

The Supernatural Cosmology of Second Temple Judaism: Divine Council, Watchers, and the Reclamation of the Nations

A Reconstruction of the Biblical Worldview Assumed by Jesus and the Apostles

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This study reconstructs the coherent supernatural worldview shared by faithful Jews of the Second Temple period (ca. 300 BCE–100 CE). Drawing on the Hebrew Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, 1 Enoch, Jubilees, and related literature, it demonstrates that the New Testament authors presupposed a structured cosmic hierarchy in which Yahweh, the Most High, rules a divine council; certain members of that council rebelled; the spirits of their hybrid offspring became the demons of later tradition; the nations were placed under the jurisdiction of lesser elohim who subsequently became corrupt; and the Messiah's mission includes the judgment of those powers and the reclamation of the nations for the God of Israel.

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I. Introduction: Recovering the Assumed Worldview

Biblical interpretation is never conducted in a vacuum. Every reader, ancient or modern, brings an implicit cosmology—a mental map of the seen and unseen realms—to the text. The authors of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament wrote within a shared Second Temple Jewish conceptual world that modern Western readers have largely forgotten. That world was neither crude superstition nor philosophical dualism. It was a sophisticated, textually grounded ontology in which Yahweh, the one Most High God, ruled over a hierarchy of created spiritual beings, some of whom remained loyal and others of whom rebelled.

The recovery of this worldview is not an exercise in speculative reconstruction. It is required by the primary sources themselves. The Dead Sea Scrolls, the Enochic corpus, Jubilees, and the Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures preserve a remarkably consistent picture of the supernatural order. Jesus and the apostles spoke and wrote within that picture. When the Gospels report Jesus' authority over "unclean spirits," when Paul speaks of "rulers and authorities," and when Jude and 2 Peter allude to angels who "left their proper dwelling," they are not inventing new categories; they are deploying categories already familiar to their audiences.

The present study therefore proceeds in six movements. First, it establishes the supremacy of Yahweh and the existence of his divine council. Second, it examines the rebellion of the Watchers narrated in Genesis 6 and elaborated in 1 Enoch and Jubilees. Third, it traces the origin of demons to the disembodied spirits of the Nephilim. Fourth, it analyzes the allotment of the nations to the sons of God at Babel as preserved in the superior textual tradition of Deuteronomy 32:8–9. Fifth, it shows that idolatry was understood as real allegiance to hostile spiritual powers. Sixth, it demonstrates that Second Temple expectations of the Messiah included the judgment of the fallen powers and the restoration of the nations to Yahweh's direct rule. Throughout, the argument engages both the primary texts and the scholarly discussion that has clarified their meaning in recent decades.

II. Yahweh the Most High and the Divine Council

Any account of Second Temple cosmology must begin with the non-negotiable conviction that there is one uncreated, eternal, sovereign God—Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He alone is the Creator of heaven, earth, and all the heavenly beings. This conviction is articulated with particular clarity in the Deuteronomic and Isaianic traditions (Deut 4:35, 39; 6:4; Isa 40–48) and is assumed throughout the literature of the Second Temple period.

Yet the same literature that insists on Yahweh's unique status also repeatedly depicts him as presiding over a council of heavenly beings. Psalm 82:1 places God (ʿĕlōhîm) in the midst of the divine council (ʿădat ʿĕl), judging among the gods (ʿĕlōhîm). Psalm 89:5–7 celebrates Yahweh's incomparability among the assembly of the holy ones and the council of the sons of God. The vision of 1 Kings 22:19–23 shows Yahweh seated on his throne with the host of heaven standing beside him, deliberating over the fate of Ahab. Job 1–2 presents the sons of God presenting themselves before Yahweh. These texts do not portray a pantheon of rival deities. They portray a royal court in which the Most High exercises absolute authority through subordinate

spiritual agents.

