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Aspects of Demonology in the text “On The Belly-Myther” of Endor by St. Eustathius of Antioch

Daniel Buda

Daniel Buda

World Council of Churches, Geneva
E-mail: Daniel.Buda@wcc-coe.org

Abstract

This article tries to identify and analyse the demonological elements contained in the text “On the Belly-Myther” of St. Eustathius of Antioch. St. Eustathius demonology is primarily based on Bible and is developed mainly as a consequence of his exegesis on 1 Kingdoms 28. Apart from the Bible, Eustathius appeals massively to logic while formulating statements about the demon and his power over human beings, the relationship between demons power in the world and God’s power, the possibility for demons to express the truth etc. St. Eustathius demonology is rather “intellectual” and might be different in its approach from the so-called “monastic demonology” which can be found by St. Athanasius of Alexandria or Evagrius Ponticus.

Keywords

demons, demonology, Demonology by St. Eustathius of Antioch; Belly-Mather, witchcraft

Introduction

A mere reading of “The Belly-Myther” of Endor wrote by St. Eustathius of Antioch¹ and a basic knowledge about the context of this interesting writing

¹ The original Greek text was published in PG 18, 613-674. A revised critical text was published later by E. Klostermann, *Origenes, Eustathius und Gregor von Nyssa über die Hexe von Endor*, Kleine Texte, 83, Bonn, 1912, p. 16-62. Proposals for improving

will emphasize immediately the theological and historical interests that this writing might raise. The lack of Christological references, which are predominant in only fragmentary² preserved works of St. Eustathius, makes this work as primarily important for its exegetical references. The central concern for St. Eustathius in *On The Belly-Myther of Endoris* basically exegetical. It deals with the correct interpretation of the episode from 1 Kingdoms 28 where the story of Saul appealing on the service of a “belly-myther” is represented. The polemic is built around the question: What actually brought up the belly-myther from Endor: the soul of Samuel or something else? While Origen argues that it was the soul of Samuel, St. Eustathius makes all efforts to demonstrate the opposite. This issue was of great interest both for Jewish and Christian exegetes.³ As a result of this exegetical polemic⁴, other theological themes are indirectly approached, such as the afterlife in general, the human soul and its fate after the end of earthly life, the resurrection of human bodies, but also questions related with angelology and demonology. In this study, I would like to research the elements of demonology as they are developed by St. Eustathius of Antioch in this work. A careful lecture of *The “Belly-Myther” of Endor* shall highlight the fact that St. Eustathius made several statements regarding the power of demons; God’s sovereignty at the expense of demonic powers

the edition published by Klosterman have been done by August Brinkmann in *Verbesserungsvorschläge zu Eustathius von Antiochia über die Hexe von Endor* in *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* nr. 74 (1925), p. 309-313 and Felix Schneiderweiler, *Zu der Schrift des Eustathius von Antiochien über die Hexe von Endor*, in *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, nr. 96 (1953), p. 319-329. For an Italian translation see Manlio Simonetti, *Origene Eustazio, Gregorio di Nissa, La Maga di Endor*, Biblioteca patristica, Florence, Nardini, 1989.

² A collection of these fragments was published by José H. Declerk, *Eustathius Antiochenus, Opera quae super sunt Omnia* in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca*, vol. LI, Turnhout, 2002.

³ See K. A. D. Smelik, *The Witch of Endor: 1 Samuel 28 in Rabbinic and Christian Exegesis Till 800 A. D.* in *Vigiliae Christianae* 33, 1979, p. 160-179.

⁴ Eustathius accused Origen of using allegory in an improper way. However, the explanation proposed by Origen for the text from 1 Kingdoms 28 makes use of literal interpretation, while St. Eustathius explanation is rather allegorical. This irony is specifically mentioned by St. Eustathius: “Thought he (i. e. Origen) customarily allegorized absolutely everything by this method (i. e. of allegorizing), it was only the words of the belly-myther that he was unable to allegorize.” (*On the Belly-Myther* 22, 7, p. 132-135).

