



# Of Demons *and The* Devil

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

## BY MARK R. DUNN

**"FACE YOUR DEMONS"** says popular advice, but such salty wisdom severely disregards humanity's pest-ridden history with demons and the devil. For millennia, people struggled to understand the diverse supernatural powers teeming at seemingly every juncture of human life. Despite the religious cults that erected temples and shrines to numerous gods and goddesses, the ancients never found a satisfactory approach to deal with the relentless demons that mercilessly harassed people. Such was life until Jesus arrived. Now the demons implored Him not to send them to their final destiny (Luke 8:31).

### Ancient Understandings

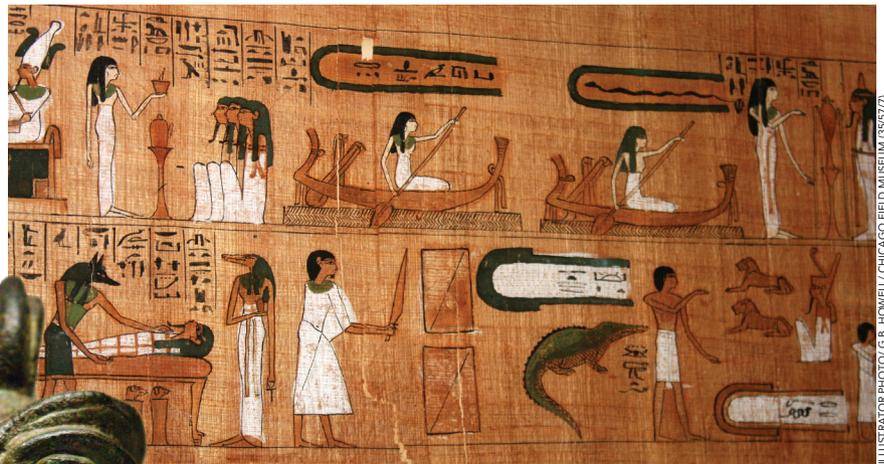
Long ago, dealing with demons was like handling lice, flies, or gnats: get rid of one and seemingly more arrive. Shrines and temples did not help. Ancient religion was useless against the frustrating, daily incursions from an ever-encroaching spirit world. To get relief, one was taught to honor countless traditions: do not stay overnight in a house of study; do not sit under a drain-pipe; do not crush a louse on your garment; do not drink water at night.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, ancient peoples understood demons to be intermediary spirits occupying the undefined realms between the gods and humanity.<sup>2</sup> Some regarded demons as spirits of the dead that intervened in human affairs. Later, philosophers upgraded them to the sphere of the divine: "lower than

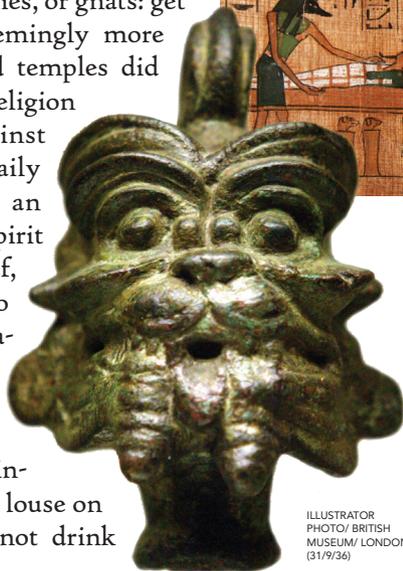
**Right: Dating to the 3rd cent. BC and carved from the mountain rock overlooking Antioch, a colossal depiction of the head of Charon. The figure was carved in an attempt to save Antioch from a plague afflicting persons in the area. Charon was the ferryman who took the dead across the River Styx.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS (5/15/11)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ CHICAGO FIELD MUSEUM (3/5/77)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/9/36)

**Left: Bronze amulet depicting an Assyrian demon, Pazuzu, who was known as the "king of the evil Liludemons," the company of devastating desert winds, and the terrifying spirit of the unburied dead. Assyrians believed an image of Pazuzu**

**attached to a place near a sick person frightened away the spirit imagined to be attacking the body; dated about 800–500 BC.**

**Above: Scene from the Egyptian Book of the Dead shows bottom left, Anubis, the god of mortuary, tending**

**to a body. Early in Egypt's history, spells and passwords were carved into tomb walls or on coffins. Papyrus copies of the Book of the Dead made spells and passwords available to commoners, who buried them with deceased loved ones.**

the gods but higher than men."<sup>3</sup> In early usage, the Greek words "daimonion" and "diamon,"<sup>4</sup> from which the English word "demon" derives, meant "divine being" and referred to the lower divines while *theos* referred to the higher divines.<sup>5</sup> Many ancient peoples did not associate all the demonic with

evil. They thought some demons did good, while others brought evil upon humanity.<sup>6</sup>

Mesopotamia, by far, struggled the most to understand the demonic. They clearly associated evil with demonic entities and believed demons won power over humans when people violated

religious values and prohibitions. Mesopotamians eventually characterized violations as “sins,” actions that exposed people to demonic curses and possession.<sup>7</sup> In time, people blamed demons for all kinds of misfortunes—from being sick to losing important items.<sup>8</sup>

