

Demon Possession in the Greco-Roman World

A Term Paper

Presented to Professor Richard Oster

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Fall 2001

In the Greco-Roman world the importance of the spiritual realm was expressed in daily life through religion.¹ MacMullen notes that everyone believed in a spiritual reality, and "'spirits' or however they may be termed could, be found everywhere."² As we attempt to understand this spiritual realm around the time that the New Testament was written, one confusing aspect is determining the position of the δαιμονιον or the demons in the typical world-view.³ This paper will survey the pagan conceptions of demons in the ancient world, focus on the pagan understanding of demon possession and exorcism, and conclude by examining the early Christian view.⁴

Demons in the pagan worldview

Before we can accurately deal with the topic of

¹Hans-Josef Klauck, The Religious Context of Early Christianity, Studies of the New Testament and Its World, trans. Brian McNeil (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 12.

²Ramsay MacMullen, Paganism in the Roman Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 82.

³Frederick E. Brenk, "In the Light of the Moon: Demonology in the Early Imperial Period," in Aufstieg und Neidergang der romischen Welt, ed. Hildegard Temporini und Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 2:16:3:2069.

⁴This paper, while lightly touching on the Jewish backgrounds, will slant toward the pagan understanding of the demonic. For a survey of the understanding of demons and exorcism with a Jewish slant, see Graham Twelftree, Jesus the Exorcist (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 22-52.

demon possession in the ancient world, we must first attempt to understand where demons fit into the "typical" pagan worldview. In stating that, we must admit that making broad generalizations about a worldview is difficult because of the assumptions that must be made. It is easy, when attempting to generalize about the worldview of most people of a given period, to assume that all people thought that way. The picture becomes even more clouded when we recognize that the Greco-Roman world was a mixture of cultures, as well as the fact that "typical" beliefs (and religions) would vary by region.⁵ Another reality that makes this difficult is that those who wrote about their beliefs on demons are mostly from the same social strata: they are all males, educated, and wealthier than the average person. These factors will tend to skew our picture and ability to determine specifics. We have very little material that deals with demons "on the folk level."⁶

In examining the belief structure of the time it is safe to presume, though, that "the Greco-Roman world was very conscious of demons. Their presence was part of the

⁵MacMullen, 1.

⁶Brenk, 2140.

disturbing world view of the time."⁷ Even though it was common to believe that demons existed, the Greco-Roman world did not have a unified understanding of their nature and function.⁸ Ferguson states that the word 'demon' "underwent important changes of meaning. In general, it referred to a power that accompanies persons and dispenses destiny."⁹ It is important to recognize that there was no one meaning for the word demon, so we must use context to understand its significance.¹⁰

Plutarch gives us the fullest exposition of demonology in this time period,¹¹ but even he is rather ambiguous about the specific usage of "demon".¹² In order to understand Plutarch's (as well as other's) conception of demons, we must recognize the influence of Homer's work. Homer had a significant impact on Greco-Roman culture, and shaped the discourses on the nature of demons in the early Imperial period because writers used

⁷Everett Ferguson, Demonology of the Early Christian World, Symposium Series, vol. 12 (New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 1984), 59.

⁸Brenk, 2069.

⁹Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 220.

¹⁰Wendy Cotter, Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity (New York: Routledge, 1999), 76.

¹¹Brenk, 2117.

¹²Ibid., 2128.

his work as a starting point.¹³ Plutarch notes that while Homer uses δαίμονας to refer to the gods as well as demigods, Hesiod was the first to distinguish four classes of rational beings: gods, demigods (or δαίμονας), heroes, and men.¹⁴ Plutarch also recognizes some fluidity between these categories,¹⁵ as entities may move between classes (this idea was likely borrowed from Plato).¹⁶ This fluidity seems to have been a common idea, as it was often assumed that the souls of the dead became demons.¹⁷ For example, a character in Euripides' Alcestis understands his wife, now dead, to be dwelling among the demons.¹⁸ Interestingly, the Greco-Roman world held onto the seemingly competing ideas that the demonic realm could be made up of both deceased souls and independent spiritual entities. Brenk notes:

"Two strands then clearly emerge, *daimones* as independent spirits, and as the souls of the departed, and it is fair to say that the strands could never be completely unraveled once they had become tangled."¹⁹

¹³Ibid., 2072 For a full discussion on the influence of Homer on the subject of demonology see pages 2071-2082.