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etc. It gives answers also to questions such as: What powers did demons retain after Christ's defeat of Satan? Had a demon such an authority as to call up the soul of a righteous like Samuel and to send it back?

This study is based mainly on the quite recent English translation of work "On the Belly Myther of Endor"⁵ known also under the name of *De engastri mythos*.⁶ It was written most probably after 320, when St. Eustathius became bishop of Berea, but before the break of the Arian controversy and was addressed to Euthropius who is called in by St. Eustathius the "most distinguished and holy preacher of orthodoxy."⁷ Euthropius is probably to be identified with the bishop of Hadrianopolis.⁸ St. Eustathius interpretation on the Belly-Myther's episode is the result of Euthropius statement that he was not satisfied with "what Origen has published on this subject." Apart of this, St. Eustathius mentioned that he knows "that there are not few others who find fault with what he (i. e. Origen) has set down so off-headedly. But there are a great many people who are vexed in their souls and distressed beyond measure."⁹ Therefore St. Eustathius decided to write this book. He suggests an investigation by a "side-by-side comparison of how both sides (i. e. Eustathius and Origen) comparison of how both sides stand in their opinions and for scholars to choose the better opinion from the two."¹⁰

⁵ *The „Belly-Myther“ of Endor. Interpretations of 1 Kingdoms 28 in the Early Church*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 16, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Rowan A. Greer and Margaret M. Mitchell, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2007. This translation contents an extensive introduction, and detailed introductory studies and the translations of the following authors which wrote interpretations on 1 Kingdoms 28 in the Early Church: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 105, Tertulian, *On the Soul* 54-58, *The Martyrdom of Pionius* 12-14, Origen, *Homily on 1 Kingdoms* 28, Eustathius, Bishop of Antioch, *On the Belly-Myther, Against Origen*, Apollinaris of Laodicea, *A Fragment from the Catenae*, Diodor of Tarsus, *A fragment from the Catenae* and Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter to Theodosius concerning the Belly-Myther*.

⁶ For a detailed explanation for the English translation of the Greek „engastrimythos“ or of the Hebrew equivalent „a woman having mastery over necromancy“ or „over ghosts“ with „Belly-Myther“ instead of „the witch“ see *Preface* (as footnote 5), p. xi-xviii.

⁷ *On the Belly-Myther* 1, 1, p. 63-64.

⁸ See *Preface* of *On The „Belly-Myther“* (as footnote 5), p. IX.

⁹ *On the Belly-Myther* 1, 2, p. 62-63.

¹⁰ *On the Belly-Myther* 1, 5, p. 62-63.

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However, as announced in the introduction, here we are interested in identifying and commentating on the aspects of demonology which are contained in Eustathius work. In his efforts to demonstrate that what happened in the narrative of 1 Kingdoms 28 was no more than a demonic fiction, Eustathius pays close attention to all details of the biblical text. He points out that both Saul and the Belly-Myther were possessed by demons and therefore were mad or demented. First of all, Saul did not receive any answer from the Lord “not by dreams, or by portents, or by prophets” (1 Kingdoms 28:6) because of “the magnitude of his wickedness ... since he had committed lawless deeds”. More than this,

“instead of making greater supplications by longer prayers and more fervent soul-searching, on the contrary he turned away and added to his deeds of apostasy. He ordered his servants to seek out a woman who was a belly-myther so that he might go to her in order to inquire of her by divination.”¹¹

When his servants found such a woman in Endor, Saul left his army, disguised himself and went to the belly-myther by night, hiding his identity. It is to observe that the moral decadence of Saul reaches its deepest point by appealing to the services of a belly-myther: “since Saul placed the request to receive divination through the belly-myther, someone could say that his words were true. But is there anyone who does not know that even Saul turned to deadly divination and the diabolic operations of myths, he was being driven to savage rages by the demon? What then? Is not God more worthy of belief – God who puts words into mouth of Balaam and entrusted Moses to write expressly in Numbers: <For there is no augury in Jacob, nor any divination in Israel> (Num. 23: 23)? Therefore such things as loath some abomination and causes of hateful idolatry are established as prohibited acts, how could the witness who has tried to use such impious means be credible?¹² Here Eustathius is concentrated on the so-called “discreditation of witness”.¹³ For the purpose of our study is to

¹¹ On the Belly-Myther 1, 4-5, p. 64-67.