Horrorified, Mesopotamians viewed their world as becoming saturated by evil spirits that supposedly worked mischief among defenseless humans. They thought demons assumed animal forms and preferred uninhabited locations: deserts, mountains, ruins, and burial places.<sup>9</sup> People even associated demons with air, believing these unseen entities could arrive on strange winds from faraway lands.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless demons turned up everywhere: in homes, foodstuffs, and water containers.<sup>11</sup> People eventually blamed demons for all adversities, especially personal sickness and widespread disease.<sup>12</sup> In their paranoia, Mesopotamians named their demons, hoping magic could neutralize the mayhem these unseen beings created.<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere, Egyptians assigned natural phenomena like storms and floods to the gods but were terrified of the disembodied spirits of the dead who supposedly devised a range of evil deeds against humans. Rattled, Egyptians fumigated the inward spaces of their temples and homes to chase away lingering spirits.<sup>14</sup>

Like the Egyptians, eventually all peoples realized that institutional religion had no effect on demonic activity. Expedient measures were needed. Thus talismans, amulets, spells, incantations, and exorcisms became a common albeit supposedly essential part of life.<sup>15</sup> A sample spell survives from Mesopotamia:

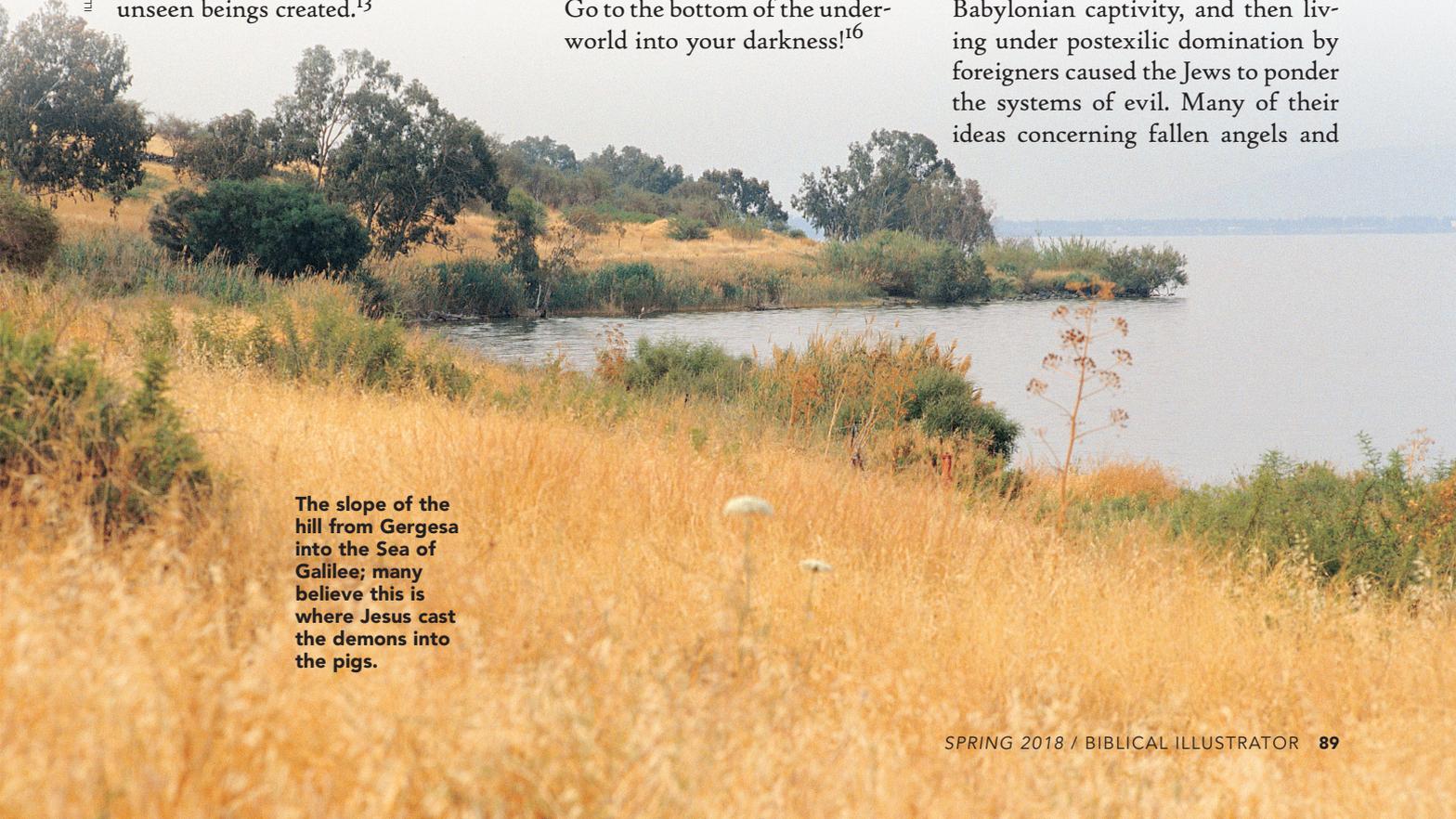
You shall not repetitiously stay around (the person) in outer corners!  
You shall not repeatedly sit (next) to him in inner corners!  
You shall not incessantly whirl around him in the city!  
You shall not recurringly circulate along the [river] bank!  
Go to the bottom of the underworld into your darkness!<sup>16</sup>