¹⁴Plutarch Obsolescence of Oracles 415B.

¹⁵Ibid., 415B-C.

¹⁶Ferguson, Demonology, 41.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Euripides Alcestis 1003.

Demons were commonly described as being lesser than the gods.²⁰ One difference between demons and the gods is shown in Hesiod's conclusion that the demons, unlike the immortality the gods possess, have a lifespan of *only* 9,720 years.²¹ As it developed in common usage the term for demons held a lower place than the term for gods.²² Plato places the δαίμονας somewhere between the mortals and the immortals, and sees them serving to interpret and transmit prayers (as well as human souls?) to the gods.²³ He thinks of them as a special personal companion, or a guardian angel.²⁴ Demons were often seen as regulated to controlling specific fields of activity: providing signs and oracles, providing supervision of animals, presiding over events or natural processes, as well as over specific cities or tribes.²⁵

There was also a dark side to the understanding of demons. For those who assumed that the divine could do

¹⁹Brenk, 2082.

²⁰Ibid., 2083.

²¹Plutarch Obsolescence of Oracles 415D.

²²MacMullen, 79.

²³Plato Epinomis 984E.

²⁴Ferguson, Early Christianity, 220.

²⁵MacMullen, 82.

no evil, it was supposed that the demons were the "instruments of vengeance and punishment; likewise as instruments for the dirty and menial business of magic."²⁶ Apuleius of Madaura, writing in the first century, said that demons controlled "all divination and the miracles of magicians."²⁷ Plutarch understands the demons to be dangerous, and says that some aspects of festivals function to ward off demons.²⁸ As Ferguson notes, "demonic forces were everywhere and constantly affecting human life."²⁹ The actions of Jesus and his followers in the New Testament fit the traditional idea of a world permeated with demons,³⁰ while understanding them as having a primarily negative function. The presence of demons was seen as a challenge to Jesus' ministry.³¹ Tatian, likely because of his Christian influences, understands them in this negative light and believes that although demons are real, they have no power to heal,

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Apuleius Apologia 43.

²⁸Plutarch Obsolescence of Oracles 417C-E.

²⁹Ferguson, Early Christianity, 221.

³⁰S. Eitrem, Some Notes on the Demonology in the New Testament (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1966), 3.

³¹Ferguson, Demonology, 59.

only power to enslave men.³²

Understanding of demon possession

Now that we have a picture of the understanding of demons in the Greco-Roman world, we can narrow our focus to examine the understanding of demon possession. Demon possession is described in a number of ways. One way that demon possession functioned was in the context of religious ceremony. Euripides describes the behavior of a demon-possessed person as being in a state of religious frenzy.³³ One accepted religious setting for demon possession occurred in oracular shrines, where the priestesses for these shrines who were "in an inspired state were believed to be under the control of 'demons.'" ³⁴

Outside of the religious context, demon possession was understood as causing insanity.³⁵ Theophrastus describes a superstitious character who, when seeing "a madman or epileptic he shudders, and (then he) spits down

³²Tatian Oratio Ad Graecos 18.

³³Euripides Hippolytus 140.

³⁴Edward Langton, Essentials of Demonology (London: The Epworth Press, 1949), 98-99.

³⁵Ferguson, Demonology, 51.

at his chest."³⁶ This man is using a magical incantation as spiritual protection against the perceived spiritual problem of insanity or epilepsy (ancient Greeks saw a connection between these two diseases).³⁷ In another account, Aeschines uses the phrase "as one possessed" as a pejorative term to describe someone who, while not 'insane,' is acting irrationally and making poor decisions.³⁸ It is clear that the understanding of demon possession was connected with insanity. Plutarch's story about one who fakes madness (δαίμωνωντι) reinforces this point, as this character is using these presuppositions to his favor:

But just as they were ready to arrest him, an assembly of the citizens was held, and here Nicias, right in the midst of some advice that he was giving to the people, suddenly threw himself upon the ground, and after a little while, amid the silence and consternation which naturally prevailed, lifted his head, turned it about, and spoke in a low grumbling voice, little by little raising and sharpening its tones. And when he saw the whole audience struck dumb with horror, he tore off his mantle, rent his tunic, and leaping up half naked, ran towards the exit from the theatre, crying out that he was pursued by the Mothers. No man venturing to lay hands upon him or even to come in his way, out of superstitious fear, but all avoiding him, he ran out to the gate of the city, freely using all the cries and gestures that would become a man possessed (δαίμωνωντι) and crazed. His wife also,

³⁶Theophrastus Characters 16.14.

