DEMONS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Juanita Feros Ruys

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Introduction

Who is the Devil? What are demons? Where did they come from, why do they exist, and why do they seem to bear so much malice towards humans?

Many cultures posit the existence of fundamental principles of good and evil, and develop narratives about the way these principles have interacted with humans and continue to do so. This book is the story of the medieval Christian approach to these questions. This approach was woven out of disparate traditions retold and reinterpreted through contexts ranging from the late antique Near East to early modern Europe. In fact, it took several centuries and a vast corpus of often polemic writings to establish the following apparently simple narrative.

There was an omnipotent God who was wholly good. This God created ranks of beings who were purely spirit, without bodies—these were angels. Since they were without bodies, angels were sexless. They were also intellective beings who were made privy to the deep truths of creation through direct revelation from God. They were created wholly good, since God the Creator could only create what was wholly good, but they were also endowed with free will, which entailed an ability to choose their actions.

At some point one of the angels, perhaps even the finest angel, decided that he was so extraordinary he had no

need to worship and obey God. Instead he would set up his own throne above that of God. He rebelled against God and drew one-third of all the angels to him. These rebellious angels were routed by the archangel Michael and flung down from Heaven, either to the pit of Hell or to a lower atmosphere. Here they lost their perfectly fine spiritual natures and took on a kind of body—not fleshly bodies like those that humans would have, but grosser bodies than they had previously. These were "aery" or "cloudy" (*caliginosus*) bodies.

The angel who had led the rebellion now became the Devil or Satan, meaning "the Adversary," and his ranks of disgraced angelic followers became demons. God had in the meantime created humans to be his special companions. Seeing this, and deprived forever of his celestial home, the Devil burned with envy. He entered the Garden of Eden and tempted Adam and Eve into rebellion against God, causing them to be ejected from Paradise and become subject to death. Humans wandering the earth now became prey to the ongoing temptations of demons, who constantly sought to turn them from God and secure them for eternal torture in Hell. In the meantime, the angels who had remained loyal to God in Heaven were confirmed in grace; some of them took on a protective ministry towards fallen humanity.

This comprises the Christian story of creation as it is most commonly known. As historians, however, it is useful to turn over this neatly woven tapestry and examine its reverse, tracing its crossed threads, knots, and loose ends to uncover how this orthodox account came to be created. It turns out to be the product of the astonishing cultural flux that constituted the Roman Empire in the Near East in the first centuries of the Common Era. It draws variously, and not always consistently, upon elements from Jewish theologies both mainstream and esoteric, early and

competing developments of Christian belief, and Graeco-Roman philosophy and theology as refracted through the lens of Alexandrian Hellenism.

The idea of a principle of evil who works in opposition to a principle of good (who is also often the creator of the universe) is an ancient one, in evidence across the Near East.[1] Yet there is surprisingly little mention of the Devil, or an evil principle as such, in the Hebrew Scriptures that would become part of the Christian Bible.[2] The tempting serpent of Genesis is only described as "the most cunning of all the animals of the earth" (Gen. 3:1) and not as a supernatural being of any sort. It was the early Christian theologians who would identify this serpent with the Devil. The tempter who is sent by God to test Job's piety is described as a "son of God" (that is, an angel), and also a "satan"—this is not a proper name, but a title indicating one who is an adversary (Job 1:6).[3] Even the famous quotation from Isaiah that supposedly gives us the name of "Lucifer" for the Devil—"how have you fallen from Heaven, Lucifer [= light-bearer or morning star], you who rose in the morning" (Is 14:12)—was intended in its own context to signify Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon.[4] It was only later reinterpreted by early Church Fathers to describe the Devil, in light of the words attributed to Jesus: "I saw Satan falling like lightning from Heaven" (Luke 10:18). Meanwhile, in the Gospels, the primary role of the Devil is again as tempter, this time of Jesus (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13; see Figure 1).

