with an account of a boy possessed by a “dumb and deaf spirit” (9:25; cf. 9:17).

Moreover, Matthew 9:32-3 records an incident in which Jesus healed a mute man, who was thought to be possessed by a demon. Furthermore, another man afflicted by a demon is described in this same Gospel account as “blind and dumb” (12:22; cf. Luke 11:14). Cases of the blindness in the south are depicted quite differently.

After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus healed people in the Temple who are simply described as being blind (Matthew 21:14). The man born blind in John 9 did not find himself in his condition because of demonic affliction.

As for blind Bartimaeus from Jericho—he is just “blind Bartimaeus,” not “blind, demon possessed Bartimaeus” (Mark 10:46-52). All this, even though his actions are similar to that of a demoniac: he cries out and attributes Biblical titles to Jesus (Mark 10:47-48). This demonstrates that even demon-like behaviour in the south was not readily attributed to evil spirits.

Why is it that such physical problems are sometimes attributed to demonic agency in the north, but never so in the south? What was so special about Judea that drove away demons? These examples also demonstrate

that it is wrong to assume that all cases of demon possession relate to mental illness.

To sum up, the results reveal that every single case of demon-possession in the Gospel accounts occurs in the north, outside Judea; there are no examples of demon-possession in Judea or Jerusalem recorded in any of the four Gospel accounts. What is more, there are several occasions in the Synoptic treatments of the Galilean ministry where we are told that Jesus healed many people possessed by demons. Again, this is in stark contrast to the lack of even a single reference to demon possession in the Judean ministry.

### **Possible objections considered**

Next, we must test this pattern for flaws or alternative explanations. If the pattern is real and significant, it must be able to stand up to rigorous objections. Could it be that there are no accounts of demon possession in Judea because no miracles of healing are recorded there at all? No, there are miracles of healing recorded in both Judea and Jerusalem. Could this pattern be the simple result of the fact that the synoptics spend so much time focusing on the Galilean and northern ministry? No, because, once again, miracles of healing are recorded in Judea.

The accounts of the southern ministry in the synoptics, while not as extensive as the accounts in the north, are by no means insignificant: there was ample opportunity to record cases of demon-possession, if they occurred in that region.

Also, when we turn to John, we see that the majority of his Gospel account deals with the Judean ministry and there is not a single reference to a healing of a demon-possessed person (the only references to demons in John occur when Christ is accused of having a demon — which seems to have been a standard form of slander and abuse among Jews). Thus the pattern holds up in the Gospel accounts.

It is only when we leave the Gospel accounts that we find two possible exceptions to this general pattern. First, in Acts 5:16 we read that those with unclean spirits were brought from the towns “around” or “in the vicinity of Jerusalem” to be healed by the Apostles.

The Greek is not overly precise, so it is hard to say from how far away these demon-possessed people came, but the language does show that wherever they were from, they were not from Jerusalem itself—the main centre for Jewish religious teaching in Judea. But it is worth noting that this is the only example in the book of Acts of demon-possession in a predominantly

Jewish region. Based on the pattern of the Gospel accounts one would expect examples around every corner. Yet this is not the case.

The other apparent exception comes in Acts 10:38 where Peter, giving an account of Christ's ministry, noted that Christ healed all who were oppressed of the devil (ho diabolos). First, it must be stressed that Peter does not specifically use the word demon (daimonion), and it is possible that this distinction is not without import.

Second, while it is true that Peter mentions that the ministry of Christ took him through first Galilee and then Judea (10:37), he does not specifically mention where the healings of those oppressed by the devil took place. His is a general statement about Christ's ministry as a whole, and since most of Christ's ministry took place in Galilee, the greatest force of the statement about demons (assuming the reference is to demons) would naturally apply to that region.

As a Galilean himself, the cases of demon possession would have left a strong impression on him, and it is thus not surprising that he should mention them in such a summary of Christ's ministry. Also, the summary statement of healing is no less true if Peter knew that those oppressed by the devil lived in Galilee. There is no necessary contradiction in stating that Christ worked in Galilee and Judea on the one hand, and that he healed all oppressed by the devil (or demons) in the north.

Furthermore, it is a long established principle of Biblical exegesis that unclear passages should be interpreted by those more easily understood. In this case, as we have seen, the wealth of testimony from the Gospel accounts confirms that every example of demon possession during the ministry of Jesus occurred in the north. Nevertheless, even if, for the sake of argument, Peter's summary statement is meant to include otherwise unrecorded cases of demon-possession in the south, such information would in no way counter what would still be an overwhelming trend.

