

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 33: Demons

In this lesson we will explore the fascinating and controversial topic of demons. Demons have long been an interest of many people, from those in churches reading the Bible stories of Jesus casting out demons, to Hollywood producers making movies about exorcisms and demon possession. Demons have been the focus of a lot of spiritual warfare teaching in the church, that seeks to discern, expose, and rid people, churches, and cities of demons. So in this lesson we will explore the interesting and complex teaching of demons in the Bible and throughout history.

Definition of Demons

Demons can be defined as spiritual or supernatural beings who bring an evil influence over people and oppose God's purposes. They are often associated with deception, opposition, oppression, and possession of people.

We get the English word 'demon' from the Greek word 'daimon'. There is no such word as 'demon' in ancient Hebrew. Thus, the Israelites would not have known what a 'demon' was. However, there are other words used in ancient Hebrew (and the whole Bible) that describe evil supernatural entities.

Such as:

- **Evil Spirit** (ruach ra'ah) - A harmful or distressing spirit, often associated with causing psychological or physical torment. Example: 1 Samuel 16:14 (the spirit that tormented Saul).
- **Lying Spirit** - A spirit that influences individuals toward deception. Example: 1 Kings 22:22-23 (the lying spirit that influenced Ahab's prophets).
- **Destroying Angel** - An angelic being or agent of destruction used by God to carry out judgments (Psalm 78:49, 2 Samuel 24:16)
- **Unclean Spirit** - This term is frequently used in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels, to describe spirits that possess and oppress people (Mark 1:23-26; Luke 4:33-36).
- **Shedim** (*shedim*, שְׁדִיִּם) - A term referring to lesser spiritual beings or "demons" associated with foreign gods or idolatry. (Deuteronomy 32:17, Psalm 106:37)
- **Familiar Spirit** - In the Old Testament, familiar spirits are often associated with necromancy or divination, suggesting a type of spirit that "familiarizes" or communicates with humans, often deceitfully (Leviticus 19:31; 1 Samuel 28:7-8).
- **Seducing Spirit** - Mentioned in the New Testament as a type of spirit that leads people astray from the truth, often through deceit or false teachings (1 Timothy 4:1).
- **Spirit of Divination** - Refers to a spirit associated with fortune-telling or sorcery; it was attributed to the girl in Philippi who had a "spirit of divination" (Acts 16:16).
- **Spirit of Antichrist** - Used in the New Testament to refer to a spirit that opposes Christ and denies His nature and work (1 John 4:3).
- **Spirit of Error** - Refers to spirits that lead people into false beliefs or away from the truth (1 John 4:6).
- **Principalities, Powers, Rulers of Darkness, Spiritual Hosts of Wickedness** - Terms found in Ephesians 6:12, describing various hierarchies or categories of evil spirits in the spiritual realm.
- **False Gods** (Deut. 32:16-17) - Pagan gods that the neighboring nations of Israel worshipped and sacrificed to. This is seen in gods like Baal and Molech, as well as the gods of Egypt.

Function of Demons

Demons and evil spirits are seen as inflicting much harm upon people within scripture through various ways of oppression and possession. While the Bible is explicit on the actions of demons and the effects of demons, we must use caution and discernment and not be too quick to 'find a demon under every rock'.

- Associated with idolatry and false worship (Deut. 32:17, 1 Cor. 10:20-21)
- Oppress people by through suffering and harm by physical and mental afflictions (Mk 5:1-5, Lk 13:10-17)
 - Such as: Mental Disease (Mk. 5, 4-5), Muteness (Mt. 9:33), Physical Deformity (Lk. 13:11), Blindness (Mt. 12:22)
- Brings profound and intense oppression and control by possessing people (Mark 5:15, 6:13, 9:17-26)
- Influence people through deception and false teaching (1 Timothy 4:1)
- Inciting Sin and Temptation (Eph. 6:12, Matthew 4:1-11)
- Opposing and attacking God's people through spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:8-10)
- Opposing God's plans and mission (1 Thess. 2:18)

The Origin of Demons

While we are not told explicitly about the origin of demons, many Christians hold to the view that demons are fallen angels that rebelled against God and fell with Lucifer.