It is not until the apocalyptic Book of Revelation, written towards the end of the first century CE, that we find a canonical Christian text that adduces the Devil as an enemy in the mould of earlier mythological figures of evil. Here the Devil emerges at last in the form he would assume in the Middle Ages—powerful, malevolent, the head of an army of terrifying and monstrous beasts, the

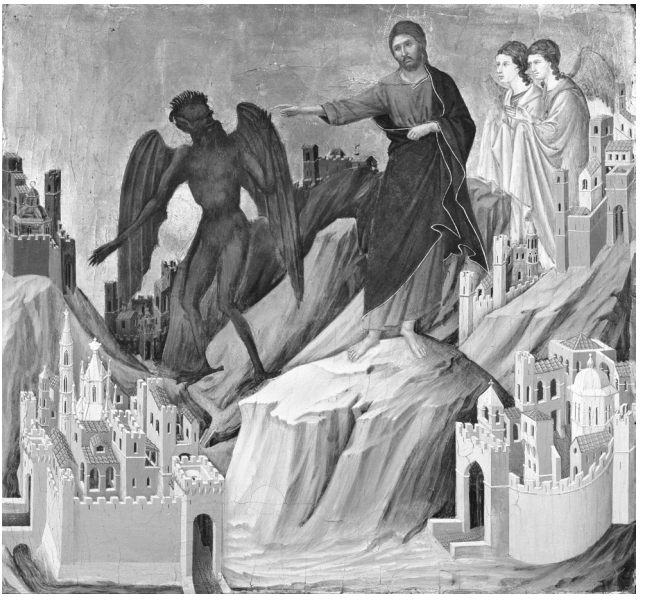

Figure 1. Duccio di Buoninsegna (ca. 1255–ca. 1319), *The Temptation of Christ on the Mountain* (1308–1311) ©The Frick Collection.

principle of evil in a battle to death and beyond with the principle of good. Here we read that as the fifth angel sounded his trumpet, a star fell from Heaven and was given the keys of the bottomless pit (Rev. 9:2). This vignette allowed medieval theologians to identify Lucifer, the brightest star in the prophecy of Isaiah, with the Devil who will incarcerate the damned in the Abyss until the Day of Judgment. When a great red dragon appears in Heaven and sweeps a third of all the stars to earth with his tail (Rev. 12:4), this would signify for medieval theologians the third of all the angels who fell in Satan's wake.[5]

The Book of Revelation then narrates that Michael and his angels fought the dragon in Heaven (Rev. 12:7) and cast him and his angels down to earth before the dragon, "that old serpent which is the Devil and Satan," was bound in chains in Hell for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1). Medieval writers, from tenth-century poets writing in Old English to Dante writing his *Inferno* in Italian in the fourteenth century, would accordingly picture the Devil as chained in Hell until the Day of Judgment.

This story narrating the downfall of the dragon and his captivity in the Abyss was by no means unique to the Book of Revelation: in the first century CE, apocalyptic literature was a widespread and popular genre, as both the Jewish and nascent Christian religions suffered persecution and violent suppression by the Roman Empire. The Revelation of John was simply one apocalyptic text out of many in circulation at that time that later came to be accepted as divine revelation and included in the Christian Scriptures. This creation of the Devil, or Satan, as a worthy and almost equal counterpart to God would, however, have serious ramifications throughout the medieval Christian period, spawning strongly entrenched dualist heresies (that is, beliefs that a principle of good that is associated with the spiritual remained in eternal conflict with a principle of evil identified with the material) that the Church would struggle to eradicate. In Late Antiquity this would manifest itself as Manicheism, while the idea of the Devil as the powerful principle who created the earth and all temporal things would recur with a vengeance in the high Middle Ages in the form of the Cathar heresy.

This gives us a broad outline of the Devil's path into Christian orthodoxy. Demons undergo a much more complex entry into the Middle Ages. They appear to derive from the Watcher Angels of ancient Jewish, and more broadly Mesopotamian, tradition. According to this tradition, angels of

a particular type descended to Earth, were attracted to human women, mated with them, and produced a race of hybrid beings. These were the giants, or alternatively the great warrior heroes of old, known as the Nephilim. God could not permit this hybrid race to exist within his perfectly ordered and hierarchized cosmos in which beings of spirit and beings of flesh were designed to be strictly segregated, and so he sent a flood (associated in the Bible with Noah) to wipe out this race. But because the Nephilim were part angel, when their human bodies were destroyed in the flood, their spirits continued to roam the earth looking for new bodies to inhabit, in the meantime willing ill against humans.[6]