Christ's words to his disciples in Mark 16:17 offer another possible exception: "In my name shall they cast out demons." Once again, however, we are dealing with a general statement with no specific geographical cues. Nevertheless, the statement is clearly prophetic, so we can confirm just how it was fulfilled by consulting the rest of the New Testament. Here we see that the Apostles (including, later, Paul) did in fact encounter cases of demon-possession after Christ's ascension.

But, the point is that with the possible exception of Acts 5:16, these cases occurred in Gentile dominated regions outside Judea. Absolutely no cases occurred in Jerusalem, and no individual cases are highlighted from Judea.

With regard to any unrecorded cases, we may expect that the pattern revealed during the ministry of Jesus would continue in the years immediately afterward his ascension. But the force of the impressive pattern of clear examples from the Gospel accounts cannot be taken away by the three above possible exceptions. If belief in demons was much weaker in Judea than in Galilee, we would still expect to see some belief in demons in the south, just as we should not be surprised if some in the north did not believe in demons. The "demons" may not have travelled, but people and ideas certainly did.

The point is: the general pattern holds up even if there are some limited exceptions. What is more, even if we are only dealing with a general pattern of demonic activity during the ministry of Christ (i.e. including some possible unrecorded Judean cases as well), it is still true that none of the examples explicitly listed in the Gospel accounts occurred in the south. There must be a reason for this inbuilt into the inspired Word. And even if we are only witnessing a general pattern, this fact alone gives us a compelling reason to seek for explanations.

Given this very powerful evidence, therefore, we must ask: what is going on? Why do we find so many demons in the north and so few (if any) in the south? Why are organic ailments in the north sometimes attributed to demonic activity, but never in the south? For the person who believes in the inspiration of Scripture these examples can be neither accidental nor without purpose. Something is being taught by this pattern.

There are two general explanations: the first is historically-based, the second comes straight from the Bible. We will begin with the historical explanation, and outline the biblical one at the conclusion of this article.

### **Belief in demons in Galilee and Judea**

Based on his studies of the relevant Talmudic literature, Cambridge rabbinical scholar Herbert Loewe concluded that during the first century AD rabbis in Galilee and Mesopotamia generally believed in the literal existence of demons, while those in Judea did not. Loewe first of all includes a commendable appeal

for the need to exercise great care and sensitivity with respect to local and chronological distinctions:

‘...references must be examined to see whether they are the utterances of individuals or genuine examples of popular belief; and distinctions must be drawn between local and general beliefs, between Semitic and non-Semitic, and between Jewish beliefs and those borrowed by Jews from their neighbours in European countries.’

A requirement more vital than any of the foregoing, is the exercise of careful analysis in selecting Talmudic material. It is absolutely necessary to assign each authority to its proper local and chronological category; that is to say, evidence which applies to Babylon is inadmissible for Palestine; that which is found to occur in Galilee cannot be used to prove arguments for Judaea; and the same care must be exercised in respect of chronology.’

Loewe next summarizes the results of his findings:

‘In investigating Talmudic evidence as to spirits, the reader will notice, at the outset, different attitudes adopted by the Rabbis in dealing with this question. In some cases the reality of demons seems to be taken for granted absolutely; in others it seems, with no less certainty, to be denied. Stories occur in which both these attitudes may be traced simultaneously. The reason for this may be found if the nationality of the respective teachers be sought. It has already been stated that Galilee was the centre of Palestinian demonology, and it will almost invariably be found that Galilean teachers accepted, while Judaeans rejected, the existence of spirits. The numerous instances which the NT furnishes would have been impossible save in Galilee; there is a strong similarity between these and those adduced by Galilean Rabbis. The same must be said of those Rabbis who came from Mesopotamia. And they were brought up in surroundings in which superstition was rife, their teaching was tinged by a belief in spirits, and in comparison with them the clarity of Palestinian teaching stands out in bold relief.’ Loewe, “Demons and Spirits (Jewish),” *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh, 1911), 4:612-13 (emphasis as in original). See also H.A. Kelly, *Towards the death of Satan: the growth and decline of Christian demonology* (London, 1968), p. 68

Loewe then goes on to cite supporting evidence from the Talmud to show that superstitious belief in demons was a characteristic feature of rabbinical teaching in Galilee, while a sceptical tradition prevailed among rabbis in Judaea. We have just seen this regional

historical phenomenon played out in vivid fashion against the New Testament documents.