³⁷Ferguson, Demonology, 52.

³⁸Aeschines Against Timarchus 41.

who was privy to his scheme...³⁹

While many assumed that insanity or epilepsy was a problem caused by demons, others understood it as a physical or medical problem. Hippocrates refers to this "sacred disease" as having a natural cause.⁴⁰ He goes on to say:

My own view is that those who first attributed a sacred character to this malady were like the magicians, purifiers, charlatans and quacks of our own day, men who claim great piety and superior knowledge. Being at a loss, and having no treatment which would help, they concealed and sheltered themselves behind superstition, and called this illness sacred in order that their utter ignorance might not be manifest.⁴¹

Hippocrates concluded that this disease was caused by problems in the brain.⁴² Another person who was skeptical of demon possession and exorcism was Marcus Aurelius who credits his teachers for helping him to think critically about the validity of demons and their exorcism.⁴³

While some were able to dismiss demon possession as a counterfeit act, many others were convinced in their presence and used demon possession to gain secret knowledge. In one spell, where the dream world and "the

³⁹Plutarch Marcellus 20.5-6.

⁴⁰Hippocrates The Sacred Disease 1.1-4.

⁴¹Ibid., 2.1-10.

⁴²Ibid., 6.1-2.

⁴³Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Meditations 1.6.

magical daemon world" combine in an act comparable to possession, a lamp daemon enters the practitioner in order to give him revelations.⁴⁴ In this spell, the practitioner commands the spirit to enter into him.⁴⁵ Although some believed that demons could serve useful purposes, over time they came to have more of a negative connotation, as people were more resistant to placing blame for evil on the gods.⁴⁶

Exorcisms

Now that we have an understanding of demon possession, we can move on to examine the understanding of the exorcism of demons. Origen, writing from a Christian perspective, gives a fairly typical understanding of the work of a non-Christian exorcist.

[The] works of sorcerers who profess to do wonderful miracles, and the accomplishments of those who are taught by Egyptians, who for a few obols make known their sacred lore in the middle of the market-place and drive daemons out of men and blow away diseases and invoke the souls of heroes.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Samson Eitrem, "Dreams and Divination in Magical Ritual," in Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion ed. Christopher A. Faraone (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 181.

⁴⁵PGM IV. 3205-7. in The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation ed. Hans Dieter Betz. trans. William C. Grese. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 100.

⁴⁶Ferguson, Early Christianity, 221.

⁴⁷Origen Contra Celsum 1.68.

While this is likely a portrayal of a pagan exorcist, it would be wrong to assume that all exorcists had this religious background. Exorcists existed in Christian and Jewish, as well as pagan groups.⁴⁸ There are a few references in the New Testament to Jewish practitioners.⁴⁹ Josephus understands the Jewish talent for exorcisms as going back to Solomon.

God granted him [Solomon] knowledge of the art used against demons for the benefit and healing of men. He also composed incantations by which illnesses are relieved, and left behind forms of exorcisms with which those possessed by demons drive them out, never to return.⁵⁰

This quote shows the connection between exorcism and physical healing. MacMullen notes that the only cure for mental sickness lay in casting out the evil.⁵¹ It seems that "there was always a close association between common healing and exorcism."⁵² This close association is shown throughout the New Testament as well.⁵³

The practice of exorcism was not something that remained static, but instead it consistently developed

⁴⁸Ferguson, Early Christianity, 221.

⁴⁹Acts 13:6-11; 19:13-16.

⁵⁰Josephus Jewish Antiquities 8.44-46.

⁵¹MacMullen, 50.

⁵²Brenk, 2112.