This tradition is largely non-biblical, although we find traces of it there. It is most fully conveyed in the Books of Enoch, particularly a section of the first book known as the Book of Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36). This book was of uncertain status in the first two centuries of the Common Era. It was increasingly under suppression in mainstream Jewish thought but was embraced by more ascetic Jewish sects, and the rediscovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has revealed that it was influential within the Qumran community.[7] Similarly, it was accepted as canonical in early Christianity, as we know from the use made of it by the Christian apologist Justin Martyr in the second century CE[8] and the theologian Tertullian in the third century CE. Indeed, it forms the basis of Tertullian's treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins* (*De virginibus velandis*), in which Tertullian castigates women for having faces so dangerous they caused even the angels to stumble. The Book of Enoch was eventually excised from the canon in the third century, however, and thereafter largely erased from Christian memory.[9]

Yet vestiges of the Watchers story do appear in canonical biblical texts. Most significantly, Gen. 6:1–4 tells the story briefly and it is suggested there, though not made

explicit, that the existence of the unclean Nephilim is the reason for Noah's flood, the story of which immediately follows. The Watcher Angels and their lust for human women is also hinted at in a number of New Testament epistles, most notably Paul's command that women should veil their heads "on account of the angels" (1 Cor. 11:10).[10] More particularly, it would seem that the demons who possess both animal and human bodies in the New Testament from which they have to be exorcised (including by Jesus) are a cultural memory of the malign spirits of the Nephilim who desire reembodiment after their physical destruction in the flood. Interestingly, the ability of these possessing demons to prophesy the divinity of Christ in his presence (Mark 1:34; Luke 4:41) also reveals their former status as angels, since they would have inhabited Heaven with the Logos prior to his incarnation and their fall, and so would have knowledge of his identity from that time.

In addition to these complex intersections of Jewish and Christian traditions, we must also take into account the influence of the Graeco-Roman mythology and philosophy that was a fundamental part of the Roman Empire. The idea of battles in Heaven that resulted in the defeated party being flung down appears in a number of pagan mythological traditions. One well-known example is the rebellion of the Olympian gods, led by Zeus, against the older Titans, headed by his father Kronos, in which the Titans were defeated and incarcerated in Tartarus, the lowest realm of Hades. It has been suggested that this Greek myth was well known to Jewish writers of Scriptures and that vestiges of it appear in the New Testament epistles that describe the incarceration of the fallen angels in Hell until the Day of Judgment.[11]

Nor should we underestimate the role of Greek philosophy in the Christian construction of the demon. Indeed, the term "demon" itself comes from the Greek *daimon*

(via the Latin *daemon*), which signified a spirit who mediated between humans and gods. Christian thinkers were greatly influenced by Plato's thought regarding *daimones*, especially as this was transmitted in the treatise *On the god of Socrates* (*De deo Socratis*) written by Apuleius in the second century CE.[12] This treatise proved so influential that the Christian theologian Augustine would eventually have to include a refutation of Apuleius's claims regarding *daimones* in his massive Christian treatise *The City of God* (discussed in chapter 1). Drawing on Plato's *Symposium*, Apuleius argued that because the natures of gods and humans were so utterly distinct, there could be no contact between them, necessitating the intervention of spirit messengers. These messengers had bodies of intermediate substance that were neither ethereal like the gods' nor terrestrial like humans', but were instead "cloudy"—the term that would also be attributed to the bodies of Christian demons. In common with the gods, *daimones* were immortal, but like humans they were subject to passions (that is, emotions) such as anger and pity. Apuleius situated the *daimones* in the air "between the highest ether and the earth below", and after they came to be associated with Christian demons, this would be recognized as (one of) the regions where demons resided. The disjunction between the Christian teachings in the Book of Revelation of the Devil and the demons being chained in Hell until the Day of Judgment, and at the same time freely occupying the upper airs in the manner of Hellenistic *daimones*, remained often unacknowledged in Christian theology.

In pagan thought the *daimones* fulfilled a number of functions, not all of which would find a place in their Christianized manifestation. The idea of the special guardian or advisory *daimon*, such as Socrates claimed to have, would find its Christian form in the personal guardian angel of the patristic era and Middle Ages.[13] Similarly, the role of

daimones in providing revelations of future events and performing magic would find expression in the belief in the magical powers of demons in the later Middle Ages. Christian theology utterly repudiated, however, the Platonic idea that the souls of the dead could become either good or bad *daimones*, depending on the kind of life the person had led. Christian theology always recognized human souls, whether embodied or separated, as spiritual substances distinct from angels and demons. Moreover, while pagan *daimones* could be either well-intentioned (*eudaimones*) or ill-intentioned (*cacodaimones*), Christian doctrine asserted the fundamental and incontrovertible evil of demons.