There is additional confirmation of this trend in the teachings of the Sadducees, who occupy the extreme sceptical end of the spirit-belief continuum. We know from history and the Bible that the Sadducees (who were associated with the Temple and Jerusalem) believed in neither demons nor angels (Luke). The effect of Sadducean teaching would have reinforced the general trend in the south.

This background information opens a window on demonic activity during the ministry of Christ. Belief in demons was taught and fostered in the north by the local rabbis; conversely, those in the south were encouraged by a sceptical outlook by the Judaeans teachers. Since belief in demons was rampant in the north, many people attributed sickness to demons.

Because demon belief was much less common in the south (the above-cited scholarly source implies that it was virtually nonexistent among Judaeans rabbis), then the demons did not exist either. Does all of this sound familiar? People who believe in ghosts, see ghosts. Those who don’t, don’t.

Those who put their faith in televangelist healings are “healed” by televangelists. Those who do not, are not. Enthusiasts who believe in UFOs sometimes see UFOs. Those who do not are much more inclined to attribute unidentified flying objects to more mundane entities like airplanes, unusual cloud formations and swamp gas. We can even extend this phenomenon across time. In eras when belief in ghosts, witches and devils was rife, sightings of all three were much more common. Yet no-one reported seeing a flying saucer, as such, until well into the twentieth century when alien life and technology had entered the popular consciousness.

Now we can extend this pattern even further to our current topic. Those who believe in demons, experience or attribute demon possession. Those who don’t, don’t. Strange, anomalous happenings once attributed to ghosts, fairies and demons are now attributed to UFOs, the laws of chance and medical causes. People often see and experience what they believe—regardless of whether these things exist in reality.

This also explains why one can talk to many evangelicals who have “seen” or “experienced” the devil, but one will be hard pressed to find a Christadelphian who has either seen the devil or been demon-possessed. Why does the devil and his demons afflict those who believe in them and leave those alone who do not?

This pattern strongly infers that putative cases of demon-possession in the Gospel and other New Testament accounts are positively related to local belief. In other words, where local folk belief encouraged or allowed for belief in demons, cases of possession exist—often in large groupings. Where such belief was either not taught or even actively discouraged, cases of demon-possession are severely reduced or non-existent.

The implications of this unmistakable pattern in the New Testament have profound ramifications for the ontological status and reality of personal, malevolent demons in the New Testament period. This striking pattern cannot be adequately explained by recourse to the argument that demons are fallen angels ruled by satan (spirit beings not restricted by geography), and intent on attacking Christ and his ministry.

If demons were literal spirit beings under the direction of satan, the distribution of demonic activity should be uniform, or even close to uniform, in all locales visited by Christ. That the distribution instead shows marked clustering, provides powerful Biblical testimony that confirms the non-existence of demons as personal spirit beings under the control of satan.

### **Demons in Acts, the Epistles and the Book of Revelation**

This analysis can be extended further to the rest of the accounts of demons in the New Testament. We see in Acts 8:7 healings of unclean spirits in Samaria, which is to the north of Judea and thus fits the general pattern. Next, we see a reference to a woman with a spirit of python in the Gentile area (Philippi; Acts 16:16-21). This reflects a Gentile belief and not a Jewish one, so this example also fits the pattern: the people of a region are afflicted by “beings” that are believed to be real in their particular area. Additionally, we are told of further activity of evil spirits in Acts 19:12-18, but once again, although Jews were involved, these examples occur in the Gentile region of Ephesus.

To summarize the rest of the New Testament, for Paul demons are worthless idols that have no existence in reality (1 Corinthians 8:4, 10:19-21, 12:2); he does not touch on the phenomenon of demon-possession in any of his writings.

When writing to the mainly Gentile Corinthians, he does not record a gift of casting out demons. Here it is probably relevant to note that Paul was not a Galilean Jew, and thus may have had more contact with Gentile demons than Jewish evil spirits. Demons in Revelation are idols and seducing spirits (Revelation 9:20, 16:14): there is no talk of possession. It is only when we turn to

James that we see what appears to be a general reference to demon-possession (James 2:19).

