

DEMONS.

A First-Century Understanding

“YOU BELIEVE THAT GOD is one; you do well. The demons also believe—and they shudder” (Jas. 2:19).¹ When James attacked faith that emphasized intellectual belief that did not result in godly works, he affirmed the reality of demons. He took for granted that his readers accepted their existence as well. What kind of understanding did first-century Christians have concerning demons and demon possession?



By Sharon H. Gritz

First-Century Beliefs About Demons

The Greco-Roman world possessed an awareness of demons and their activities. Pagans, Jews, and Christians alike accepted their existence. They differed, however, in their ideas about the nature and role of these beings.

Greek thought identified demons in numerous ways. A demon could be a god—some kind of divine being or a lesser deity. A demon could be a divine power, an unknown supernatural force, or an intermediary between humans and the gods. Some believed demons to be personal guardian spirits. A popularly-held belief was that demons represented the spirits of the dead—departed souls.² Consequently, for pagans the word “demon” embraced ideas whose meanings could overlap and even contradict each other.

Greco-Roman thinking viewed demons as either good or bad. What they did determined their nature. Society believed these demonic forces existed everywhere and continually effected people’s lives.³

The Jews of the Old Testament Era did not develop their ideas about demons primarily because they emphasized the complete sovereignty and supremacy of God. Their strict monotheism supported the conviction that all spiritual beings, both good and evil, came from and existed under the control of God. Satan could afflict Job with calamities only with God’s permission (Job 1–2). God sent the evil spirit that tormented King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14–15). God ordered the lying spirits to deceive Ahab (1 Kings 22:20–23).

Apart from the above references, the Old Testament writers seldom mentioned demonic beings. They referred directly to Satan three times (Job 1–2; 1 Chron. 21:1; Zech. 3:1–2). Moses’ song declared how God’s rebellious people “sacrificed to demons...to gods they had not known” (Deut. 32:17). According to the Greek translation, the psalmist also identified demons (*idols* in Hebrew) “with the gods of pagan idolatry” (Ps. 96:5).⁴ Centuries later the apostle Paul would also identify pagan gods as demons (1 Cor. 10:19–21).

Some Bible students believe references to hairy

or goat-like creatures in Isaiah (13:21; 34:14) reflect a pagan concept that demons possessed goats. The prophet, however, could have been referring literally to wild goats. Yet, the Greek translation of the Old Testament designated these beings as *daimonia* (demons).⁵ Demons were associated with dry, unsettled, deserted places. On the Day of Atonement, Aaron sent out a sacrificial goat “into the wilderness for Azazel” (Lev. 16:10). *Azazel* might be the name of the demon of the desert.⁶

During the time between the writing of the Old and New Testaments, Jewish literature began to focus more on the problem and origin of evil.⁷ Writers began to see evil not as coming directly from God but from supernatural beings He had created who were in rebellion against Him and His plans. These evil spiritual beings worked more independently of God than those angels who obeyed Him by performing specific tasks.

Right: A marble statue of Hades dating from the Roman period. The statue was found in Kapisuyu near Samandagi, Turkey. Hades was the god of the underworld. Here he is sitting on a throne with his dog Cerberus beside him. Cerberus, which means “demon of the pit,” was Hades’s guard dog. He allowed souls to enter the underworld, but never to leave.



Left: Stone plaque depicting the Mesopotamian demon, Pazuzu, who was king of the evil wind demons. Pazuzu was a composite

creature with a lion or dog-like face, the horns of a goat, a human torso, the front paws of a lion, a scaly lower body, a scorpion’s tail, and the talons

and wings of a bird. Pazuzu emerged from the mountains of the underworld, which are represented at the bottom of the plaque.

LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: James 2:14–26

Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphal books suggested diverse origins for demons, including fallen angels, the offspring of fallen angels and human women, or rebellious angels jealous over mankind's place in creation. The writers called the leader of these demons many names: Mastema, Satanael, Satan, Samael, Beliar, Belial, and Devil.⁸

According to Jewish texts, demons caused and transmitted disease among people. They accused individuals before God. They served as God's instruments of punishment for sin. They tempted men and women to sin. They triggered evil and worked destruction in the world.

By the Christian Era, Jews had begun to think of demons as intermediate evil beings. The Jewish belief in the sovereignty of God remained dominant in all their ideas about demons. God created these hostile beings. They were under His control. He would ultimately bind them and break their power.⁹

First-Century Beliefs About Possession

First-century pagans, Jews, and Christians believed that demons could possess individuals. This belief was widespread, as was the practice of using magic and exorcism to drive out the demons.

