

The Early Church Fathers on Angels and Demons

The existence of angels and demons is considered by many to be pure fantasy. Some of these people even claim to be Christian. They try to update Christianity so as not to feel silly when confronted by friends and acquaintances. They will often attribute symbolic meanings to the terms. For instance, I once heard a priest say that the devil was symbolic for “evil in all of its forms.” But why the disbelief? We believe that God is pure Spirit? Is He not capable of creating beings that are also pure spirit? The Early Church Fathers certainly thought so.

Clement of Rome

Let our glorifying and our confidence be in him. Let us be subject to his will. Let us consider the whole multitude of his angels, how they stand waiting to minister to his will (*Letter to the Corinthians* 34:5 [A.D. 95]).

Ignatius of Antioch

Let no one be deceived: Even the heavenly beings and the angels in their glory and rulers visible and invisible – even for these there will be judgment, if they do not believe in the blood of Christ (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6:1 [A.D. 110]).

Hermas

God planted the vineyard, that is, he created the people and gave them over to his Son. The Son appointed the angels to guard over them, and he himself cleansed them of their sins, laboring much and undergoing much toil (*The Shepherd* 5:6:2 [inter A.D. 140-155]).

Justin Martyr

For we do continually beseech God by Jesus Christ to preserve us from the demons which are hostile to the worship of God, and whom we of old time served, in order that, after our conversion by Him to God, we may be blameless. For we call Him Helper and Redeemer, the power of whose name even the demons do fear; and at this day, when they are exorcised in the name of Jesus Christ, crucified under Pontius Pilate, governor of Judæa, they are overcome. And thus, it is manifest to all, that His Father has given Him so great power, by virtue of which demons are subdued to His name, and to the dispensation of His suffering (*Dialogue with Trypho* 30 [A.D. 155]).

Athenagoras of Athens

Who, then, would not be astonished to hear those called atheists, who speak of God the Father and of God the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and who proclaim their power in union and their distinction in order? Nor is our theology confined to these; for we recognize also a multitude of angels and ministers whom God, the Creator and designer of the world, by means of his Word, set in their places and gave into their charge the elements and the heavens and the world and what is in it, and the good order of all (*Supplication for the Christians* 10:4 [A.D.177]).

Irenaeus

The devil, however, since he is an apostate angel, is able, as he was in the beginning, to lead astray and to deceive the mind of man for the transgressing of God's commands. Little by little he can darken the hearts of those who would try to serve him, to the point that, forgetting the true God, they adore him as if he were God (*Against Heresies* 5:24:3 [inter A.D. 180-199]).

Tertullian

The business [of the fallen angels, who are the demons,] is to corrupt mankind. Thus, from the very first, spiritual wickedness augured man's destruction. Therefore, are they everywhere in a moment. The whole world is but one

place to them. What and where anything happens they can know and tell with equal facility. Their swiftness is thought of as divine, because their substance is not understood (*Apology* 22:4, 8 [A.D. 197]).

Origen

In regard to the devil and his angels and opposing powers, the ecclesiastical teaching maintains that these beings do indeed exist, but what they are or how they exist is not explained with sufficient clarity. This opinion, however, is held by most: that the devil was an angel and, having apostatized, he persuaded as many angels as possible to fall away with himself; and these, even to the present time, are called his angels (*The Fundamental Doctrines* 1: Preface:6 [inter A.D. 220-230]).

Cyprian of Carthage

The obstinate wickedness of the devil prevails even up to the saving water, but that in baptism it loses all the poison of his wickedness...when, however, they come to the water of salvation and to the sanctification of baptism, we ought to know and to trust that there the devil is beaten down, and the man, dedicated to God, is set free by the divine mercy. For as scorpions and serpents, which prevail on the dry ground, when cast into water, cannot prevail nor retain their venom; so also the wicked spirits, which are called scorpions and serpents, and yet are trodden under foot by us, by the power given by the Lord, cannot remain any longer in the body of a man in whom, baptized and sanctified, the Holy Spirit is beginning to dwell" (Letter 75:15 [A.D. 255]).

Eusebius

For when God willed it, seeing that he is the only good and the source and beginning of everything, many participants in his treasures were produced. It was just then that every rational creature was sent forth, some as incorporeal, intelligent and divine powers – angels, indeed, and archangels—immaterial and entirely pure spirits; and besides these, there were the souls of men supplied with a nature that is independent and of free will in respect to the choosing of what is noble or its opposite (*Proof of the Gospel* 4:1 [inter A.D. 316-322]).

Athanasius

And while in times past demons, occupying springs or rivers or trees or stones, cheated men by deceptive appearances and imposed upon the credulous by their juggleries, now, after the divine coming of the Word, an end is put to their deceptions. For by the sign of the cross, a man but using it, their wiles are put to flight (*Treatise on the Incarnation of the Word* 47:2 [A.D. 318]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

What about this? Someone may say, 'Is it not written that the angels of the little ones always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven?' But the angels see God not as he is, but insofar as they themselves are capable. It is Jesus himself who says, 'Not that anyone has seen the Father, except him that is from God—he has seen the Father.' The angels, then, behold as much as they are able, and the archangels, as much as is their capacity; and the thrones and dominations, more than the others mentioned, yet less that his true dignity. Only the Holy Spirit, with the Son, can behold him properly (*Catechetical Lectures* 6:6 [A.D. 350]).

Augustine of Hippo

There the angels too are our fellow citizens; but because we are yet on pilgrimage, we labor; they, however, await our arrival in that city. And from that city to which we journey, letters come to us: those letters are the Scriptures which exhort us to live properly (*Explanations of the Psalms* 90:2:1 [inter A.D. 392-418]).