That this should be so is hardly surprising: James, the brother of the Lord, was raised in Galilee and was familiar with demon-possession. He was also writing to Jews and Jewish Christians (cf. James 1:1 and 2:2, which uses the term synagogue), who would be familiar with demon-possession, even if they had not witnessed it in their regions. Paul, in writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, does not feel he needs to mention demon-possession at all.

James also wrote at a very early date, perhaps as early as the late 40s AD, when his memories of such events in Christ’s Galilean ministry were still fresh (I think James’ allusion is to the Gadarene demoniac—other Galilean case). James’ references, then, are likely reminiscences of Galilean demon-possession. Thus, the general geographical patterns holds up for the entire New Testament.

This evidence presents a serious obstacle to the believer in fallen angels. Not only does this pattern imply accommodation (or something like it), but it cannot be assimilated easily into the other main alternative: literal, personal, malevolent demons.

If this is what the Bible is speaking about, why the regionalization? If Satan was trying to attack Christ in his ministry, why were the demons so ineffective and virtually absent in the south? If the demons of the Gospel records really were fallen angels acting under diabolical orders, why were they not powerful enough to swarm into the southern regions and continue to afflict hapless victims and further attempt to impede the ministry of Christ?

If they had power to enter into a person and bring on that person debilitating illnesses, could they not travel to all regions? Was Christ’s power more effective in the south? Yet he spent more time in the north. Some might argue that the demonic onslaught started with the beginning of Christ’s ministry and that part-way through his ministry Christ gained control over them, thus when he went down to Judea late in his ministry, they had already been driven away.

But this will not do, because although references to demons and evil spirits are much reduced in the book of Acts, there are examples nonetheless, after this supposed victory. Once again, the geographical distribution of demon-possession cannot be explained by literal demons.’



# Questions from our Readers

**Q:** Hey Kurt, thank you for sending me your *Sword & Plow*, I do want you to explain in simple terms the idea of no eternal hell, but destruction. I'm intrigued.

**A:** This is another issue that will get you into trouble in the ministry and the church, so be careful who you discuss it with.

Essentially, once we realize that the language of the prophets is often hyperbolic and charged with symbols and metaphors and poetic imagery, particularly as regards passages describing judgment of men and nations, we are forced to question the literalness of eternal conscious torment in hell.

For example, Jude talks about Sodom and Gomorrah suffering the vengeance of "eternal fire" (Jude 7). However, the fires that consumed those cities burned out long, long ago, so the literalness of eternal fire here must be taken with a grain of salt. The idea behind "eternal fire" may be "unquenchable fire;" viz., God's judgment upon the cities would achieve its objective and his wrath and fury would not be quenched until it was accomplished.

Some other examples of this sort include Isa. 34:9, 10 where God's judgment upon Edom is described by the land being turned to burning pitch and sulfur (brimstone) which "shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up forever." Clearly, this is hyperbolic language that was never intended to be taken literally, but describes with poetic exaggeration the desolation Edom would suffer.

Several New Testament passages describe the lost as suffering "everlasting destruction" (II Thess. 1:9) or the body and soul being "destroyed" (Matt. 10:26) in Gehenna (Valley of Hinnon/Tophet outside Jerusalem where 185,000 Assyrians were buried and burned and the maggots "died not, nor was the fire quenched" - Mk. 9:44, 48; Isa. 30:31-33; 37:36; cf. Isa. 66:24 which foretells a similar fate in store for the Jews in AD 70), but these passages teach *destruction*, not eternal conscious torment. The only passage that really comes close to teaching eternal torment is Matt. 25:46, which again only speaks of everlasting punishment, not eternal conscious torment.

There is a Church of Christ elder who has done a lot of work on this subject. His has a written debate you should get. His name is Edward Fudge. The book is called "Two Views on Hell" and is published by

Varsity Press. You should be able to get a used copy cheap at [abebooks.com](http://abebooks.com) or [alibris.com](http://alibris.com). See the link.

<http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=Fudge&sts=t&tn=two+views+on+hell>

Write back if you need more information.