¹² On the Belly-Myther 2, 7-9, p. 66-67.

¹³ See Margaret M. Mitchell, *Patristic Rhetoric on Allegory: Origen and Eustathius Put 1 Samuel 28 on Trial in The Journal of Religion*, p. 414-445.

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see that for Eustathius any kind of divination is a big sin, which affects the faculties of the human soul.¹⁴

The belly-myther herself is presented as “mad woman”¹⁵, being “under demonic influence”¹⁶ and demon-possessed.¹⁷ St. Eustathius suggests that she “presumably ... encouraged toward the evil act” answered that she is ready to bring up whoever shall be requested by her client. Eustathius continues:

“What kind of woman and what kind of evil demon was this old crone that she promised to bring up Samuel from the dead? Indeed, even if we must in speaking pass over the matter of her mouth, not only was she not able to bring up a prophet’s soul but not even that of any ordinary person – not even that of an ant or a flea! For demons do not have authority over spirits and souls, but the one who is Lord of all at once – God. As a result, the capacity to summon and to call up again from hell must be granted to the divine nature alone.”¹⁸

Therefore, what the belly-myther brought up was not the soul of Samuel because

“nowhere at all had the plain sense of the divine text said that Samuel was brought up through the agency of the belly-myther. Rather, she prophetically declares through the agency of the demon raging with frenzy in her that it is necessary to bring him up. Then, boasting that she saw even gods coming up, she was deceitfully giving tell-tale signs of the man to trick him. And Saul, since he was out of his mind, <knew> from what he had heard that this was Samuel himself.”¹⁹

The demon and his servants, as Saul and the belly-myther, are liars. The Lord itself called the demon “a liar and the father of the lie” (John

¹⁴ Saul is considered as “driven by the demon” and therefore “blind in his governing mind” (On the Belly-Myther 10, 13, p. 92-93) “incurably struck by the demon ... led by malign influence...” (15, 1, p. 108-109).

¹⁵ On the Belly-Myther 2, 6, p. 66-67. She is called also “deranged” and “brain-damaged woman” (7, 7, p. 80-81); “deranged woman” (10, 1, p. 88-89).

¹⁶ On the Belly-Myther 7, 2, p. 78-79. The belly-myther and Saul are called “personae possessed by demons” (8, 7, p. 82-83).

¹⁷ On the Belly-Myther 26, 10; 30, 1.

¹⁸ On the Belly-Myther, 3, 3, p. 66-69.

¹⁹ On the Belly-Myther 3, 8-9.

8:44). While in this case there is no other choice than that the demon lies about the image that Saul has seen, St. Eustathius briefly approaches the question: Are the demons able to say the truth? The answer is: “There are, of course, times when the demons quite unwillingly are compelled to tell the truth by being painfully tortured, but willingly, however, they would not say anything whatsoever without lying.”²⁰

The exegesis of the verse from 1 Kingdoms 28: 13 which contains the words of the belly-myther given as response to Saul’s question “What have you seen” “I have seen gods coming up from the earth” are based on the idea that the demon is a liar but always trying to bring proof to support his lie by bringing other untrue reasons: “For when the devil, after snatching the man up, wished to throw him over by various devices, he tried to give him clear proof that the petty demon had it in his power to bring up not only a single soul of the holy men at once. But on the contrary it was the devil, the one who had armed the cohort of demons in that place and brought them all together at that critical moment, who was making this boast, because he wished also by this means to persuade everyone that he ... was a god.”²¹ St. Eustathius concludes that the Bible is the best proof that the devil pretends on every occasion to be God and “relies upon such apparitions (with other words is able to bring up other demons) in every instance when he boasts” even God threatens him with punishment.²² He did the same with Saul. “Because (he, i. e. Saul) was driven by demon, was blind in his governing mind” and worshiped the devil. In this case “the devil changed himself into various forms, exerting himself in the effort to be worshiped by the ruler so that in this way he might trick as many people as possible into bowing down to him unawares.”²³ It is no surprise that the devil acts in this way with Saul. He tried to bring into temptation even the Son of God, by trying to make him worship the devil as the master of the world.