⁵³Matt. 8:17; 15:22; Mark 7:25; Luke 6:18; 13:16; Acts 5:16.

over time.⁵⁴ Technique and character were vital parts of the exorcist's work since "obtaining the name of the demon was important for the exorcist, while virginity as well as religious, moral or intellectual authority gave efficacy to the exorcist's words."⁵⁵ Plutarch highlights the connection between magic and demon possession when he tells us: "sorcerers advise those possessed by demons to recite and name over to themselves the Ephesian letters."⁵⁶ The allusion to the 'Ephesian letters' in Plutarch's comment refers to the "unintelligible formulae used in the practice of magic."⁵⁷ One incantation used for exorcisms is found in the Paris Magical Papyrus (lines 3,007-3085), where the spell begins: "For those possessed by daemons, an approved charm by Pibechis."⁵⁸ This incantation comes from about 300 A.D., but makes use of earlier Jewish elements because Jews had a considerable reputation for being effective exorcists and because those in this profession would freely borrow from

⁵⁴Brenk, 2111.

⁵⁵Ibid., 2112.

⁵⁶Plutarch Table Talk 7.5.706E.

⁵⁷Ferguson, Demonology, 54.

⁵⁸C. K. Barrett, The New Testament Background (London: SPCK, 1956), 31.

each other.⁵⁹ Here is an excerpt from the spell:

"But write this phylactery upon a little sheet of tin: 'Jaeo, Abraothioch, Phtha, Mesentiniao, Pheoch, Jaeo, Charsoc', and hang it around the sufferer: it is a thing to be trembled at which he fears. Standing opposite, adjure him. The adjuration is this: 'I adjure thee by the God of the Hebrews Jesu, Jaba, Jae, Abraoth, Aia, Thoth, Ele, Elo, Aeo, Eu, Jiibaech, Abarmas, Jabarau, Abelbel, Lona, Abra, Maroia, arm, thou that appearest in fire, thou that art in the midst of earth and snow and vapour, Tannetis: let thy angel descend, the implacable one, and let him draw into captivity the daemon as he flieth around this creature which God formed in his holy paradise.'"⁶⁰

Two aspects of this incantation deserve mention. One is that it gives instruction for a phylactery to be used in relation to demon possession. This may have been common since we have a reference to another phylactery of this type (PGM IV. 86-87).⁶¹ A second aspect to highlight is the odd reference to the "God of the Hebrews Jesu," which Barrett takes to be a non-Christian Gentile's misunderstanding of the connection between Judaism and Christianity.⁶² Later on in the incantation the final instructions are given:

"But I adjure thee, thou that usest this adjuration: the flesh of swine eat not, and there shall be

⁵⁹Ferguson, Demonology, 54-55.

⁶⁰Barrett, 32; lines 8-21.

⁶¹PGM IV. 86-87. in The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation ed. Hans Dieter Betz. trans. Marvin W. Meyer. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 38.

⁶²Barrett, 34.

subject unto thee every spirit and daemon, whatsoever he be. But when thou adjurest, blow, sending the breath from above [to the feet] and from the feet to the face, and he [the daemon] will be drawn into captivity. Be pure and keep it. For the sentence is Hebrew and kept by men that are pure."⁶³

One of the best-known exorcists is Apollonius of Tyana; he lived at the end of the first century A.D. and had a reputation for using magic as well as casting out demons.⁶⁴ There are a number of stories that portray Apollonius' encountering demons. One shows him relieving a young man of a torturing demon, who turned out to be a deceased soldier enchanted by the young man's good looks.⁶⁵ In another story Apollonius has the residents of Ephesus stone a demon disguised as a beggar, and after the stones were removed the body of a dog was found in its place.⁶⁶ Among the stories about Apollonius, there is not a consistent demonology.⁶⁷ It is important, as we look at this wonder-worker, to recognize that his biography was fashioned (either by Philostratos or Apollonius) to give a supernatural interpretation to the events of his life in order to portray Apollonius in a

⁶³Ibid., 33; lines 72-80.

⁶⁴Ferguson, Demonology, 55.

⁶⁵Philostratus The Life of Apollonius of Tyana 3.38.

⁶⁶Ibid., 4.10.

⁶⁷Brenk, 2141.

favorable light.⁶⁸ The following story occurs after a young man in the audience of Apollonius' speech breaks out in rude laughter.