**Q:** Hi Kurt,

I was interested to read some of your comments and beliefs in your question and answers of this issue of *Sword and Plow*. In particular you mentioned that of the 3 views regarding the last trump only the last is possible. You mention that Ed Stevens' view is not likely especially in light of the fact of Eusebius' writings stating that the believers were still on earth after the destruction of Jerusalem. However I am more inclined to agree with Ed Stevens on this point but differently. I think it possible that they were raptured a little later after they fled into Pella, perhaps as late as AD79 during the devastation of Mt. Vesuvius. Especially after reading of the events of those days by Dio Cassius. His description of giant men being visible in the clouds etc. makes it seem possible that Jesus returned then. Do you think that is possible? It also seems to me that Matthew 24:29 "immediately AFTER the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from heaven....." could be a literal description of that event. I also noticed that Bill Mounce (koine greek teacher) comments on the Greek use of the word immediately, saying "this word has a wider semantic range than immediately, it can simply indicate continuance.

Luke 21:24-33 describes their fleeing from Judea followed by signs in the sun etc. followed by seeing the Son of Man coming in clouds. During which time they were to look up for their redemption was drawing near.

Is there any Scripture that would show me that this could not be so?

**A:** Sorry to be slow getting back with you; things here have been hectic.

I appreciate the thoughtfulness of your approach to the question of a rapture/translation of the righteous. However, as amazing as Vesuvius was, I do not feel it can provide evidence of a literal rapture.

First, the narrative of Matthew 24 ties the events to the fall of Jerusalem; the explosion of a Roman volcano a decade later is hard to bring within the text.

Second, the phrase "immediately after the tribulation of those days" refers, in my opinion, to the tribulation associated with the persecution under Nero, not the destruction of Jerusalem. For the elect's sake (the saints), God would cut short the period of persecution (v. 22), then the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem would ensue. It is in this context (the destruction of Jerusalem and year of four emperors) that the figurative imagery of the sun and moon being darkened and the stars falling from heaven occurs and Jesus comes in the "clouds of heaven" in power against those persecuting the saints (cf. Matt. 16:27, 28).

That brings us to the third point: the language of the sun and moon being darkened, and the stars falling from their orbits, is figurative, not literal, as your approach assume. There are many examples of this sort of language in the Old Testament (Isa. 13 & 34). It would require strong inducement to abandon the figurative hermeneutic established in the prophets to adopt a literal hermeneutic here.

Dio Cassius' reference to giant men in the clouds of ash and smoke coming out of Vesuvius should not be interpreted as Jesus; this is better understood as the superstitious reaction of pagan Romans; Roman literature is full of such things. They really were a very superstitious people. Besides, why would Christ appear in the clouds of Vesuvius where few if any Christians were, and not in Pella or where the saints were collected? I can find no reason for Jesus to appear to the pagan Romans at Vesuvius during their destruction, but not to believers elsewhere in the world.

In the end, of course, it cannot be proved that your scenario could not be, since it is impossible to prove a negative. However, I feel the probabilities weigh heavily against it. Revelation seems also to agree, since it ends with the destruction of Jerusalem, and does not reach to Vesuvius, so that we are hard pressed to tie something as significant as a rapture to events so totally removed from the Biblical narrative.

Hope that helps. Keep up the good work and study!

**Q:** Hi Kurt,

I always enjoy getting your newsletter every month! I'm glad you continue to do that!

I had a thought on one of the questions this month about the "change" in 1 Cor 15. Maybe there are more than the three options you listed.

I'm wondering if we are reading ourselves into 1 Cor. 15:51-52 and 1 Thes 4:13-17 more than we should?

Perhaps, it was directed directly to them. Maybe the people of the churches at Corinth and Thessalonica were part of the gathering/harvest of the elect. All of them.

Take a look at the sequence of events:

Matthew 24:29-31 - Trumpet, then "gathering"

1 Cor. 15:51-52 - Trumpet, then dead are raised, then the "change"

1 Thess. 4:13-17 - Trumpet, then dead are raised, then the "catching up"

Revelation 11:15, 14:1-5, 14:14-16: Trumpet, then dead are raised, then "harvest"

While Matthew doesn't mention the dead being raised, we can safely assume it happened after the trumpet and before the gathering/harvest.

They all mirror each other, so why wouldn't the "change" and "catching up" be the same as the "gathering" and "harvest". The "change" is upon death according to 1 Cor. 15:53-58. So was the harvest and gathering.

Maybe Paul knew that all the living brethren from these two churches were to be part of the harvest of the elect. So he said things like, "WE shall ALL be changed...at the last trump" and "then WE shall be caught up with them".

If we view the letter as written to THEM, those two churches, we can infer that THEY were all to be changed or caught up at the last trumpet as part of the harvest of the elect.

