

What is Demon Possession?

Among the more spectacular supernatural events to occur today is demon possession. In our rational world, such events are viewed skeptically and reinforced as fiction by the media (i.e. movies, television, computer games, etc). Yet there are over 50 references to demon possession in the New Testament. So to dismiss this phenomenon requires one to dismiss the historicity of Jesus Christ. To begin understanding this issue, one must take a closer look at the meaning of "possession." This article will take a brief survey of the cases involving non-Christians.

What is meant by "demon possession"?

The English translation of "demon possession" is used to translate the Greek terms "daimonizomai" and "echein daimonion".

Daimonizomai means "to be under the power of a demon." In all 13 occurrences of this term in the New Testament, each case referred to some form of demonization where the demon appears to reside in the human being.

The etymology of the participle *daimonizomenos* is revealing. The root word *daimon* refers to demons. The causative stem *iz* indicates that there is an active cause to the verb *daimonizomai*. The passive ending *omenos* indicates the passivity of the subject. Thus the etymological definition is "a demon caused passivity."

Echein daimonion means "to have a demon." In all 9 occurrences of this term in the New Testament, each case referred to some form of demonization where the demon appears to reside in the human being.

The majority of references in the New Testament that refer to demonic influences involve the use of the Greek term "daimonion," which means "a demonic being." Of the 60 occurrences of this term in the New Testament, 52 referred to some form of demonization where the demon appears to reside in the human being.

The idea that demons can reside within a human body is evidenced by some of the Greek verbs associated with "daimonizomai, echein daimonion" and "daimonion."

"Cast out" refers to "being drawn out of something" (i.e. Matt 7:22; 8:31; Mark 1:34).

"Come out, came out, goes out" refers to "coming forth out of an object or place" (i.e. Matt 8:32; 12:43; 17:18; Mark 1:25; 5:8; 9:25; Luke 4:35, 41; 8:29; Acts 8:7; 16:18).

"Had" refers to "having, to hold, or possess" (i.e. Mark 7:25).

"Entered into" refers to "going into an object or place" (i.e. Mark 5:12-13; Luke 8:30-33).

What does demonization do to the human being's soul or body? In terms of function, does this mean that the human being loses his will or mind?

Examine the cases of demonization where the demon, inside the human being, has intermittent or complete control of the human body and mind:

The man at Capernaum (Mark 1:23-27, Luke 4:33-36)

The Gerasenes man with a legion of demons (Matt 8:28-34, Mark 5:2-16, Luke 8:27-38)

The son with convulsions (Matt 17:14-21, Mark 9:17-25, Luke 9:38-42)

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Examine the cases of demonization where the demon, inside the human being, causes the human being to experience physical sickness, disease or disability without an apparent loss of will:

The man who was mute (Matt 9:32-33, Luke 11:14)

The man who was both blind and mute (Matt 12:22)

Examine the cases of demonization where the demon, inside the human being, did not cause the human being to exhibit any outward signs of physical sickness, disease, disability or loss of will:

Judas Iscariot (Luke 22:3-6; John 13:27)

In all instances of demonization in the New Testament involving demons residing in non-Christians, they appear to have the following characteristics:

- It is an active process by fallen angels.
- It afflicts non-Christians of any age.
- The affected human being is personally unaware of the demon's residence.
- The affected human being appears to lose control of his body and / or mind only when the resident demon(s) choose to seize control or perhaps only certain demons have the capability of controlling a human being's will.
- It may wholly or partially afflict the physical and mental well being of the human being; demonic control may not be total.
- The affected human being may have fits of rage.
- The affected human being may have split personalities and alterations in his voice.
- The affected human being may temporarily have supernatural strength (i.e. the Gerasenes man with a legion of demons) or abilities such as clairvoyance (i.e. the slave girl with the spirit of divination (Acts 16:16-18)).
- The affected human being resists spiritual things.

There has been debate whether the translation "demon possession" accurately reflects the true meaning of the Greek terms. The translators of the King James Bible introduced this translation to describe what they perceived as an all encompassing level of "demonization" reflecting the demonic ownership of the human being and his will.

However, the biblical text limits our understanding to the bodily invasion of a demon(s) and some degree of demonic control including the rare cases of total demonic control of a person's will.

There does not appear to be any biblical evidence that the soul of a human being is "demonized." Demonization seems limited to the physical, mental and volitional capabilities of human beings.

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The process of demonization is not clear. Whether the demon(s) enter through the skin or through an opening in the body is not specified in the Bible.

Is all physical and mental illness due to demonization?

With the understanding of what demonization (especially when there is a resident demon) is capable of, there is the risk of attributing all illnesses and diseases to demonic influences. However, the biblical record clearly shows otherwise.

Physical illness and disease may be caused intentionally by God:

Witness and testimony of the sovereignty of God (Ex 9:8-12 – boils; 1 Kings 13:1-6 - shriveled hand; Acts 9:1-9 – blindness; John 9:1-5 - blindness)

Judgment (Num 12:1-15 – leprosy; 2 Chron 26:16-22 – leprosy)

Physical illness and disease may be caused intentionally and temporarily by unfallen angels:

Protection (Gen 19:1-11 - blindness)

Punishment for a lack of faith (Luke 1:18-22 – mute)

Physical illness and disease may be caused intentionally by the Holy Spirit working through an apostle:

Paul punishing a false prophet (Acts 13:10-12 blindness)

Physical illness and disease may be caused by sin:

Jesus reveals that sin was the cause, which He chose to heal as a testimony of His deity (Matt 9:2-8 – Paralytic)
Self deceit (1 Cor 11:28-32)

Physical illness and disease may have natural causes:

Leprosy (Matt 8:3-2-4)

Various illnesses and diseases (Matt 4:24; 15:30; Mark 1:32; Luke 6:17-19)

While demonization may be the cause of some illnesses and diseases, it is not the cause of most. The Bible does make a point when distinguishing demonic causes.