The term “divine council” is a modern scholarly designation for this reality. It is not a concession to polytheism. As Michael S. Heiser and others have demonstrated, the Hebrew word *’ēlōhîm* is a place-of-residence term: it designates any inhabitant of the spiritual realm. Yahweh is an *’ēlōhîm*, but no other *’ēlōhîm* is Yahweh. The distinction is ontological and functional. The members of the council are created beings; Yahweh alone is uncreated. They serve; he rules. They may rebel; he cannot. This hierarchical monotheism (or, more precisely, monolatry that acknowledges the existence of other spiritual beings while restricting worship to Yahweh alone) is the consistent posture of the biblical writers.

Second Temple literature intensifies rather than abandons this picture. The Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice from Qumran describe the heavenly liturgy of the angelic priesthood. 1 Enoch 14 depicts Enoch’s ascent into the divine throne room. The War Scroll (1QM) and related texts assume a cosmic conflict between the forces of light and the forces of darkness under the ultimate sovereignty of the God of Israel. The divine council is therefore not a peripheral curiosity; it is the structural backdrop against which the entire drama of rebellion, judgment, and restoration unfolds.

III. The Rebellion of the Watchers and the Production of the Nephilim

Genesis 6:1–4 is one of the most compressed and enigmatic passages in the Hebrew Bible. In the Second Temple period it became the seed of an elaborate tradition that explained the origin of evil, the necessity of the Flood, and the continuing presence of hostile spiritual forces. The biblical text itself is brief: the “sons of God” (*bēnê hā’ēlōhîm*) see the daughters of humankind, take them as wives, and produce the Nephilim, the “mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.”

The Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36), whose core narrative is generally dated to the third century BCE, expands this episode into a full rebellion story. Two hundred angels, led by Shemihazah (and in a parallel tradition by Asael/Azazel), descend on Mount Hermon in the days of Jared. They bind themselves by oath, take human wives, and beget giants of enormous size. These giants consume the produce of the earth, turn against humanity, and finally devour one another. In addition, the Watchers teach forbidden arts—metallurgy, cosmetics, astrology, and magical practices—that further corrupt the antediluvian world. The archangels intercede; God pronounces judgment; the Watchers are bound in the earth until the final judgment; and the Flood is unleashed to cleanse the earth of the giants’ violence.

Jubilees 5 offers a related but not identical account. In Jubilees the Watchers are initially sent by God to instruct humanity in righteousness; their subsequent lust and the birth of the giants constitute a betrayal of that commission. The giants’ mutual destruction and the imprisonment of the Watchers again appear, and a remnant of the evil spirits is permitted to remain under the authority of Mastema (a Satan-figure) in order to test humanity.

The New Testament alludes to this tradition without hesitation. 2 Peter 2:4 speaks of angels who sinned and were cast into Tartarus, kept in chains of gloomy darkness

until the judgment. Jude 6 refers to angels who did not keep their own domain but abandoned their proper dwelling, kept in eternal chains under darkness. Both passages employ language that closely parallels the Enochic narrative and assumes its basic outline. The rebellion of the Watchers is therefore not a late, eccentric development; it is part of the interpretive tradition that shaped the earliest Christian proclamation.

Scholarly discussion has clarified the Mesopotamian background of the tradition. The apkallū—antediluvian sages who brought civilization to humanity—provide a cultural template that the Enochic authors invert: what Mesopotamian tradition celebrated as beneficial divine instruction, the Jewish authors portray as illicit and destructive. The Watchers are not culture heroes; they are transgressors of cosmic boundaries whose offspring and teachings introduce violence and impurity into the world.

IV. The Origin of Demons in Second Temple Thought

One of the most distinctive contributions of the Enochic tradition is its aetiology of demons. According to 1 Enoch 15–16, when the giants—hybrid beings of angelic and human parentage—were destroyed, their spirits were released upon the earth. Because they were born of spirit and flesh, their spirits cannot ascend to heaven; they remain earth-bound, restless, and hostile. These spirits are the “evil spirits” that afflict humanity until the final judgment. Jubilees 10 similarly attributes the continuing activity of demons to a divinely permitted remnant of the giants’ spirits.