I know in your "Three View on the Rapture and Change" article, you state that the "we all" refers to all Christians for all time, but what if Paul was really just talking to them for now. We can still gain insight and know what happens at our death though, but this specific instance of "change" Paul was referring to was the gathering/harvest.

I'd love to get your opinion on that thought.

**A:** Great to hear from you. Hope things with you and your family are going well.

You are right that there is always the possibility of another interpretation or explanation for these passages. The three I mentioned are the only ones I have been confronted with until now. Who knows that there are not others still to be discovered.

As I understand your suggestion, you propose that Paul was writing the saints of Corinth and Thessalonica, contemplating that they would all suffer death/martyrdom, and thus be gathered/changed and caught up together with the rest of the dead at the resurrection of the last day. I have considered a similar solution to this myself in the past, but so far have rejected it.

Paul says "we shall not all sleep." Whatever this sleep entails, it marks this group off from the Hadean dead; the Hadean dead sleep, but the others will not. But your proposal seems to require that the Corinthians and Thessalonians die/sleep and thus go to Hades in order to be raised/gathered/caught up with the dead at the Hadean resurrection. If so, this would seem to preclude the approach you suggest, since Paul specifically says they will not be asleep at the time of their change. If I misunderstand you, write back and straighten me out.

My understanding of the "sleep" Paul mentions in I Cor. 15:50 is that it refers to Hadean death, and that Paul is saying we will not all go to Hades, but we shall all be changed (one by one as we die). All Preterists accept this as true today and that we are changed one by one as we die. I simply propose that this is what I Cor. 15:51, 52 means, even though we do not usually cite it as proof of this, because the mistranslation of the "last trumpet" confounding it with the trumpet that raises the dead.

Some interpret the "gathering" in Matt. 24:31 as evangelism of the world following AD 70; some interpret it as the resurrection of the dead; I have taken the view that it refers to Christ gathering his saints into in martyrdom. I base this on language of harvest in the gospels (Matt. 3:10-12; Matt. 13:33-51) and II Thess. 2:1 and Rev. 14, the latter of which expressly describes Jesus harvesting his saints in martyrdom under the beast. However, there may be other possibilities we have not yet discovered, and who is to say which is right?

Write again anytime. You are never a bother!

**Q:** Hello Mr. Simmons. Could you please tell me your interpretation of who the "cloud of witnesses"? are. Are we being watched everyday, everywhere in our private moments too?

**A:** Long time no see; good to hear from you.

My opinion is that the great cloud of witnesses refers to the fathers of our faith, whose lives serve as witnesses to us of how we are to follow their example. That is, those the writer mentions in Heb. 11, are the "cloud of witnesses" he is referring to. These do not see us in our private moments, but God and the angels do; I do not think anything we do escapes their notice.

Hope that helps.

**Q:** I just finished my outline on the beast from Revelation 17. I'm including it here, in case you're interested.

In doing some research, I found that the word translated "continue" (KJV, 17:10) can also be translated "wait for." This actually makes much more sense and fits the context nicely. When Nero died, Vespasian had to "wait for" a short season before taking the throne. This would make him king #7.

Titus, who was "of the seven," or "son of the seventh" (see the listing of the apostles where it says James "the son of Alphaeus" when the Greek just has "of Alphaeus" for this kind of usage), was the power of the beast himself, the one who came and destroyed Jerusalem.

The beast was, but is not (this chronologically would be talking about the period of darkness during Galba, Otho, and Vitellius' reigns), but came roaring out of the bottomless pit. AKA, they thought the Roman Empire was finished, but it came roaring back to life. AKA, the Jews thought they had defeated the Romans when Vespasian left, but then came Titus with a vengeance.

That's in a nutshell what I came up with.

**A:** I appreciate the study and original thinking you demonstrate here. However, in my view the "beast" is the persecuting power against the saints, not the war prosecuting power that destroyed Jerusalem. There is a distinction between the dragon and the beast. The dragon is the civil power; the beast is the persecuting power and makes war against the saints (Rev. 11:7; 17:14), not against Jerusalem or the Jews.

The beast "was and is not" signifies that it had temporarily ceased from persecuting (collapse of the persecution over Stephen). It was "about to ascend out of the pit" signifies that it would start persecuting again

(the Neronean persecution). The wound to the beast's head that sent it to the pit (Rev. 13:3, 12) was received when the persecution collapsed in AD 38, marked by the removal of Pilate, the removal of Caiaphas from the high priesthood and the conversion of Saul/Paul. The wound was about to heal and the persecution revive under Nero and the Jews (the beast come up from the pit), which is the reason Revelation was written.