Greek thought associated demon possession with causing madness, sickness, and other irrational behavior. Possession also produced the drunken frenzy associated with some pagan religious practices. Some demon-possessed people functioned as "prophets" who delivered messages from the gods. Efforts to expel demons included binding the disturbed person, participating in purification rituals, reciting magical formulas, and other means of exorcism.¹⁰

In contrast, the Jews understood demon possessed individuals to be those who seemed completely under the control of an evil power. They held that some diseases resulted from demonic activity. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, wrote of demons causing frenzy, suffocation, and strangling. Philo, a first-century Jewish interpreter of Scripture, described people as ridiculing the demon-possessed.¹¹ Jews often labeled people demon-possessed if they acted differently from the standard norms of behavior, like John the Baptist (Luke 7:33).

The Jews also practiced exorcism. A popular story in Tobit, a Jewish work in the Apocrypha, tells of the expulsion of a demon from Tobias's bride. Josephus described the method of a first-century exorcist named Eleazar.¹² Jewish exorcistic formulas, such as the magical papyri, contained "traditional incantations, spells and potions for controlling demons."¹³ The New Testament mentions Jewish exorcists in general (Matt. 12:27), an unknown person who used Jesus' name (Mark 9:38-39), and the seven sons of Sceva who were itinerant exorcists (Acts 19:13-16).

Demons and the New Testament: A Brief Look

The New Testament consistently uses the word *spirits* to describe demons but always with the adjectives *unclean* or *evil*, reflecting their nature. These spiritual beings exist in

Right: Incantation bowl found at Qumran. People had superstitious beliefs about these bowls. A protective spell was written on the inside of each bowl, and it was

buried upside-down. This action had two purposes: to ward off evil spirits and to serve as a trap for any demons that came near.



Ruins from Jezreel, which was the palace city of both Omri and Ahab. Because King Ahab did not want to hear the word of the prophet Micaiah, the Lord sent a lying spirit to deceive Ahab (1 Kings 22:1-28).

Mount of Temptation in the Judean wilderness. According to tradition, this is the place where Satan tempted Jesus.



rebellion against God and with hostility toward people. Their spiritual nature enables them to enter and possess people. Demons act under Satan's direction as his servants. The New Testament views demon possession as a form of spiritual bondage.

Demon-possessed people mentioned in the Gospels and Acts showed various signs of their condition, including speechlessness, blindness, fierceness, unusual strength, convulsions, foaming at the mouth, insane ravings, self-destructive behavior, anti-social behavior (nudity), and the ability to tell fortunes (divination). The New Testament writers carefully distinguished between demon possession and illness (Mark 1:32). Demons could cause sickness and disease-like symptoms, but demon possession was different from being sick. The demons dominated the personality of the individuals they possessed.

Jesus accepted the certainty of demons and demon possession. Driving or casting out demons was a part of His ministry. He performed this by the power of God's Spirit. His contemporaries viewed Him as a successful exorcist since He consistently demonstrated His authority over demons. He declared that His exorcisms showed the defeat

of Satan. They also indicated that the kingdom of God had come.

Jesus has already defeated the demonic forces, thus limiting their power and sphere of operations. He will ultimately destroy their power and influence. Although demons and their ruler, Satan, dominate the world outside of Christ, believers belong to God in Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. "The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). No wonder the demons shudder! **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. Graham H. Twelftree, "Demon, Devil, Satan" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 164; Everett Ferguson, *Demonology of the Early Christian World*, Symposium Series, vol. 12 (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), 35-36, 58.

3. Eric Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 82. See also Twelftree, 164; and Ferguson, *Demonology*, 58.

4. Everett Ferguson, "Demons" in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 325.

5. Ferguson, *Demonology*, 73. See also R. K. Harrison, "Demon, Demonic, Demonology," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2:95-96.

6. David E. Aune, "Demonology" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 920. See Lev. 16:8 footnote in HCSB.

7. Sorensen, 59.

8. James D. G. Dunn and Graham H. Twelftree, "Demon-Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament," *Churchman* 94:3 (1980): 216; Aune, 921.

9. Dunn and Twelftree, 216.

10. Sorensen, 79-80, 91, 104, 109; Ferguson, *Demonology*, 54.

11. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (WORKS), trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 6.8.2 (p. 164); *The War of the Jews* in WORKS, 3.10.3 (p. 661); Philo, *In Flaccum* in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 6 (p. 728); Twelftree, 165.

12. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* in WORKS, 8.2.5 (p. 214).

13. Dunn and Twelftree, 211.

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