

## **The Power of Demons in Intellectual Discourse and Social Practice**

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This paper compares Late Antique ideas about the nature of demons and their power at the levels of intellectual discourse and social practice. In the second and third centuries CE, Jewish, Christian and pagan intellectuals were producing various demonologies, part of the purpose of which appears to have been to draw lines between these ideological groups. However, on closer examination, many of their ideas about demons, their role in the cosmos and ways in which humans can secure power over them, appear to be relevantly similar. Hence, the similarities between the ideas of such thinkers as Origen, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and the writers of apocryphal literature and the Testament of Solomon are more pronounced than they would have us believe. These similarities are likewise reflected at the level of social practice where we see ordinary people strategizing to remedy various physical and mental ills. I will argue that the way in which the afflicted and their loved ones employed a variety of healing and prophylactic strategies and apparatuses reflects a general understanding of evil spirits that mirrors that found in the demonological discourses of contemporary intellectuals but fails to make reference to divisions between ideological or confessional groups. For instance, many healing amulets and curse tablets from the late Roman period adjure protective spirits and seek to bind evil ones that belong to a range of religious traditions. If we were to rely only upon the intellectual discourse of the time, we would be surprised to find that while Christian and pagan intellectuals were busy defining and maintaining the boundaries between themselves, an ordinary woman named Aurelia was using an amulet against epilepsy that invoked the Hebrew God, angels and prophets, Gnostic deities, the Christian chi-rho symbol, and Egyptian magical gibberish. Material artifacts such as medicinal amulets, healing tablets, and votive inscriptions and offerings to healing deities and saints represent concrete strategies of everyday people for dealing with their afflictions, and they are one of the only forms of evidence we have from the ancient world in which ordinary people present themselves and their concerns directly. Hence, they tell us a great deal about the way in which individuals from a variety of social classes conceived of their bodies, psyches, suffering and health. I will argue that to the end of avoiding misfortune and restoring health and well-being, everyday people in the Late Antique Mediterranean world co-opted, reinterpreted, and redirected demonological discourses arising from centers of religious power for their own purposes. In so doing, they often subverted the attempts of religious and intellectual authorities to create clear boundaries between groups and to prescribe beliefs, behaviors and practices.