I do not believe Vespasian, Titus, or Domitian are referred to. How can Vespasian be the beast that makes war against the saints, when he did not persecute the

church at all? Same with Titus? Remember, the beast makes war against the saints, which clearly means it persecutes them (Rev. 11:7). Thus, to say that Vespasian is the seventh (skipping three intervening emperors!) seems a reach to me.

Of course, in the end, it is a matter of interpretation and no one can say they are absolutely right.

Keep up the good work!

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## Ten Examples of Conversion from Acts

|                                      | <b>Heard</b>     | <b>Believed</b> | <b>Repented</b> | <b>Confessed</b>    | <b>Baptized</b> |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Pentecostians<br>Acts 2:38           | Heard the gospel |                 | Repented of sin |                     | Baptized        |
| Samaritans Acts<br>8:5-16            | Heard the gospel | Believed        |                 |                     | Baptized        |
| Simon Magi<br>Acts 8:13              | Heard the gospel | Believed        |                 |                     | Baptized        |
| Ethiopian Eunuch<br>Acts 8:35-38     | Heard the gospel | Believed        |                 | Confessed his faith | Baptized        |
| Household of<br>Cornelius<br>Acts 10 | Heard the gospel |                 |                 |                     | Baptized        |
| Household of Lydia<br>Acts 16:14-16  | Heard the gospel | Believed        |                 |                     | Baptized        |
| Philipian Jailer<br>Acts 16:30-33    | Heard the gospel |                 |                 |                     | Baptized        |
| Corinthians<br>Acts 18:8             | Heard the gospel |                 |                 |                     | Baptized        |
| Ephesians<br>Acts 19:1-5             | Heard the gospel |                 |                 |                     | Baptized        |
| Saul (St. Paul)<br>Acts 22:16        | Heard the gospel |                 | Repented        |                     | Baptized        |

*If we are teaching the same gospel and following the pattern of faith and practice of the apostles, our conversion should mirror those we find in scripture. In each case, the individual's coming to salvation was sealed by baptism. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Mk. 16:16*

# Voices from History

[Editor's note: Here follow several famous and illustrious voices from history, who affirmed that demoniacs and unclean spirits were really mental and physical maladies, which the superstitious peoples of the ancient worlds supposed were possessed or afflicted by demons, in a manner similar to primitive peoples today. These people fully affirmed the inerrancy and inspiration of scripture, but felt a literal reading sometimes failed to take into account the changes of language and terminology of the times.]

**Thomas Hobbes** (A.D. 1588 – 1679) lived under Oliver Cromwell's government and the Puritan Commonwealth (1641-1660). He is mostly remembered today for his political treatises on government: *Leviathan* and *Behemoth*, but especially *Leviathan*, from which the following are excerpts:

- "That there were many Daemoniaques in the Primitive Church, and few Mad-men, and other such singular diseases; whereas in these times we hear of, and see many Mad-men, and few Daemoniaques, proceeds not from the change of Nature; but of Names" (ch. 45, p. 445).
- "Significant names, Satan, Devill, Abaddon, set not forth to us any Individuall person, as proper names use to doe; but onely an office, or quality; and are therefore Appellatives; which ought not to have been left untranslated, as they are, in the Latine, and Modern Bibles; because thereby they seem to be the proper names of Daemons; and men are the more easily seduced to beleeve the doctrine fo Devills; which at that time was the Religion of the Gentiles, and contrary to that of Moses, and of Christ.

And because by the Enemy, the Accuser, and Destroyer, is meant, the Enemy of them that shall be in the Kingdome of God; therefore if the Kingdome of God after the Resurrection, bee upon the Earth, (as in the former Chapter I have shewn by Scripture it seems to be,) The Enemy, and his Kingdome must be on Earth also.

For so also was it, in the time before the Jews had deposed God. For Gods Kingdome was in Palestine; and the Nations round about, were the Kingdomes of the Enemy; and consequently by Satan, is meant any Earthly Enemy of the Church." (Ch. 38, p. 314).