In his argumentation against Origen’s opinion that Samuel’s soul was the one brought up by the belly-myther, St. Eustathius touches two other aspects of demonology. The first one is the affirmation that demons can be exorcized which implies the fact that human being can be possessed by

²⁰ On the Belly-Myther 4, 4, p. 70-71.

²¹ On the Belly-Myther 10, 2, p. 88-89.

²² On the Belly-Myther 10, 4, p. 88-89.

²³ On the Belly-Myther 10, 13, p. 92-93.

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demons: "A demon, when exorcized by pious people, is driven out, burned, whipped, and flees, leaving his dwelling behind."²⁴ The second is the fact that the demon is able to take the shape of a human being: "The monster, indeed, is accustomed to change himself into the form of many different people, so that I may say, speaking in agreement with the saintly Paul, <Even Satan changes his form into an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also change their form into ministers of righteousness> (2 Corinthians 11: 14-15)."²⁵ In the construction of his argumentation against Origen, and proving that what the belly-myther saw was "some kind of unseen shadow".²⁶ St. Eustathius affirms: "For example, sometimes in dreams spirits and souls appear to mortals, displaying the characteristics suited to human beings with all their members. Not only that, but they wear all sorts of different clothes and bear the signs of scars, beatings, or bruises, even of blows or wounds."²⁷

Saul worshiped a phantom, "the crafty one, having changed himself into the form of Samuel." The dialog the demon has with Saul is meant to convince him that what he is going to see is really Samuel. St. Eustathius analyses this dialogue in detail and comes to the conclusion that

"the devil fabricates subordinate arguments to utter in pretence. But saying nothing worthy of foreknowledge, he craftily repeats what Samuel when alive had already foretold would happen to Saul, pronouncing this in the course of prophesying events ahead of time as though they had already taken place"²⁸;

he has stolen "the things Samuel had said earlier, he added to them a few particulars, interweaving them with verisimilitudes based on what was likely to happen."²⁹ The first conclusion that arises from the analysis of the dialogue between Saul and the appearance of the devil is that the devil is able to plagiarize Samuel, however there are enough signs that would permit for a morally integral person to suspect that the dialogue partner is not really the one who he pretends to be. But because Saul is blinded by his sins and therefore possessed by the power of the demon, his soul has

²⁴ On the Belly-Myther 4, 8, p. 72-73.

²⁵ On the Belly-Myther 4, 9, p. 72-73.

²⁶ On the Belly-Myther 6, 5, p. 76-77.

²⁷ On the Belly-Myther 6, 1, p. 76-77.

²⁸ On the Belly-Myther 12, 1, p. 98-99.

²⁹ On the Belly-Myther 13, 5, p. 104-105.

lost such abilities. A careful analysis of what the appearance of Saul had prophesied shows that he lied or was inexact in what he said. Therefore, the devil remains what he always was: a permanent trier of building “double stratagems”³⁰ and “the one who stiches lies together.”³¹

“For it belongs to God alone to give orders with such authority that he can summon and call souls from hell”³² – this is a conclusion that was sufficiently demonstrated until now by Sf. Eustathius. However, he is constrained by Origen to continue his argumentation³³ because he stooped to a “deceptive artifice” appealing to the “personage of Christ ... by comparing him side by side with the holy men” and saying that it was possible for Samuel to come up since Christ himself went down to hell.”³⁴ For St. Eustathius is clear that after Christ himself was in hell and brought there the fruits of his salvation, the power of the demons even in hell is very narrow. In conclusion “to summon souls from hell and to call the choruses of angels that wing their way around heaven at the same moment – God alone and his most divine Son have authority to do this. Absolutely no one else has this authority.”³⁵

