

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 409

Q&A 48

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Episode Summary

Dr. Heiser answers your questions:

- What is John talking about regarding a sin that leads to death and a sin that does not lead to death? [2:10]
- How does Sarah fit into the covenant of Abraham? [7:00]
- When David played an instrument to help Saul with the “evil spirit of the Lord,” would this be considered an exorcism? [12:10]
- What does the head covering on a woman have to do with authority? [19:50]
- Is the Cushite woman that Moses married Zipporah or someone else? [22:15]

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 409: Our 48th Q&A. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How are you feeling?

MH: Well, I’m feeling a little bit better today. I think people can probably hear my voice is a little better. So we’ll see how long that lasts. [laughs] But feeling a little bit better today. I’ve got my MRI coming up, so I should soon be able to issue a report. Or maybe by the time this drops I will have already done that. But hopefully we’ll get some good news.

TS: Yeah, absolutely. Everybody keep the prayers up. And we look forward to a healthy update. Alright, Mike, well, I know this isn’t a Revelation Q&A...

MH: Forty-eight.

TS: It’s just regular Q&A.

MH: It’s amazing.

TS: So how does it feel to do just regular old questions?

MH: Good. [laughs]

TS: Yeah?

MH: Back to normal, essentially.

TS: Yeah, that's good. Yeah, we're going to be doing two Q&As. And so we're one shy of our 50th Q&A. But I think you were about to say you can't believe it's almost 50.

MH: Yeah.

TS: That's a lot of...

MH: It is kind of shocking.

TS: Yeah, I wonder how many questions you've answered, not just during this Q&A, but in your lifetime. I wonder if you're approaching tens of thousands, if not 100,000.

MH: Yeah, I'm sure thousands. Thousands is going to be in the right orbit.

TS: Yeah. Well, that's good stuff. Well, let's see if we can't get some good answers from you today.

MH: Yeah.

TS: Our first question is from Curtis. And it's about 1 John 5:16-17.

2:10 **What is John talking about with a sin that leads to death and sin that doesn't lead to death?**

MH: Well, believe it or not, this question's one that I actually addressed in something I've written: my little book, *I Dare You Not to Bore Me With the Bible*. So when I saw this question, I thought, "I'm just going to read a little portion of what I wrote in that book." And I guess this is a good opportunity for me to remind readers that I have some smaller books from Lexham Press that, you know, I've tackled a lot of these things. You know, there's *I Dare You Not to Bore Me With the Bible*, and then there's one called *The Bible Unfiltered*. And they are collections of articles I wrote for *Bible Study Magazine*. And a lot of this kind of stuff is in there. I think, if memory serves me correctly, I noticed a few questions in this Q&A (or maybe it's down the road) that are addressed in either or both of those little books. So that's how I'm going to approach this one here. So "the sin unto death" is a common question. And I wrote a little piece called "Tough Love"

in *I Dare You Not to Bore Me With the Bible*. So I'm just going to read a little bit from that. I wrote:

It's a common myth that God will always bring us back to repentance. This myth is debunked in the first letter of John. While John writes that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9), he also tells us that sometimes God never gives us another chance to confess our sins and be forgiven.

In 1 John 5:16–17, the apostle gives us the other side of the sin-confession-forgiveness coin [MH: So here's where we get the passage that Curtis is wondering about, which reads in, I think this is LEB]:

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

So there's sin that leads to death, and then other sins that don't lead to death, according to these verses. So back to my little entry here, I wrote:

Put simply, there are sins that Christians commit that don't lead to death—but there are some that do. Is John talking about a divine law of cause and effect, where a specific sin irrevocably results in death? Not exactly.

We can be certain that John has no specific sin in mind because he never names a sin in this passage. John is saying there may come a time when God has had enough of our sin, and then our time on earth is up. We cannot know when such a time might come—so we shouldn't be in the habit of sinning with impunity.

John had actually seen this happen. In Acts 5:1–11, Luke relates the incident of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to Peter (and to God) about the proceeds from a piece of property they had sold. They were under no obligation to give any of it to the church, but pretended that they had given all the money to the Lord's work. When confronted by Peter, both of them collapsed and died on the spot. Luke writes that "great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things" (Acts 5:11). No kidding.

No doubt this incident left an imprint on John's mind. But John would have also known that there was Old Testament precedent for "sin unto death" as well. In Numbers 11, in response to the latest wave of complaining about their

5:00

circumstances, the LORD sent the people of Israel meat to eat in the form of quails. “While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague” (Num 11:33). John’s message to believers wasn’t: “God doesn’t judge like that today.” Rather, it was: “Stop sinning, because there is a sin that leads to death.”

