

How Jewish mythology helps us understand the New Testament



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Jewish myths

Titus 1:14

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1 Timothy 1:3–7

... command certain persons not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith... They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

Outline

- 1 **Some simple examples**
- 2 Demons
- 3 Beelzebul
- 4 Belial
- 5 Satan as an angel of light
- 6 Angels that sinned
- 7 Rich man and Lazarus
- 8 Some conclusions

Some simple examples

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- Also mentioned in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*.

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- **1 Corinthians 10:4.** Based on well-known rabbinic legend — Targum of Onkelos describes a well which followed them in the wilderness.
- **2 Timothy 3:8.** Based on Midrash Tanchuma (Parshat Ki Tisa) — “Forty thousand people had assembled to leave Egypt with the Israelites, and among them were two Egyptians named Jannes and Jambres, who had performed magical feats for Pharaoh.”
- Also mentioned in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*.
- Origen says that Paul is quoting *The Book of Jannes and Jambres*.

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Mark 5:1–20

- 1 What words are used to describe this man's problem?
- 2 What did his neighbours believe his problem to be?
- 3 If this man were admitted to a psychiatric hospital today, what would his diagnosis be?
- 4 What did Jesus believe the man's problems to be?

Cp. *Matthew 9:32–33; 12:22; 17:15–18.*

Jewish belief in the first century

Greek mythology:

- Plato (c400BC) taught that demons were souls of dead heroes who served as messengers for gods.
- Plutarch (c.80AD) described demons as “servants of the gods” and “roving avengers” (*Oracles in Decline*).

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Jews influenced by these ideas: Acts 23:8–9

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Josephus Antiquities, Book 8, chapter 2:5

“I have seen a certain man of my own country, whose name was Eleazar, releasing people that were demoniacal ... The manner of the cure was this: He put a ring that had a foot of one of those sorts mentioned by Solomon to the nostrils of the demoniac, after which he drew out the demon through his nostrils; and when the man fell down immediately, he abjured him to return into him no more, making still mention of Solomon, and reciting the incantations which he composed. And when Eleazar would persuade and demonstrate to the spectators that he had such a power, he set a little way off a cup or basin full of water, and commanded the demon, as he went out of the man, to overturn it, and thereby to let the spectators know that he had left the man.”

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- According to some texts, the queen of demons is Lilith, pictured with wings and long flowing hair.
- "When Adam, doing penance for his sin, separated from Eve for 130 years, he caused the earth to be filled with demons."

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- Modern parallel: “lunatics” meaning insane people.

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- **Why did Jesus use an ironic argument? (Compare *1 Kings 18:27*)**

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The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness

‘But for corruption thou hast made Belial, an angel of hostility. All his dominions are in darkness, and his purpose is to bring about wickedness and guilt. All the spirits that are associated with him are but angels of destruction.’

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- In later Jewish writings, Belial appears frequently as the “Angel of Darkness”, the “King of Evil” and “Prince of Darkness”.
- Paul appears to have used Belial as a form of literary hyperbole. e.g., What do Christ and Voldemort have in common?

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Satan as an angel of light

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The Life of Adam and Eve (c50BC)

17:1 Then the two of them [The diabolos Satan and the serpent] came to me [Eve] at the wall of the paradise. And when the angels went up to worship God then Satan as took on the image of an angel and praised God as the angels. 2. And I [Eve] looked over the wall and I saw him like an angel. And he said to me "Are you Eve?". And I said "I am". 3. And he said to me "What are you doing in the paradise?" And I said "God set us to guard the paradise and to eat from it". 4. And the Accuser [Greek diabolos] replied through the mouth of the serpent; "You do well, but you don't eat from every plant?". 5 And I [Eve] said "Yes, we eat from all, except from only one which is in the middle of the paradise, concerning which God commanded us do not eat of it, or you will die the death".