Revelation 12:3-4a *Then another sign appeared in heaven: a huge red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven royal crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars from the sky, tossing them to the earth.*

Revelation 12:7-9 *And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, ⁸And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. ⁹And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceives the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.*

Matthew 25:41 *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*

As we will see, the Book of Enoch greatly influenced early Jewish and Christian thought on fallen angels. It describes how a group of angels, called the Watchers, descended to earth, took human wives, and fathered the 'Nephilim'.

The *Book of Enoch* suggests that after the Nephilim died, their spirits became disembodied and continued to roam the earth as evil spirits, which we might equate with demons. Some New Testament writings, such as Jude and 2 Peter, seem to reference or allude to these concepts from the Enoch literature.

Demons in the Old Testament

The Old Testament contains almost no direct references to demons, individual demonic activity, or supernatural evil entities as they are presented in the New Testament. However, there is still a framework within the Old Testament for understanding malevolent supernatural forces, though described differently than in New Testament texts.

1. Gods and "False Gods" in the Old Testament: In the worldview of ancient Israel, other nations worshiped "gods" who were often believed to be real spiritual entities, although vastly inferior to Yahweh. **Deuteronomy 32:17** and **Psalms 106:36-39** describes how the Israelites sacrificed to "demons" (*shedim*, שְׂדִיִּים) through idolatry, which implies that idols were not merely lifeless objects but could be connected to spiritual entities. 'Seirim' or 'goat demons' were associated with desolate places and idol worship (Lev. 17:7, Isaiah, 13:21).

2. Malevolent Spiritual Forces in Nature and National Enemies: In ancient Israelite thought, some malevolent entities were associated with chaotic forces in nature, like the **Leviathan** and **Rahab** (e.g., **Psalms 74:14, Isaiah 51:9**). These mythological creatures symbolized evil or destructive powers that God subdued or used as symbols of His authority over chaos.

3. Sorcerers: In the Old Testament, sorcerers are individuals who practice occult arts, often involving spells, charms, and magical rituals that seek to manipulate spiritual forces or bring harm. Sorcery was prevalent in neighboring pagan cultures. Key passages, such as **Exodus 22:18** ("You shall not permit a sorceress to live") and **Deuteronomy 18:10-12**, label sorcery as an abomination.

4. Divination and Familiar Spirits: These were strictly forbidden practices associated with seeking hidden knowledge or supernatural guidance apart from God. Divination—attempting to predict the future or uncover secrets through supernatural means—is condemned as a form of unfaithfulness to God (e.g., **Deuteronomy 18:10-12, Leviticus 19:26**). Familiar spirits, associated with necromancy or spirit mediums, involve summoning the dead or consulting spirits for insight, as in the case of the medium at Endor in **1 Samuel 28**. These practices were common in surrounding pagan cultures but were viewed by Israel as spiritually dangerous, corrupting, and detestable to God because they implied reliance on unclean or deceptive spiritual forces rather than on God’s guidance and revelation.

5. Use of Terms like “Evil Spirit” and “Lying Spirit”: Terms like “evil spirit” or “distressing spirit” are used to describe spiritual agents that cause harm or distress as part of God’s judgment or discipline, as seen with Saul in **1 Samuel 16:14-16**. These spirits are often understood as agents that bring chaos or psychological turmoil rather than outright possession. The “lying spirit” in **1 Kings 22:22-23** suggests that deceptive spirits can act as instruments of divine judgment. This differs from New Testament views of demonic possession but highlights an Old Testament understanding of spirits that can influence people toward their own destruction.

6. Limited Role of Satan as an Adversary: Satan is seen as an “Accuser” in Job and Zechariah: In the Old Testament, Satan appears as a limited figure who functions as an accuser in the divine council rather than a free-roaming adversary (e.g., **Job 1-2, Zechariah 3:1-2**). His role is not to possess or torment humans directly but to challenge their faithfulness to God. The Old Testament doesn’t connect Satan to demons as in the New Testament. His role is more judicial and less focused on spreading evil directly among humans.