- "... where St. Luke sayes of Judas Iscariot, that Satan entred into him, and thereupon that he went and communed with the Chief Priests,

and Captaines, how he might betray Christ unto them: it may be answered, that by the Entring of Satan (that is the Enemy) into him, is meant, the hostile and traiterous intention of selling his Lord and Master.

For as by the Holy Ghost, is refrequently understood, the Graces and good Inclinations given by the Holy Ghost; so by the Entring of Satan, may bee understood the wicked Cogitations, and Designs of the Adversaries of Christ, and his Disciples.

For as it is hard to say, that the Devill was entred into Judas, before he had any such hostile designe; so it is impertinent to say, he was first Christs Enemy in his heart, and that the Devill entred into him afterwards. Therefore the Entring of Satan, and his Wicked Purpose, was one and the same thing" (ch. 45, p. 444).

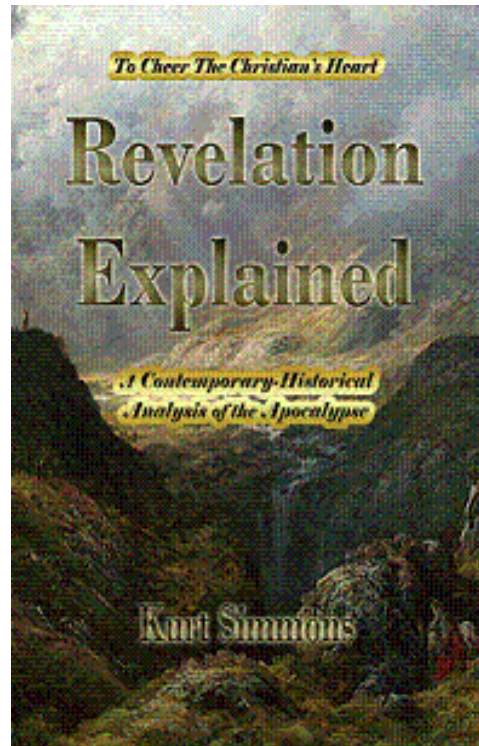
**Bishop John Lightfoot** (1602-1675) was English scholar partially responsible for formulating the Westminster Confession. Lightfoot wrote a commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica, which make his insights into the colloquialisms of the Jews particularly valuable. He was also a strong Preterist:

- "There were divers diseases, which, in their own nature, were but natural diseases, which yet the Jews did, commonly, repute as seizure and possessing by the devil; especially those that distempered the mind, or did in more special manner convulse the body: and, according to this common language and conception of the nation, the language of the gospel doth speak exceeding frequently.

**Isaac Newton** (A.D. 1642 – 1727) was a physicist and mathematician and is widely regarded as one of the most influential scientists of all time. Newton also wrote heavily on Biblical topics, including eschatology.

themselves among the people.<sup>7</sup>

- “A Dragon or serpent, if called the old serpent or the Devil signifies the spirit of error delusion & inordinate affections reigning in the world. for spirits good or evil are sometimes put for the tempers dispositions & persuasions of men’s minds much after the manner that we often take death for a substance.<sup>5</sup>
- “From this figure of putting serpents for spirits & spirits or Daemons for distempers of the mind, came the vulgar opinion of the Jews & other eastern nations that mad men & lunaticks were possessed with evil spirits or Daemons. Whence Christ seems to have used this language not only as Prophet but also in compliance with the Jews way of speaking: so when he is said to cast out Devils, those Devils may be nothing but diseases unless it can be proved by the circumstances that they are substantial spirits.<sup>6</sup>
- “We are also to allow for the changes that have been made in the signification of words. So Cherubim were originally nothing more than hieroglyphical symbols or armies & other bodies politick. Spirits frequently signified the tempers & dispositions of the mind; & evil spirits the diseases & distempers thereof as when Saul was troubled with an evil spirit from the Lord; Devils signified the imaginary Ghosts of dead men whom the heathens worshipped as Gods; Inchanters, Magicians, Sorcerers, Necromancers & Witches signified deceivers & cheats who by certain forms of words & ceremonies & other juggling tricks pretended to supernatural powers & arts of prognosticating for magnifying



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<sup>5</sup>Newton, Yahuda MS 9.1, ff. 19v-20v.

<sup>6</sup>Newton, Yahuda MS 9.1, f. 21v.

<sup>7</sup>Newton, New College, Oxford MS 361.2, f. 133r, cited in Manuel, *Isaac Newton, historian*, 149.