Satan as an angel of light

2 Corinthians 11:3

The Life of Adam and Eve (c50BC)

16:4. Satan said to the serpent: 'Do not fear, be my skin, and I will speak through your mouth' (*Greek version, Georgian similar.*)

Satan said to the serpent: 'You be, in your shape, a lyre for me, and I will speak through your mouth' (*Armenian version*)

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- **Probably these false apostles were teaching this myth (1 Tim 1:3–7)**

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Angels that sinned

2 Peter 2:4

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.

Jude 6

And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.

Angels that sinned

Genesis 6:1–4 (NIV)

When men began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose... The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.

Angels that sinned

Genesis 6:1–2 (LXX, Alexandrine text)

And it came to pass when men began to be numerous upon the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the angels of God having seen the daughters of men that they were beautiful, took to themselves wives of all whom they chose... Now the giants were upon the earth in those days; and after that when the sons of God were wont to go in to the daughters of men, they bore children to them, those were the giants of old, the men of renown.

Angels that sinned

Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 1.3.1

Now this posterity of Seth continued to esteem God as the Lord of the universe, and to have an entire regard to virtue, for seven generations; but in process of time they were perverted, and forsook the practices of their forefathers; ... for what degree of zeal they had formerly shown for virtue, they now showed by their actions a double degree of wickedness, whereby they made God to be their enemy. For many angels of God accompanied with women, and begat sons that proved unjust, and despisers of all that was good, on account of the confidence they had in their own strength; for the tradition is, that these men did what resembled the acts of those whom the Grecians call giants.

Angels that sinned

Enoch 6:1–6

And it came to pass when the children of men had multiplied that in those days were born unto them beautiful and comely daughters. And the angels, the children of the heaven, saw and lusted after them, and said to one another: 'Come, let us choose us wives from among the children of men and beget us children.' And Semjâzâ, who was their leader, said unto them: 'I fear ye will not indeed agree to do this deed, and I alone shall have to pay the penalty of a great sin.' And they all answered him and said: 'Let us all swear an oath, and all bind ourselves by mutual imprecations not to abandon this plan but to do this thing.' Then swore they all together and bound themselves by mutual imprecations upon it. And they were in all two hundred; who descended in the days of Jared on the summit of Mount Hermon.

Angels that sinned

Enoch 7:1–2

And all the others together with them took unto themselves wives, and each chose for himself one, and they began to go in unto them and to defile themselves with them, and they taught them charms and enchantments, and the cutting of roots, and made them acquainted with plants. And they became pregnant, and they bare great giants, whose height was three thousand ells.

Angels that sinned

Enoch 10:1–2

Then said the Most High, the Holy and Great One spake, and sent Uriel to the son of Lamech, and said to him: [Go to Noah] and tell him in my name “Hide thyself!” and reveal to him the end that is approaching: that the whole earth will be destroyed, and a deluge is about to come upon the whole earth, and will destroy all that is on it.

Timeline

- Genesis 6:2 — sons of God and daughters of men
- Jewish readings of Gen.6 vary.
- 2ndC BC — Enoch myth begins to circulate in Judaism
- 1stC BC — Enoch myths grow in popularity, many versions
- 1stC AD — several versions of Enoch myths in use at Qumran.
- Rabbi Shammai against the reading of Gen.6 as angels
- Luke 20:36 — Christ teaches that angels do not marry, and that “sons of God” are men in the resurrection.
- Colossians 1:18 — Paul warns about “religion of angels”
- Titus 1:14 — Paul warns about “Jewish myths”
- 2 Peter — several quotes and allusions to the text of 1 Enoch.
- Jude — direct citation from 1En.1:9 in Jude 14
- Trypho the Jew and Justin Martyr debate Gen.6
- 2ndC — Enoch literature circulates widely amongst Christians, being the dominant story for the origin of the devil.
- 3rdC — Enoch myth begins to be replaced by Lucifer myth drawn from Isaiah 14.
- 1948 — copies of 1Enoch predating Jude discovered at Qumran

Slandering angels

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- **In logic: Reductio ad absurdum.**

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- Compare *Jude 6*.
- Compare *1 Enoch 10*

Tartarus

Enoch 10:1–5

Then said the Most High, the Holy and Great One spake, and sent Uriel to the son of Lamech, and said to him: [Go to Noah] and tell him in my name “Hide thyself!” and reveal to him the end that is approaching: that the whole earth will be destroyed, and a deluge is about to come upon the whole earth, and will destroy all that is on it. And now instruct him that he may escape and his seed may be preserved for all the generations of the world.’ And again the Lord said to Raphael: ‘Bind Azâzêl hand and foot, and cast him into the darkness: and make an opening in the desert, which is in Dûdâêl, and cast him therein. And place upon him rough and jagged rocks, and cover him with darkness, and let him abide there for ever, and cover his face that he may not see light.’