Demons in Greek Culture and Second Temple Judaism

Demons in Ancient Greek Culture

As far as the development of the term and idea of ‘demon’, in ancient Greek culture, the word ‘*daimōn*’ had a complex and often neutral meaning. The Greeks used the term for a wide range of spiritual entities that inhabited an intermediary realm between gods and humans. These influences were often for good and not inherently evil, as later presented in the New Testament. They were seen as ‘messengers from the gods’ and had a role in the natural order of life and linked to destiny and fate.

Greek philosophers like Socrates and Plato described ‘daimons’ as divine guides that directed one in life. Hellenistic philosophers developed the concept of the daimon as a personal spirit or guardian for each person. These could even be the spirits of deceased ancestors looking after their descendants. However, some ‘daimons’ were thought to bring misfortune or sickness, and ancient Greeks often performed rituals or sacrifices to appease them.

Demons in Second Temple Judaism

Jews in the Second Temple period began to reinterpret ‘*daimons*’ in light of their own monotheistic worldview, increasingly associating them with rebellious or harmful spiritual forces opposed to God. Jewish writings from the Second Temple period developed a dualistic worldview in which evil spirits and demons opposed God’s purposes. These writings depict spirits as fallen angels or as spirits of the Nephilim (offspring of angels and humans), interpreting them as disruptive to divine order.

In Second Temple literature, Satan becomes more of an embodiment of evil, opposition to God, and a leader of rebellious angels as opposed to how Satan is presented in the Old Testament. The *Book of Enoch* and other texts, like *2 Maccabees* and *Testament of Solomon*, portray Satan not just as a prosecutor but as a ruler of fallen angels and a tempter of humanity, thus broadening the conception of Satan as a more active and malevolent force. Other ‘demon’ names we find in Scripture and Second temple literature are: Lilith, Asmodeus, Azazel, Baphomet, and Beelzebub.

Demons and the Book of Enoch

The Book of Enoch was one of the most popular Jewish writings in the final two centuries BC and had a profound impact on the view of demons in Judaism and early Christianity. According to 1 Enoch, a group of 200 angels, called the Watchers, descended to Earth and took human wives, producing the Nephilim—giant, violent beings who wrought havoc. When the Nephilim died, their spirits could not ascend to heaven nor find peace on earth, so they became wandering, restless spirits.

These spirits, referred to as demons, were believed to instigate evil, possess people, and lead them into sin. The Book explains that these demons are malicious spirits that bring about mischief, illness, and moral corruption on Earth, acting against God's purposes.

The Book of Enoch provides information about the origins of demons and Nephilim, explains why some angels fell from heaven (their lust for human women), offers an explanation for why the Genesis flood was morally necessary (to rid the world of the Nephilim), and the book also includes depictions of a messianic figure, the Son of Man, who will bring judgment, restoration, and salvation to God's people and who has authority over the fallen Watchers.

Demons in the New Testament

In the New Testament, '*daimon*' takes on a fully negative connotation. Instead of being intermediaries or neutral forces, demons are depicted as entirely malevolent beings, subject to Satan and hostile to God and humanity. This shift marked a stark departure from the ancient Greek view and became central to Christian demonology, where *daimones* were uniformly seen as evil spirits needing to be resisted or exorcised.

So therefore, the New Testament provides extensive teachings about demons, their nature, their influence on individuals and communities, and their ultimate defeat in the coming kingdom of God. The increase in demonic emphasis in the New Testament is an outgrowth of the Messianic expectations of Jews that their Messiah would exercise power over all the forces of Spiritual darkness, showing his ultimate authority. It's not that there were no demonic forces before, but now they are exposed and overcome by the power of Christ.

1. The Existence and Nature of Demons: Demons are described as spiritual entities that possess real power, but their power is always subordinate to God. They are often described as unclean spirits or evil spirits.