Then Apollonius looked up at him and said: "It is not yourself that perpetrates this insult, but the demon who drives you on without you knowing it." And in fact the youth was, without knowing it possessed by a devil; for he would laugh at things that no one else laughed at, and then he would fall to weeping for no reason at all, and he would talk and sing to himself. Now most people thought that it was the boisterous humour of youth which led him into such excesses; but he was really the mouthpiece of a devil, though it only seemed a drunken frolic in which on that occasion he was indulging. Now when Apollonius gazed on him, the ghost in him began to utter cries of fear and rage, such as one hears from people who are being branded or racked; and the ghost swore that he would leave the young man alone and never take possession of any man again. But Apollonius addressed him with anger, as a master might a shifty rascally, and shameless slave and so on, and he ordered him to quit the young man and show by a visible sign that he had done so. "I will throw down yonder statue," said the devil, and pointed to one of the images that were in the king's portico, for there it was that the scene took place. But when the statue began by moving gently, and then fell down, it would defy anyone to describe the hubbub which arose thereat and the way they clapped their hands with wonder. [The account concludes with the young man showing his freedom from the demon by giving up his old way of living and following after Apollonius' way of life.]⁶⁹

As mentioned earlier, Jews as well as pagans were

⁶⁸Ibid., 2141. For a thorough discussion of the historicity of this miracle worker see Ewan L. Bowie, "Apollonius of Tyana: Tradition and Reality," in Aufstieg und Neidergang der romischen Welt, ed. Hildegard Temporini und Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), 2:16:2:1652-99.

⁶⁹Philostratus 4.20.

known for performing exorcisms. Josephus gives an account of a Jewish exorcist.

I have seen a certain Eleazar, a countryman of mine, in the presence of Vespasian, his sons, tribunes and a number of other soldiers, free men possessed by demons, and this was the manner of the cure: he put to the nose of the possessed man a ring which had under its seal one of the roots prescribed by Solomon, and then, as the man smelled it, drew out the demon through his nostrils, and, when the man at once fell down, adjured the demon never to come back into him, speaking Solomon's name and reciting the incantations which he had composed. Then, wishing to convince the bystanders and prove to them that he had this power, Eleazar placed a cup or foot basin full of water a little way off and commanded the demon, as it went out of the man, to overturn it and make known to the spectators that he had left the man. And when this was done, the understanding and wisdom of Solomon were clearly revealed.⁷⁰

In this account, as well as the exorcism that Apollonius performs, the exorcist makes the demon perform an action in order to prove the effectiveness of the exorcism and show that the demon is subjected to the exorcist.⁷¹

Not all people in the Greco-Roman world accepted the reality of exorcisms. Many mocked the exorcists and their craft. Hippocrates ridicules the exorcists because he says that when they fail, they always have a large number of excuses for their lack of success.⁷² He also attacks their so-called "piety," because he says they

⁷⁰Josephus 8.46-49.

⁷¹Cotter, 105.

⁷²Hippocrates 2.127-32.

imply "that the gods do not exist, and what they call piety is ... impious and unholy."⁷³

Another example of an author who ridicules the belief in exorcisms is the satirist Lucian. He uses the following story about exorcisms and spirits to make fun of a Platonist, who accepts the reality of a spiritual realm, and to mock one who accepts the validity of magic and superstitions.⁷⁴ His reference to the Syrian from Palestine is not necessarily a reference to Jesus because there were many other wonder-workers who practiced exorcism, but this reference does give us a picture of the first and second century world where Jesus worked.⁷⁵

"You act ridiculously," said Ion, "to doubt everything. For my part, I should like to ask you what you say to those who free possessed men from their terrors by exorcising the spirits so manifestly. I need not discuss this: everyone knows about the Syrian from Palestine, the adept in it, how many he takes in hand who fall down in the light of the moon and roll their eyes and fill their mouths with foam; nevertheless, he restores them to health and sends them away normal in mind, delivering them from their straits for a large fee. When he stands beside them as they lie there and asks: 'Whence came you into his body?' the patient himself is silent, but the spirit answers in Greek or in the language of whatever foreign country he comes from, telling how and whence he entered into the man; whereupon, by adjuring the spirit and if he does not obey, threatening him, he drives him out.

⁷³Ibid., 3.12-20.

⁷⁴Ferguson, Demonology, 56.

⁷⁵Ibid., 56-7.

Indeed I actually saw one coming out, black and smoky in colour." "It is nothing much," I remarked, "for you, Ion, to see that kind of sight, when even the 'forms' that the father of your school, Plato, points out are plain to you, a hazy object of vision to the rest of us, whose eyes are weak."