Lest we think God is horrible and negative, we would do well to remember that it was John who penned “God is love”—in this same letter (1 John 4:8). As with Ananias and Sapphira, removing a sinning believer from the church was (very) tough love. But the fledgling church was all the stronger and more committed for it.

So that is how I approach “the sin that leads unto death.” And sometimes God just determines that we’re done. We’re done. And so whatever that sin was, God decides that that’s the end of the person’s life, and that their time is up. And those two things go hand in hand to form this idea of a sin unto death.

TS: Our next question is from Jessica.

7:00

How does Sarah fit into the covenant of Abraham?

MH: This is a logical question because of the fact that Sarah is a woman. Obviously, she’s not going to be circumcised. I would say there’s something to be said here because of Isaac, that when Sarah bears Isaac, he is the sign of the covenant—because he is *her* son, and she is unable to conceive and have children. So his miraculous birth, followed by his own circumcision, would have continued the covenantal line. So there’s something in regard to that that’s going on here. But I’m going to quote again from another one of these little books that I wrote (*The Bible Unfiltered* this time) just to talk a little bit about circumcision. Because there is something else going on here with respect to women and not just Sarah.

Several aspects are clear in regard to circumcision in Old Testament theology and in the historical context of biblical Israel. The Old Testament story indicates that circumcision neither provided nor ensured salvation, nor did it lessen anyone’s sinful impulse. In the Old Testament, most circumcised Israelites still turned away from God, practicing idolatry—their actions eventually prompting Yahweh to punish them with exile. The fact that Israelite men were circumcised meant nothing with respect to their spiritual inclination or destiny.

Furthermore, the Old Testament texts are clear that circumcision was not practiced on women. While some cultures and religions around the world have practiced female circumcision, Israel only circumcised males. This indicates that

the cutting rite itself did nothing with respect to an individual's ultimate spiritual destiny—if it did, women would have been excluded. Additionally, historical sources indicate that cultures other than Israel, such as Egypt, also practiced circumcision for men. This shows that the rite itself had no efficacy in regard to salvation [MH: in other words, it wasn't something mystical or spooky]. Rather, its importance was in what the rite signified in conjunction with the promises God gave to Abraham and his descendants. The actual ritual of circumcision therefore had nothing to do with salvation or expressing faith in the God of Israel.

As far as the meaning [of circumcision], I wrote this:

For all Israelites, circumcision was a physical, visible reminder of their identity as Yahweh's covenant people (Gen 17:1–14). They owed their existence both individually and corporately to a supernatural act of God on behalf of Abraham and Sarah in fulfillment of his covenant promise (Gen 17:15–21). Circumcision was a constant reminder of the supernatural grace of God.

10:00

For males, circumcision granted the recipient admission into the community of Israel—the community that had the exclusive truth of the true God. This truth included Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel and their need to have “circumcised hearts” (i.e., to believe in Yahweh's promises and worship him alone; Deut 10:16; 30:6). In ancient patriarchal Israel, women were members of the community through marriage to a circumcised man or by being born to Israelite parents. Intermarriage with foreign men (i.e., uncircumcised so not part of Yahweh's covenant community) was forbidden, a prohibition that maintained the purity of the membership (Deut 7:3–5). This purity was directly related to the spiritual significance of circumcision.

Membership in the community was important for a specific reason: only this community had the truth—the “the oracles of God,” as Paul called God's revelation to Israel (Rom 3:2). Only Israel had the truth in regard to the nature of the true God among all gods and how people could be rightly related to him (i.e., the way of salvation). Yahweh had created this human community with the goal of giving the way of salvation. This exclusivity is what is meant in Old Testament theology to be “elect” or “chosen” (Deut 7:7). Election was not equated with salvation since vast multitudes of elect Israelites were not saved due to their unfaithfulness. Every Israelite member of the exclusive community had to believe in the covenant promises and worship Yahweh. Circumcision [MH: therefore] meant access to this truth [MH: by virtue of being a member of the covenant community].

So for women, when they were married and they had sexual relations with their husbands, they would know that their husbands were circumcised and they

would know that's a sign of the covenant. And when they had male children, they would have their children circumcised. So circumcision was still a sign *to women*, even though they didn't "take the mark," as it were, on their own bodies. So in the bigger picture of things, circumcision did have meaning for everyone in Israel.

TS: Adam from Baltimore, MD, was wondering:

12:10

What does Dr. Heiser think about David playing an instrument to help Saul with the "Evil Spirit" of the Lord in 1 Samuel 16:14-23. Would this be considered an Old Testament exorcism? Is the "Evil Spirit" shedayim? How does this (if at all) correlate to Psalm 91 world view about demon protection?