- **Matthew 12:43-45:** Jesus speaks of unclean spirits that go out of a person and wander through dry places seeking rest. If they return and find the person "unoccupied," they bring seven other spirits more wicked than themselves.
- **Mark 1:23-26:** Demons are described as recognizing Jesus' divine authority, often acknowledging Him as the Holy One of God (Mark 1:24).
- **Demons and Possession:** Demons can possess individuals, causing physical or mental afflictions. Possession is a major theme in the Gospels, where Jesus often casts out demons.
 - **Matthew 9:32-34:** Jesus heals a mute man who was demon-possessed.
 - **Luke 8:2:** Jesus heals Mary Magdalene, whom He had cast seven demons out of.

2. The Authority of Jesus Over Demons: One of the central themes in the New Testament is that Jesus has complete authority over demons. His ability to cast them out is one of the ways He demonstrates the arrival of God's kingdom.

- **Matthew 8:28-34:** Jesus casts out demons from two men in the region of the Gadarenes. The demons acknowledge His power and beg Him not to torment them before the appointed time.
- **Mark 5:1-20:** The story of the demon-possessed man in the tombs (Legion) reveals that even a great number of demons cannot resist Jesus' command. He sends them into a herd of pigs, which then drown in the lake.
- **The Significance of Exorcisms:** Jesus' exorcisms are not just acts of mercy but signs of the in-breaking of God's kingdom. They signal the defeat of Satan's power and the restoration of God's dominion over creation.
 - **Matthew 12:28:** Jesus says, "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you," showing that His exorcisms are evidence of the presence of God's kingdom.

3. The Role of Demons in Temptation and Opposition: In addition to their work of possession and oppression, demons also work to tempt and deceive individuals, leading them into sin and opposition to God's purposes.

- **Matthew 4:1-11:** Satan, acting as the chief of demons, tempts Jesus in the wilderness. Although the demonic forces are strong, Jesus resists them by quoting Scripture and relying on God's truth.
- **1 Timothy 4:1:** Paul warns that "the Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons," indicating that demons can influence people to depart from the truth.
- **Demons as Opponents of the Gospel:** Demons work to hinder the spread of the gospel and to oppose the work of God in the lives of believers.
 - **Acts 16:16-18:** Paul casts out a spirit of divination from a slave girl who had been following them, proclaiming, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." Though the demon spoke truth, it was still a deceptive spirit used to hinder the gospel's spread.

4. The Final Defeat of Demons: The New Testament teaches that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection represent the ultimate victory over Satan and his demons. Though demons still have influence in the world, their power has been decisively broken by Jesus.

- **Colossians 2:15:** "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." This refers to Jesus' victory over demonic forces through His crucifixion, effectively defeating their rule.
- **Hebrews 2:14:** "Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil." Jesus' death breaks Satan's power over death and sin, offering salvation to all.
- **The Final Judgment of Demons:** Demons are ultimately destined for judgment. The New Testament reveals that they will be cast into the "eternal fire" prepared for them.
 - **Matthew 25:41:** "Then He will say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" Demons are subject to eternal punishment alongside Satan.

5. The Believer's Authority Over Demons: The New Testament teaches that, as followers of Christ, believers have been given authority over demonic forces. Jesus' authority is passed on to His followers to continue His work.

- **Mark 16:17:** "And these signs will accompany those who believe: In My name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues." Believers are empowered to cast out demons as part of their witness to the kingdom of God.
- **Luke 10:19:** Jesus says, "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." This refers to the authority given to His disciples over demonic forces.
- **Resisting Demons:** Believers are called to resist demonic influences through submission to God and faith in Christ.
 - **James 4:7:** "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." Demons can be resisted by standing firm in faith and relying on God's power.
 - **Ephesians 6:10-18:** Paul speaks of the "armor of God" that believers are to put on in order to stand against the schemes of the devil, indicating that spiritual warfare is an ongoing battle for the believer.