"Why, is Ion the only one who has seen that kind of sight?" said Eucrates. "Have not many others encountered spirits, some at night and some by day? For myself, I have seen such things, not merely once but almost hundreds of times. At first I was disturbed by them, but now, of course, because of their familiarity, I do not consider that I am seeing anything out of the way, especially since the Arab gave me the ring made of iron from crosses and taught me the spell of many names."

Later on in the story, Lucian ridicules Eucrates' exorcism of a demon from a house because of his need for many Egyptian books and having to speak to the demon in an Egyptian language.⁷⁶

While many authors gave their opinions about the validity of the exorcisms, there is no indication that the practice of exorcism (real or otherwise) was absent in this period. It seems clear that the general cosmology used by Jesus in dealing with the exorcism of demons fit the basic thought forms of his day.

Early Christian Response to Demon Possession

Just as Jesus did not ignore the realm of the demonic in his ministry, so also the early church was

⁷⁶Lucian The Lover of Lies 31.

willing to be assertive in their encounters with these spiritual powers. Brenk says that "by the 2nd century, Christians were employing the Creed in the exorcism formula, and exorcism became a normal part of baptism: disbelief indicated possession and baptism liberation."⁷⁷ In the minds of many Christians in this time period, the demons were "more weak than wicked" and were easily dispatched because of Christ's authority over these powers.⁷⁸

As demonology continued to change through the years, demons were increasingly seen as transcendent.⁷⁹ This transition was a "way of reconciling the philosophical movement toward monotheism with the polytheism of popular religion. The admission that the gods of polytheism were 'demons' played into the hands of Christian apologetics."⁸⁰ Paul comments on the connection between the gods of the pagans and demons when he says that the pagan sacrifices to the gods are in reality offered to demons.⁸¹

Christians did not just speak out against the

⁷⁷Brenk, 2116.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ferguson, Early Christianity, 221.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹1 Cor. 10:20.

demonic realm, but were also frequent and powerful exorcists.⁸² Justin Martyr writes that one reason Jesus came to earth was to bring about "the destruction of the demons."⁸³ He goes on to say:

For [there are] numberless demoniacs throughout the whole world ... [and] many of our Christian people [are] exorcising them in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontus Pilate, have healed and do heal, rendering helpless and driving the possessing demons out of the men, though they could not be cured by all the older, exorcists and those who used incantations and drugs...⁸⁴

Another early Christian author, Irenaeus, comments on how some Christians are adept in driving out demons, and that those "who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ], and join themselves to the Church."⁸⁵ Tertullian confidently stated this about the influence that Christians can have on demons:

Let a person be brought before your tribunals, who is plainly under demoniacal possession. The wicked spirit, bidden to speak by a follower of Christ, will readily make the truthful confession that he is a demon, as elsewhere he has falsely asserted that he is a god.⁸⁶

Origen also attested to the power of Christians over the demonic because he believed that "traces of the Holy

⁸²MacMullen, 50.

⁸³Justin Martyr 2 Apology 6.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Irenaeus Against Heresies 2.32.4.

⁸⁶Tertullian Apology 23.4.

Spirit who appeared in the form of a dove are still preserved in Christians. They charm daemons away and perform many cures."⁸⁷ These four references are just a sample of early Christian observations on demon possession and exorcisms. We have Christian sources commenting on the connection between Christians and exorcisms that come "from both halves of the Empire and from the mid-second century on up to the 230s" and on to the reign of Constantine.⁸⁸ It is evident that there was a consistent response to the problem of demon possession in early Christianity.

Conclusion

It seems clear that as Christianity was introduced onto the world's religious scene it used the thought forms and cosmology of the day in order to be effective. Christianity did not ignore the problem of the demonic, but showed how these mysterious spiritual entities were subject to the authority of Christ. The early church continued this tradition of freeing the possessed from spiritual bondage. It is important to recognize, though, that while exorcisms brought a strong reaction out of

⁸⁷Origen Contra Celsum 1:46.

⁸⁸MacMullen, 50.

crowds, "the art itself had no great fame or audience."⁸⁹ The early church certainly did not perceive its central mission as going into the world to cast out demons. That was, as it should have been, only part of their holistic approach to evangelism. The church today could learn a lot from how the early church lived out their faith. As the church seeks to engage the world of today, we should have confidence in the message given to us, understand the culture we live in, and seek to appropriately address the needs of the world around us.

⁸⁹MacMullen, 50.

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