MH: Well, I would say initially, the text does not call the "evil spirit" that troubled Saul *shedayim*. It doesn't name this spirit at all. So we can't fill in that gap, whether we want to or not. You know, we can't add to the Scripture there. And as far as Psalm 91 about demon protection, it really doesn't pertain to that because that psalm is about protection from evil spirits and other calamities (just general assaults), whereas 1 Samuel 16 is specifically about judgment. You know, we know who's being judged here and we know why. It has a different context.

Now as far as the meaning, I'm going to go to my *Demons* book here. So this is another question that the information is found in something that I've written. And in the *Demons* book, I have, in one part of it, this:

The divine throne room scene in 1 Kings 22:19–23 is therefore useful for considering other instances where *rûah* [MH: spirit] may point to an unembodied entity but where ambiguity exists [MH: kind of like 1 Samuel 16]. In this regard, the following passages are relevant:

Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. And God sent an evil spirit [*rûah*] between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem [MH: so there's this evil spirit between Abimelech and these other men], and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech. (Judg 9:22–23)

Again, we don't know enough to know whether that's an entity or something else. And we'll get to the "something else" in a moment. In 1 Samuel 16, again, the passage that the question actually refers to, we read this:

Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit [*rûah*] from the LORD tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, "Behold now, a harmful spirit [*rûah*] from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing

the lyre, and when the harmful spirit [*rûah*] from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well.” (1 Sam 16:14–16)

15:00

The next day a harmful spirit [*rûah*] from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand. And Saul hurled the spear, for he thought, “I will pin David to the wall.” But David evaded him twice. (1 Sam 18:10–11)

So there you actually have... That’s from 1 Samuel 18:10-11, an instance where playing on the lyre doesn’t do anything. Saul is still agitated and tries to kill David. In Isaiah 19:13–14, here’s another example:

**The princes of Zoan have become fools,
and the princes of Memphis are deluded;
those who are the cornerstones of her tribes
have made Egypt stagger.**

**The LORD has mingled within her a spirit [*rûah*] of confusion,
and they will make Egypt stagger in all its deeds,
as a drunken man staggers in his vomit. (Isa 19:13–14)**

Another one in Isaiah 37:

When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, “Say to your master, ‘Thus says the LORD: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the young men of the king of Assyria have reviled me. Behold, I will put a spirit [*rûah*] in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.’” (Isa 37:5–7)

[Back to quotation from *Demons*:]

In each of these passages, a “spirit” (*rûah*) is sent from God and that spirit affects an individual or group [MH: remember, an individual or group] in an adverse way. Are these descriptions best understood as God in some way affecting the internal state of mind of the individuals in view or dispatching an unembodied entity to affect behavior?

One could easily conclude, based on the usage of *rûah* to describe a person’s thoughts, feelings, and decisions [MH: which happens all over the place in the Old

Testament], that the latter perspective makes sense. However, in light of 1 Kings 22:19–23, which uses quite similar language to that found in these passages, it is at least possible that unembodied divine spirits in the service of Yahweh are in view.

So that's a long way of saying, it could be either. It could be either a spirit sent by God, much in the fashion of 1 Kings 22. But since "spirit" is used so frequently (the same word) in the Old Testament for our internal life (our thoughts, our emotions, our feelings, just what goes on inside our heads), it could also be that—that God does something that causes psychological troubling with Saul or any of these other groups of people—these individuals—in these passages. And so the passage itself is actually ambiguous. It could be either.

Now when you get to New Testament demons (evil spirits, the same kind of language, but now we're in Greek--we're not talking Hebrew here), there are instances where someone is troubled by an evil spirit and it is associated with a physical or psychological malady, something like epilepsy or paranoia or some other neurotic kind of thing. And in those instances, it's probably better to say that we're not dealing with a disembodied spiritual entity, but again, God casting some judgment on a person that renders them this way, for whatever judgment purpose God has in mind. But there are other passages where evil spirits are not accompanied by sort of this physical or mental/emotional language. And where the evil spirit that is troubling someone speaks (like speaks to Jesus or protests or asks not to be judged)... They have a conversation. So in that case, it's very clear that we *do* have a disembodied entity. So it could be one or the other. And the Old Testament passages just are not clear on this. But what is clear is that we don't have... If we have an exorcism here of Saul, it didn't work, because when David plays the lyre in 1 Samuel 18, that actually provoked Saul into trying to kill him. So I personally think... I lean toward Saul being judged by some physical or psychological judgment sent from God, not a specific entity. Again, there's no entity named. There's no specific exorcistic language about casting them out. And in fact, playing the lyre doesn't work in the one situation. Sometimes it does; sometimes it doesn't. And that suggests to me that what's going on with Saul is something inside of him that God has sent his way to judge him, and not specifically an evil spirit. But it very well could be. That is a possibility.