## Old Testament Era

Remarkably, the Old Testament gives little attention to demonic activity. Twice it renders the Hebrew word *shedim* as “demons” (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37). Otherwise people either assigned supernatural phenomena to God or described them in ways that did not convey inherent demonism.<sup>17</sup> Though evil phenomena went under explained, the Israelites did not experience the terrible sense of being occupied by demon hordes in the same way the Mesopotamians had interpreted their experiences.

The Old Testament does affirm, though, the presence of a being that is evil personified. This was the serpent that tempted Eve in the garden. This being, Satan, brought accusation against Job (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7); stood before the Angel of God, ready to accuse Joshua the high priest (Zech. 3:1); and incited David to conduct a census (1 Chron. 21:1).

Having survived the horrendous experience of being forced from their homeland, being put into Babylonian captivity, and then living under postexilic domination by foreigners caused the Jews to ponder the systems of evil. Many of their ideas concerning fallen angels and



The slope of the hill from Gergesa into the Sea of Galilee; many believe this is where Jesus cast the demons into the pigs.



**Left: From the Mycenaean citadel. Fragment of a wall painting depicting demons in an apparent hunting scene; 13th cent. BC. Three demons walk, holding a pole from which they would hang their prey.**

**Below: Terra-cotta plaque from Mesopotamia dated to the 1st half of the 2nd millennium BC. The scene depicts the death of the demon Humbaba, who was surnamed "the Terrible."**



their leader, the prince of darkness, solidified during these experiences and afterward. "During the intertestamental period most people, including the Jews, ... believed that the world was full of supernatural agencies working for good or ill."<sup>19</sup> Angels did good and demons, evil. Satan, who had Old Testament cameo appearances, led the demons.

### New Testament Era

By the first century, both Jews and Gentiles had developed a greater understanding of demons. The New Testament thus depicts demons as being both powerful and pervasive. Demons appeared shortly after Jesus' wilderness temptation (Matt. 4:24). The New Testament depicts demons tormenting humans and harassing the progress of God's kingdom. They moved in swarms, lived among the dead, and invaded people's lives. They caused disease and inflicted untold misery upon defenseless people.

Christ the Deliverer, though, arrived. To Him demons would powerlessly yield. Jesus talked about entering the strong man's house, binding him, and taking his property (Mark 3:27, NASB), a reference

to His coming into the kingdom of the Devil and delivering those in darkness. Thus from Mary Magdalene He cast out seven demons (Luke 8:2).<sup>20</sup> Many times demons recognized Jesus; they knew He came to conquer them (Matt. 8:29; Mark 1:24). Additionally, He gave His disciples power to "tread upon serpents and scorpions" (Luke 10:19, NASB), referring to demons. Indeed throughout His ministry, Jesus showed that His authority is greater than the sum of all demonic power.

Since the first century, people have had a fascination with demons and the devil. Such interest, though, can be dangerous.<sup>20</sup> Christians need not give their attention to the evil one. We can have assurance that Jesus still gives His followers victory over "the father of lies" (John 8:44, NASB) and "the rulers of the darkness of this world" (Eph. 6:12, KJV). ❖

1. Naomi Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2001), 27. Edward Langdon, *Essentials of Demonology* (London: Epworth, 1949), 23.
2. Everett Ferguson, *Demonology of the Early Christian World* (New York: Edwin Mellon, 1984), 35.
3. Eamonn O'Doherty and A. van den Bom, "Demon" in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 546.
4. *Daimonion* is the common New Testament Greek word for "demon," occurring 63 times. *Daimon* is the common Classical Greek word for "demon" but occurs only once in the New Testament, Matt. 8:31. David E. Aune, "Demon; Demonology" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, rev. ed., vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 919.
5. Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), 163. "δαίμωνιον" (*daimonion*; deity, demon) and "δαίμων" (*daimon*, demon) in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 169.
6. Charles Yeboah, "Demon" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed.-in-chief David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 337.
7. Gerald Messadié, *A History of the Devil*, trans. Mare Romano (New York: Kodansha International, 1996), 103-104.
8. Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, 27.
9. Langdon, *Essentials of Demonology*, 21.
10. Anne Marie Kitz, "Demons in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East" in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016): 457.
11. Langdon, *Essentials of Demonology*, 23.
12. *Ibid.*, 22.
13. R. K. Harrison, "Demon" in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 2:96-97.
14. *Ibid.*, 2:98.
15. *Ibid.*, 2:96.
16. Kitz, "Demons in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East," 457.
17. Harrison, "Demon," 2:98.
18. Aune, "Demonology," 920-21.
19. Harrison, "Demon," 2:102.
20. Greg J. Riley, "Demon" in *Dictionary and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (New York: E. J. Brill, 1995), 445-56.

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