Tartarus

Enoch 10:11–13

And the Lord said unto Michael: 'Go, bind Semjâzâ and his associates who have united themselves with women so as to have defiled themselves with them in all their uncleanness. And when their sons have slain one another, and they have seen the destruction of their beloved ones, bind them fast for seventy generations in the valleys of the earth, till the day of their judgement and of their consummation, till the judgement that is for ever and ever is consummated. In those days they shall be led off to the abyss of fire: [and] to the torment and the prison in which they shall be confined for ever. And whosoever shall be condemned and destroyed will from thenceforth be bound together with them to the end of all generations.

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- **v6–10.** “*If*” the myth is true and the 200 angels were chained by Raphael in Tartarus, then they cannot harm anyone.
- **v11–16.** If those teachers charge angels with sinning, and this charge is blasphemy (according to Peter), then it follows that the charge is false.
- **v17–22.** Quotes and illusions from 1 Enoch to false teachers — but applied to the contemporary false teachers rather than those from Noah’s day.

Jude

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- **Jude 14–16.** Quote from Enoch 1:9

Judgement on false teachers

Enoch 1:9

And behold! He cometh with ten thousands of
his holy ones
To execute judgement upon all,
And to destroy all the ungodly:
And to convict all flesh
Of all the works of their ungodliness which they
have ungodly committed,
And of all the hard things which ungodly
sinners have spoken against him.

Michael and the body of Moses

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- **Alternative explanation: a cryptic allusion to *Zechariah 3*. (Unlikely since neither Michael nor Moses are mentioned there.)**

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Rich man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19–31

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4 Maccabees 13:17

“After our death in this fashion Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will receive us and all our forefathers will praise us.”

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Apoc Zeph 9:2

You have escaped from the abyss and Hades, you will now cross over the crossing place... then he ran to all the righteous ones, namely Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Enoch, Elijah and David.

Rich man and Lazarus

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Rich man and Lazarus

- According to the Pharisees all the 'sinners' (i.e., tax-collectors, poor, disabled, lepers, insane, Gentiles, Samaritans) would burn in the fire.
- Only the 'righteous' who followed all the rules of the Law, as did the "righteous" (i.e., rich, respectable, scribes, experts in the Law, rulers of synagogues, priests, Pharisees), would depart to be with "Father Abraham". (Jewish Mishnah — Aboth 3:12; 5:2,3,6,19; 6:10; Taanith 2:4,5)

Rich man and Lazarus

Apoc Zeph 11:1-2

As they looked at all the torments they called out, praying before the Lord Almighty saying, 'We pray you on behalf of those who are in all these torments so you might have mercy on all of them.' And when I saw them, I said to the angel who spoke with me, 'Who are they?' He said 'Those who beseech the Lord are Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Rich man and Lazarus

- The section in Josephus entitled “Discourse to the Greeks concerning Hades” is actually from Hippolytus of Rome (3rd Cent AD). It is unhelpful in establishing Jewish beliefs.

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- Jesus is ridiculing their beliefs, not accommodating them.

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- *Luke 16:31* is a prophecy that was fulfilled in *John 12:10*

Outline

- 1 Some simple examples
- 2 Demons
- 3 Beelzebul
- 4 Belial
- 5 Satan as an angel of light
- 6 Angels that sinned
- 7 Rich man and Lazarus
- 8 Some conclusions**

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- A lot of information on Jewish myths is wrong. Try to read primary sources, or at least references that cite primary sources.