TS: Our next question is from Chris:

19:50

I listened to the Naked Bible podcast about the head covering in 1 Corinthians 11 and I want to know, if it has to do with the physiological understanding of that time, why does Paul call it a "sign of authority" in 1 Corinthians 11:10? I know you said Genesis 6 and the sin of the watchers is in view, but while I can see how it

would prevent lewdness at that time, I couldn't make the connection as to how it shows being under authority.

MH: This'll be a short answer, because I'll narrow it to the authority part. I do think Paul in this passage doesn't want a repeat of Genesis 6, and that is his concern. That's why he says, "because of the angels." And the head covering language in the Greco-Roman world (not the Jewish world)... But he's writing to the Corinthians. So in Greco-Roman medical texts, as the episode on the head covering shows with ample documentation, the head covering idea had something to do with becoming pregnant and sexual activity. As strange as that sound to us, you'll find it in the writings of people like Hippocrates (you know, the Hippocratic Oath that doctors take today). This is Greco-Roman medical thinking of the time, and it has some connection to pregnancy, the ability to conceive, fecundity, all that stuff. But as far as the authority, the authority here references the woman's husband. She is to be modest so as not to tempt other men as well (or in Paul's mind, God forbid, the angels). So by virtue of what she does in covering herself, that is a sign that she essentially belongs to someone already. And so in that respect, it's a sign of authority in the culture of the day—that the husband would have authority over his wife in all matters sexual (and of course lots of other things, too). But that's why Paul loops that in, too. It's just another aspect of what the sign would mean to the people who are seeing it.

TS: George has a question about Moses and Zipporah.

22:15

According to Numbers 12:1, it says that "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman." I'm wondering if the Cushite woman is Zipporah? And why is she a Cushite when she is supposed to be from Midian? Perhaps I missed out something when Dr. Heiser was explaining about locating Midian. Or did Moses re-marry?

MH: Well, there are two views to this. One says that the woman is Zipporah because the theory is that someone named Cush (or Kish) is in her line. Okay? That's probably not the case. Now I'm going to read something from Baruch Levine in his Numbers commentary, because this concerns Numbers 12:1:

Cush designates the Sudan (Nubia) [MH: again, if this is a geographical reference rather than a personal reference—personal name], the land south of Egypt, though Cush is sometimes identified as Ethiopia. The woman in question was most certainly not Zipporah [MH: according to Levine], who is identified as a Midianite woman. (Exod. 2:16–22) According to Exod 18:23, Zipporah had been sent home earlier, but was later brought back to join Moses by Jethro, her father. Most likely, Moses had married the Cushite woman during Zipporah's absence. (Exod. 18:2–5).

Again, that's speculative, but it is a way that you could be reading Exodus 18:2-5.

The basis of the criticism by Miriam and Aaron is not explained, and there has understandably been much speculation on this subject. The inhabitants of Cush are black, according to Jer 13:23, but race could not have been the point at issue. Perhaps there was objection to the taking of a second wife, which might have been regarded as an affront to Zipporah. Gen 31:50 gives evidence of such objection, because Laban insisted in his treaty with Jacob that the latter not take additional wives beyond Rachel and Leah, his daughters. Ancient Near Eastern marriage contracts often contained provisions that a first wife's children would be protected as heirs in the event the husband in question took a second wife during their mother's lifetime.

25:00

So that's probably a more reasonable perspective here—that we have Moses taking a second wife, and that causes the objection because of the connection to Midian, which of course is connected in some way to Sinai (without getting into all that mess, which we spent probably five weeks talking about in the Exodus series). So there could have been something maybe that smacked of a... They were wondering if this was a covenantal violation or violation of Jethro's trust or something like that. Or maybe Midianite marriage. We just don't know for sure. But of the two options, it seems more reasonable. Because Zipporah is identified as a Midianite and not a Cushite. And it's probably the case that Moses married a second time, and that was considered an affront for whatever reason by Miriam and Aaron. So again, there's a little ambiguity there, but I think the evidence leans in that direction.

TS: Alright, Mike. That's all we have. Short and sweet this week. That's good.

MH: Good.

TS: Yeah, I like these. It's a nice break [laughs] from the hour-long ones.

MH: Yeah.

TS: I'll take it. I know I'll take it, and Becky and Brenda will take it as well (for the transcripts). [laughter] Alright, Mike, well, that's it. We appreciate everybody sending in their questions and you answering our questions. And with that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.