



B REVEALING WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

How Jesus responded to people with evil spirits



Why use this Bible study?

To help us understand how Jesus acted when faced with people who the Bible describes as having an evil spirit, and to see that witchcraft accusations against children, and the abuse and stigma that often follows, are completely unbiblical.



“Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet ...”

Read Mark 9:14–27

We see from this story that the people the Bible describes as having evil spirits are tormented victims. The child in this passage does not cause harm to others. Rather, they themselves are suffering. The child’s family and community do not drive the child away, rather they approach Jesus and ask for his mercy and help. Jesus is kind and full of pity. He does not punish the child. He speaks directly to the spirit, commanding it to leave, and casting it out simply with a word. The child is healed: ‘Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet, and he was able to stand.’ Jesus’s actions show tenderness and compassion.



Key points

- In the Bible, those who were possessed or oppressed are never accused of witchcraft. While they are often excluded by society, Jesus shows them love, compassion and care. We should follow his example.
- Witchcraft, understood as the innate, secret, evil power of a person to cause misfortune or problems for others, is not found in the Bible. However, the word of God shows clearly that the enemy and powers of evil do exist and that their goal is to oppose God.
- Jesus cast out demons as part of his daily ministry. He never took part in special exorcism ceremonies.
- Jesus has won the victory over all these powers of evil and has made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by his victory on the cross (Colossians 2:15).

Awareness-raising

Children & youth

Climate & environment

Conflict & peace-building

Corruption & governance

Disaster risk management

Discrimination & inclusion

Food & livelihoods

Gender & sexual violence

Health & HIV

Influencing decision-makers

Migration & trafficking

Water, sanitation & hygiene

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Questions for discussion

- Describe the boy who is possessed by a demon in this story. Has this child done harm to others?
- Is he accused of witchcraft?
- What is the attitude of his family and the community? Was he abandoned?
- What does Jesus do to cast out the demon?
- What is his attitude towards the boy?
- What is the consequence for the boy? Is he stigmatised?
- Describe a typical ceremony of deliverance (especially of children accused of witchcraft) in:
 - our churches
 - our community
- What are the differences between these ceremonies and the example of Jesus?



Notes

This activity is adapted from *The Heart of the Matter*, a 5-day training resource developed by the Stop Child Witchcraft Accusations Coalition – <https://stop-cwa.org>



Finding out more

- Stop Child Witch Accusations (2017) *Roots, realities and responses: lessons learnt in tackling witchcraft accusations against children* – <https://stop-cwa.org/resources/31>
- Stop Child Witch Accusations (2017) *A Call to Action: Responding to beliefs that harm children* – <https://stop-cwa.org/resources/10>

Related tools

- A1 – Revealing the harm caused by witchcraft allegations against children [A1: Children & youth-3]
- A2 – How did Jesus respond to children? [A2: Children & youth-5]
- A2 – Understanding accusations of child witchcraft [A2: Children & youth-6]
- B – Christ's victory over evil and fear (Bible study) [B: Children & youth-4]

What does the Bible say about witches and witchcraft?

Many people understand the term ‘witch’ to be someone who intentionally causes misfortune or problems for other people by using innate evil powers, in secret and often during the night. Witchcraft is understood to be this innate, secret, evil power to harm.

Witchcraft and witches as understood in this way, are not found in the Bible. The Bible does not talk of people who do harm to others in secret by using innate evil powers. There is no example of an evil *person* who harms others by invisible means or with the help of a demon. There is no example in the Bible where a person is accused of being a witch, and Jesus never accused anyone of exercising witchcraft.

There are diviners and magicians in the Bible, including those who seek to manipulate nature or to know the future (for example by consulting the dead, like the woman in 1 Samuel 28:7). Diviners are publicly recognised as such. They are people who practice their art in public, and earn their living by using magic or occult practices or divination. Such practices exist in every culture. King Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33 ‘practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists’ (verse 6). But this behaviour was public and visible, rather than in secret - there was no doubt that he was doing such things.