The Greek concept of the *daimon* was filtered through Jewish thought by Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenized Jewish scholar who wrote in the first decades after Christ. Philo synthesized Jewish theology and history with various Graeco-Roman schools of philosophy, and his writings heavily influenced early Christian thinkers such as Origen and Eusebius. In his treatise *On the Giants*, Philo equated pagan *daimones* with Jewish angels and situated them in one of the heavens above the earth where they functioned as intermediaries between humans and God. Origen completed the Christian naturalization of the *daimon* by describing the Devil as the chief *daimon* in charge of all the others.[14]

Having entered the Christian imaginary in the first centuries of the Common Era in these ways, the Devil and his demons did not, however, remain static in terms of their representation over the next thousand years from Late Antiquity to the early modern period. On the contrary, as we will see in the coming chapters, conceptions of the Devil and demons changed markedly in this time. Understandings of what demons were and how they could behave varied widely according to the cultural context in which they

were believed to interact with humans, and we will examine in subsequent chapters the worlds of desert eremitism, the cloisters of Western monasticism, the universities of the high Middle Ages, and the secular world of medieval magic. In the high Middle Ages, developing intellectual traditions, including the reintroduction of Aristotelian philosophy, along with the growing significance of Jewish and Islamic scientific thought in the West, also profoundly impacted the way the Christian demonic was theorized.

This might seem surprising if we think of the Christian Middle Ages as a time of monolithic orthodoxy in which ideas—particularly of something so fundamental as the nature of evil—were immovably fixed. We need to remember, however, that it took several centuries for Christian communities just to reach agreement as to what constituted the canonical texts of their Scriptures. Looking closer, we find that Christian orthodoxy in the medieval period was under constant threat and hence continual negotiation and construction, with doctrines often developed and rendered explicit only in reaction to new lines of thought sweeping communities. Key pressure points in relation to orthodoxy at this time were the Trinity, including the nature and role of Christ and the Holy Spirit; after these the most significant actor in the anxiety over orthodoxy and heresy was the Devil.

Notes

[1] Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[2] Archie T. Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits: The Reception of Genesis 6:1–4 in Early Jewish Literature*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 1–3.

[3] Forsyth, "The Satan of the Old Testament," in *The Old Enemy*, chap. 5, pp. 107–23.

[4] Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 130–32; T. J. Wray and Geoffrey Mobley, *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 108–12.

[5] An alternative tradition that remained current throughout the Middle Ages was that one-tenth of the angels fell and that elect humans would replace the lost tenth order of angels.

[6] *The Fall of the Angels*, ed. Christoph Auffarth and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *The Watchers in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Angela Kim Harkins, Kelley Coblentz Bautch, and John C. Endres (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); and Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits*.

[7] Wright, "Reception of the Watcher Tradition in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Origin of Evil Spirits*, chap. 6, pp. 169–93.

[8] Randall D. Chesnutt, "The Descent of the Watchers and its Aftermath According to Justin Martyr," in *The Watchers in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, pp. 167–80.

[9] Reed, "Demonology and the Construction of Christian Identity: Approaches to Illicit Angelic Instruction among Proto-Orthodox Christians," in *Fallen Angels*, chap. 5, pp. 160–89, and "The Interpenetration of Jewish and Christian Traditions: The Exegesis of Genesis and the Marginalization of Enochic Literature," in *Fallen Angels*, chap. 6, pp. 190–232; and Dyan Elliott, "Tertullian, the Angelic Life, and the Bride of Christ," in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz, pp. 16–33 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[10] Scott M. Lewis, "'Because of the Angels': Paul and the Enochic Traditions," in *The Watchers in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, pp. 81–90.

[11] Jan N. Bremmer, "Remember the Titans!," in *The Fall of the Angels*, pp. 35–61 at 58–59.

[12] An English translation by Christopher P. Jones will be published alongside the Latin text in the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press) in June 2017.

[13] Ellen Muehlberger, "Angels as Equipment for Living: The Companion Angel Tradition in Evagrian Christianity," in *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 3, pp. 89–118.

[14] Wright, "Philo of Alexandria: Interpreting Genesis 6.1–4," in *The Origin of Evil Spirits*, chap. 7, pp. 194–222.