Another question with which St. Eustathius is dealing is whether the devil is able to say the truth. Again the Bible is brought as witness. “The demons, when tortured in the presence of Christ, against their will cried out” that Christ is the Son of God and were aware of their fate (cf. Matt. 8:29).³⁶ The conclusion is that the demons might know the truth of the Bible and can express it, but in all cases they try to use the inspired word in a wrong manner or for evil purposes: “Surely, then, if he (the devil) fashions his speech from the holy scripture, he has a knowledge of what is written, even he is poorly trained. ... Therefore, the demon, by saying that had already been, did not prophesy a single thing at all.”³⁷ “Yet even if he happened to have spoken words worthy of prophecy, not even then would

³⁰ On the Belly-Myther 15, 5, p. 110-111.

³¹ On the Belly-Myther 15, 7, p. 110-111.

³² On the Belly-Myther 16, 10, p. 114-115.

³³ “What needs to be investigated is not whether it was Samuel but whether a demon had such authority as to call up the souls of the righteous from hell and send them back again.” (On the Belly-Myther 17, 2, p. 116-117).

³⁴ On the Belly-Myther 17, 3, p. 116-117.

³⁵ On the Belly-Myther 23, 6, p. 136-137.

³⁶ On the Belly-Myther 23, 6, p. 136-137.

³⁷ On the Belly-Myther 23, 8, p. 136-137.

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it be necessary to suppose that the demon brought up spirits and souls from hell."³⁸

At the end of his writing, St. Eustathius offers a summary of his research, which can deal as a conclusion:

“Therefore, if the name itself has been rightly assigned to the actual thing, the belly-myther in all likelihood fabricates a myth in her belly. For she does not speak from the natural mind in a sane fashion, but the demon lurking in her inner organs encroaches upon her and disables her thinking and, composing mythic fictions, he makes resound from her belly. Changing himself into diverse forms, he leads her soul by various hallucinations. And when he transforms himself into all sorts of different shapes, being a creature of many faces, no less does he pretend both to come up from the earth and to call out. Then in both ways, changing his ministrations at the same time as his forms, he seems to present himself coming up as someone different from the one who summons him. Yet though it is one and the same running about here and there, he changes his appearances so that he demonstrates in deeds and words that he is a liar (cf. John 8:44). Then he gives the impression that he brings up the very person of the dead, just as one is likely to suppose of such an act. Bringing up gloomy sights and sullen phantoms by sheer fabrication and presenting it all as dim and filled with the stench of death, he uses terrifying expressions to say that they have been summoned from hell and, as though freed for a short time from their prison or bonds, are going back there once again. For that very reason he astounds the soul with terrors by these sights, fabricating pale shapes with grim or sunken eyes, as if the corpses just now respiration were on the verge of expiring once more. That forger of victims customarily by pretense configures himself with terrifying features. There are times when he changes himself into multiple forms and others when he has employed demons with a character like his as his co-workers. But he summons from hell neither the souls of prophets nor the spirits of the righteous nor the ranks of angels. On the contrary, he was with the angels only to be mocked (cf. Job 41:25) and was handed over to the

³⁸ On the Belly-Myther 24, 3, p. 138-139.

best men with the results that he was trodden under foot, broken headlong on the ground. Indeed, brought down from the highest places with a violent rushing noise, that best has been laid low on his back. But only to god who rules over all and to his most divine Son does it belong to bring souls up from hell and to have the choruses of angels standing by in rank. This belongs exclusively and above all to the divine nature.”³⁹

Finally I shall mention the following aspects which are linked with the theme of this article:

- St. Eustathius states that in his time the knowledge of a demon-possessed man was considered unworthy⁴⁰;
- The devil is the “cause of all wars ... a self-appointed messenger, a witness, and a warlord slipping into the inner parts of people”⁴¹;
- The devil is named by St. Eustathius also as “multifarious serpent”⁴², “the crafty one”⁴³; possess an “immeasurable arrogance”⁴⁴ “the avenger;”⁴⁵ “a creature of many faces”.⁴⁶

Concluding remarks

1. St. Eustathius of Antioch gives great importance to clarifying certain aspects of demonology, especially those related to God’s sovereignty in the world, demonic influence over humans beings, demonic powers etc. As Rowan A. Greer rightly observes, St. Eustathius “seems more preoccupied with insisting upon God’s sovereignty at the expenses of demonic powers than with sorting out a Christian view of the life to come.”⁴⁷

2. The entire presentation brings up clearly the idea that Christians should have nothing to do with the demonic divination of belly-mythers or any other kind of witchcraft. Any kind of divination is called “instruments

³⁹ On the Belly-Myther 30, 1-6, p. 154-157.

⁴⁰ On the Belly-Myther 7,4, p. 78-79.

⁴¹ On the Belly-Myther 13, 10, p. 104-105.

⁴² On the Belly-Myther 10, 9, p. 90-91.

⁴³ On the Belly-Myther 11, 1, p. 94-95.

⁴⁴ On the Belly-Myther 16, 11, p. 114-115.

⁴⁵ On the Belly-Myther 23, 7, p. 136-137.

⁴⁶ On the Belly-Myther 30, 2, p. 156-157.

⁴⁷ Rowan A. Greer, *Some observations ...* (as footnote 5), p. XXXii.

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idolatry"⁴⁸ and is a clear break of God's commandments (cf. Leviticus 19:31⁴⁹; Deut 18:9-12)⁵⁰

3. St. Eustathius demonology is more a consequence of his exegetical research and is not dominated by conflicts with demons, exorcisms and other aspects that are central in the so-called "monastic demonology." Therefore, St. Eustathius is not accounted among the great fourth-century demonologist" as is St. Athanasius of Alexandria and Evagrius Ponticus.⁵¹ His demonology is rather intellectual and does not dominate his work *On The "Belly-Myther"* of Endor, however it is an aspect that was worthy to be researched.

4. St. Eustathius demonology could be summarized as followings: demons are a reality of the spiritual life. Human beings can be possessed by demons. There are two types of possessions: a direct one and a spiritual one. The real possession can be stopped by exorcisms conducted by "pious people." St. Eustathius gives no details about exorcisms. They are just mentioned as part of the practice he is aware of. The spiritual possession by demons damages the rationale of people and they become vulnerable to demon's influence and to sin. Demons are unable to bring up human souls from hell. However, demons possess the capacity to create appearances of human beings and to pretend that they are real. They have also the capacity to bring up other demons with an appearance of human beings. Demons are liars per definition. They try to bring people into temptation by using parts of the truth, even of the biblical truth. Their final goal is to be worshiped as God. For St. Eustathius the demon is a plagiarist of God.

5. There is no place for dualism in St. Eustathius demonology. The power of demons is nothing compared with the omnipotent power of God. According to St. Eustathius, it is in the custom of the devil "to join battle with God"⁵² but it is clear that God will punish the devil for his evil activity in the world.⁵³ After Christ's victory over hell and sin, the demon's power in the world is very limited.

⁴⁸ *On the Belly-Myther* 3, 4, p. 68-69.

⁴⁹ *On the Belly-Myther* 11, 12, p. 96-97.

⁵⁰ *On the Belly-Myther* 24, 10, p. 140-141. See also 24, 10, p. 140-141: "For it is necessary to guard altogether against the pollution of divination, as the lawgiver has decreed."

⁵¹ See David Brakke, *The Making of Monastic Demonology: Three Ascetic Teachers on Withdrawal and Resistance in Church History* 70: 1, 2001, p. 20.

⁵² *On the Belly-Myther* 10, 14, p. 92-93.

⁵³ *On the Belly-Myther* 10, 4, p. 88-89.