This understanding differs markedly from later Christian popular theology, which often equates demons with fallen angels. In the Second Temple sources the fallen angels (the Watchers) are imprisoned; the demons are the disembodied offspring of their illicit unions. The distinction is not trivial. It explains why demons in the Gospels seek embodiment, why they are associated with violence and uncleanness, and why their ultimate destruction is tied to the eschatological judgment rather than to an already completed fall.

The Dead Sea Scrolls confirm the currency of this view. Texts such as 4Q510–511 (Songs of the Maskil) and various exorcistic compositions speak of “bastard spirits” and “spirits of the bastards”—language that directly echoes the Enochic description of the giants’ offspring. The Qumran community’s practice of apotropaic prayer and its dualistic framework presuppose the ongoing activity of these malevolent spirits under the sovereignty of the God of Israel.

When the Synoptic Gospels depict Jesus casting out unclean spirits with a word, they are therefore portraying him as the one who exercises the authority expected of the eschatological judge over precisely these beings. His authority is not merely therapeutic; it is cosmic. The demons recognize him, fear him, and obey him because he is the one authorized to terminate their permitted activity.

V. The Allotment of the Nations: The Deuteronomy 32 Worldview

The second great rebellion in the Second Temple cosmic narrative occurs at Babel. After the Flood, humanity again unites in defiance. Yahweh confuses their language

and scatters them. According to the textual tradition preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls and reflected in the Septuagint, Deuteronomy 32:8-9 records the theological significance of that scattering:

“When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided the sons of man, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But Yahweh’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance.”

The Masoretic Text reads “sons of Israel” rather than “sons of God.” Text-critical analysis strongly favors the latter reading. Two Qumran manuscripts (4QDeut^j and 4QDeut^q) preserve “sons of God” (or “sons of El”). The Septuagint renders the phrase as “angels of God,” an interpretive translation that still points to heavenly beings rather than Israelites. The Masoretic reading is best explained as a later scribal alteration motivated by discomfort with the implication of other divine beings. Israel did not yet exist at the time of Babel; the logic of verse 9—that Yahweh kept Israel as his own portion while assigning the other nations to lesser beings—requires the “sons of God” reading.

This “Deuteronomy 32 worldview” provides the conceptual framework for understanding the spiritual geography of the nations. The sons of God who received the nations subsequently became corrupt. Psalm 82 depicts Yahweh standing in the divine council and condemning these elohim for judging unjustly, showing partiality to the wicked, and failing to defend the weak. Their fate is to “die like men.” Daniel 10 portrays territorial princes—the “prince of Persia” and the “prince of Greece”—who oppose the angelic messenger and are contested by Michael, the prince of Israel. The nations are therefore not merely political entities; they stand under the influence of real spiritual powers who have rebelled against their original commission.

The practical consequence is that every ancient nation possessed gods, temples, and cults because the heavenly rulers assigned to them accepted worship and led their peoples into idolatry. Israel alone remained under the direct rule of Yahweh. This is not a denial of the existence of other spiritual beings; it is an assertion of Yahweh’s unique claim upon one people and his eventual intention to reclaim all peoples.

VI. Idolatry as Spiritual Treason

In the Second Temple worldview, idols are simultaneously nothing and something. Psalm 115 and Isaiah 44 insist that idols are wood and stone, the work of human hands, powerless in themselves. Yet the same tradition affirms that real spiritual beings stand behind the cults. The Wisdom of Solomon 13-15 develops this tension at length: the craftsman shapes the image, but the worshiper enters into fellowship with demons. Paul, writing within this tradition, can say both that “an idol has no real existence” (1 Cor 8:4) and that “what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God” (1 Cor 10:20).