The Bible is very clear that the people of God are forbidden to engage in such practices. Manasseh’s behaviour aroused God’s anger (2 Chronicles 33:6). Christians are forbidden to consult diviners or mediums, or to seek to make contact with the spirits of the dead, or to put their faith in the stars and horoscopes, or even in amulets that bring luck (Deuteronomy 18:10-12; Jeremiah 14:14). These practices seek to bypass or deny the wisdom and omniscience of God and to give glory to Satan. Christians must not play the role of diviner, for example by accusing others of being witches. God abhors and condemns such practices.

A verse in the book of Exodus – ‘Do not allow a sorceress to live’ (Exodus 22:18) – is often used to justify accusations of witchcraft and the torture and murder of people who are accused of witchcraft. In African languages, the word ‘sorceress’ is often translated with a term that is the equivalent to the word ‘witch’. But in Hebrew - the original language of the Old Testament - the word ‘kashaph’ is used, which is closer to the idea of ‘diviner’ or ‘magician’. In every example of this word in the Bible, it is referring to people with a public (and well-paid) role whose job was to help the king, to reveal secrets, or to imitate miracles. For example, in Exodus chapters 7:8-12, we read of Aaron (on God’s command) throwing his staff before Pharaoh and it becoming a snake. In response, Pharaoh summons ‘the wise men and the sorcerers’ (‘kashaph’ in the original text), and they ‘did the same things by their secret arts’ (verse 11). However, it’s important to note that the powers of these magicians were vastly inferior to God’s, which were at work through Aaron. We read in verse 12, ‘But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs.’

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Another example of the term ‘kashaph’ is in Daniel chapter 2:1-3, where King Nebuchadnezzar summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to interpret his dreams. In Hebrew, these verses also use the word ‘kashaph’. As before, this means people who publicly practise their learned art. They are known by the king, and he can easily summon them. They are not ‘witches’ who act in secret to harm others. So this verse in no way justifies the action that is taken against people who are accused of ‘witchcraft’.

It is essential to read the verse from Exodus 22 in context. Exodus 22:18-24 says

“Do not allow a sorceress to live ...

“Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the LORD must be destroyed.

“Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

“Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.’

God forbids His people to consult diviners or to do the work of a diviner (by making or affirming witchcraft accusations, for example), because diviners seek to usurp God’s place. But God is *extremely* angry with people who mistreat the most vulnerable: widows and orphans. And yet it is orphans and widows who are most often subjected to accusations of witchcraft and the awful consequences which follow from them.

The Bible does contain examples of people who are oppressed or possessed by demons and teaches us that spiritual powers are real and affect the world we live in. The Bible teaches us that these malevolent powers exist and seek to destroy human beings and to push them away from God. They bring death and destruction. The Bible also teaches us the wonderful news that Jesus came to bring people back to God. In Scripture, the people who are oppressed by demons are victims. The demons harm them, and the people who are oppressed suffer because of it. In the Bible, we see problems caused by Satan and his demons but never because a person has sent them. We also see that demons do not need to be encouraged or pushed to kill, steal, lie, accuse or tempt.

It is often very difficult to tell if demonic possession is present, and it is important to discern this carefully using the spiritual gifts that God gives his people. When we are dealing with situations where possession is a possibility, we must follow Christ’s example. Jesus cared for people who were vulnerable, marginalised, sick, and oppressed in society. His first response was always one of love. When he met people who were oppressed by demons, He did not fear them or the demons which oppressed them. He healed the person with compassion and gentleness, and drove out the demons with authority, but never with violence, torture or rituals.

[Source: Adapted from *The Heart of the Matter*, a 5-day training resource developed by the Stop Child Witchcraft Accusations Coalition - <https://stop-cwa.org>, who in turn cite Dr Steven Rasmussen, article on Witches and Diviners, in the Africa Study Bible (pages 662–664), Oasis International Ltd (2017). Article adapted and used with permission.]