Idolatry is therefore not a harmless cultural practice or a mere intellectual error. It is spiritual treason—the transfer of allegiance from Yahweh to the hostile powers that rule the nations. Spiritual warfare, in this framework, is not primarily about ritual techniques or territorial mapping. It is about loyalty. The faithful Israelite (and later the faithful follower of Jesus) remains loyal to Yahweh, refuses the gods of the nations, and trusts that the Most High will ultimately judge the corrupt rulers and restore the

nations to himself.

VII. The Messiah's Cosmic Mission and the End of the Age

Second Temple expectation of the Messiah was never merely political. The Enochic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and related texts consistently portray the coming deliverer as one who will confront the rebellious powers of heaven. 1 Enoch 48 and 62–63 depict the Chosen One / Son of Man judging the kings and the mighty, including the fallen angels. The War Scroll anticipates a final cosmic battle in which the forces of light, under the leadership of the Prince of Light, defeat the forces of darkness. Isaiah's servant songs and royal oracles are read within this larger horizon: the Messiah will not only restore Israel but will reclaim the nations and restore creation itself.

The New Testament presents Jesus as the fulfillment of these expectations. In the wilderness he confronts the devil who claims authority over the kingdoms of the world. On the cross he “disarms the rulers and authorities and puts them to open shame” (Col 2:15). The Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20) is the formal announcement that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him; the disciples are therefore sent to make disciples of all the nations—precisely the nations that had been placed under the sons of God at Babel. Revelation 12 and related passages portray the decisive defeat of the dragon and his angels. The end of the age will see the Watchers cast into the abyss, the demons destroyed, the nations returning to the God of Israel, and the righteous shining like the stars (Dan 12; 1 Enoch 90, 108).

In short, the mission of Jesus is cosmic before it is political or even soteriological in the narrow sense. He is the one who reclaims the inheritance of the nations for the Most High and who inaugurates the new creation in which the rebellious powers no longer hold sway.

VIII. Conclusion: Implications for Interpretation and Faith

The supernatural worldview of Second Temple Judaism is not an optional background for New Testament study; it is the assumed conceptual framework within which the New Testament was written and first understood. When modern readers approach the Gospels, the epistles, or the Apocalypse without this framework, they inevitably domesticate the texts—turning cosmic conflict into psychological struggle, reducing demons to metaphors for social pathology, and treating the “principalities and powers” as human institutions alone.

Recovering the Deuteronomy 32 worldview does not require uncritical acceptance of every detail in 1 Enoch or Jubilees. It requires recognition that the New Testament authors stood in continuity with a living interpretive tradition that read Genesis 6, Deuteronomy 32, Psalm 82, and related texts as describing real events in the unseen realm. That tradition supplies the categories that make sense of Jesus' exorcisms, Paul's language of cosmic powers, and the apocalyptic hope of final judgment and restoration.

For the contemporary church, the implications are both sobering and hopeful. The nations remain contested territory. Idolatry—whether ancient or modern—continues to involve real spiritual allegiance. Yet the decisive victory has already been won. The Messiah has disarmed the powers. The commission to disciple the nations is the outworking of that victory. The final judgment of the Watchers and the demons is certain. The righteous will inherit the renewed creation. Understanding the story as Second Temple Jews understood it does not diminish the gospel; it reveals its full cosmic scope.

Comparative Summary: Second Temple and New Testament Convergence

Topic	Second Temple Jewish View	New Testament Affirmation
Supreme God	Yahweh, the Most High, uncreated and sovereign	Same; Jesus shares the unique identity of Yahweh
Divine Council	Sons of God / holy ones under Yahweh's rule	Presupposed; expanded in light of Christ's exaltation
Watchers	Fallen angels of Gen 6 imprisoned until judgment	Affirmed (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6)
Demons	Disembodied spirits of the Nephilim	Affirmed as real; origin not restated but consistent
Nations	Allotted to heavenly rulers who became corrupt	Christ reclaims the nations (Matt 28; Rev 5, 7)
Messiah	Judge of angels, restorer of nations and creation	Jesus fulfills this role comprehensively
Idolatry	Fellowship with demons / hostile powers	Same (1 Cor 10:20; cf. Acts 17)

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