

Some readers have suggested that I have guest posts from my former PhD students describing their dissertations. Great idea! This is our first shot at it. One of my most recent PhDs was Travis Proctor, who is now an Assistant Professor of Religion at Wittenberg College in Springfield Ohio. Travis wrote a terrifically interesting dissertation on demons in early Christianity. It turns out, it's not only a really intriguing topic, but unexpectedly complicated.

The dissertation was called "Rulers of the Air: Demonic Bodies and the Making of the Ancient Christian Cosmos," completed in 2017. And just recently it has won Travis a major international award from University of Heidelberg, German. See: <https://religion.unc.edu/travis-proctor-phd-2017-manfred-lautenschlaeger-award-for-theological-promise/>

I asked Travis to summarize the dissertation for us, and here is what he has to say! (I will be happy to post your comments on this; Travis will not be able to respond directly.)

\*\*\*\*\*

Clement of Alexandria, one of the most famous philosophers and ethical teachers of early Christianity, was no fan of eating meat. But Clement's rationale for avoiding animal flesh would never occur to most people today.

According to Clement, Christians ought to keep their diets simple: fruits, nuts, and vegetables were sufficient fare. But while modern vegetarians might appeal to environmental or health reasons to argue for such a diet, Clement turned to a different justification: demonic corruption. According to Clement, demons were infatuated with the blood of red meat, and so anyone who overindulged in the flesh of animals would inevitably attract evil demons, with the result that their bodies would become full of evils spirits bent on their ruin.

But why are demons so attracted to meat, and the people that eat it? To answer that question sufficiently, one must delve back into ancient Christian concepts of the demonic body. Readers of this blog will not be surprised to hear that early Christians, despite their general agreement regarding the existence of demons, often disagreed regarding demons' physical appearance and substance. On the one hand, several early Christian texts portray demons as disembodied entities. This is likely due to the notion, found especially in Second Temple Jewish texts, that evil demons are the lingering souls of monstrous giants who were destroyed in Noah's flood. Thus, demons are, by definition, entities deprived of a body as part of the punishment for their primordial iniquity. On the other hand, other early Christian writers, including Clement, frequently portray demons as possessing some form of autonomous, if subtle, corporeality. We see this especially in the writings of early Christian apologists, who claim that demons possess a "pneumatic" or "airy" body that, while invisible to the human eye, is nonetheless corporeal in its own right.

Why did Christians disagree so thoroughly on this matter? My dissertation seeks to show that early Christian discordance over demonic bodies is intimately connected to related divergences concerning the makeup of the *Christian* (human) body. Namely, I argue that early Christian disagreements over demonic corporeality simultaneously *reflect* and *reproduce* associated Christian dissimilarities regarding the nature and performance of proper Christian embodiment.

The dissertation consists of two parts, each comprising two chapters. Part I examines early Christian traditions regarding “bodiless” demons. In Chapter 1, I focus on traditions of demonic possession and exorcism in the texts and reception histories of the New Testament gospels. I note that, as mentioned previously, the gospels collectively assume the disembodied nature of demons, in part informed by ancient Jewish traditions wherein demons are in fact the residual souls of antediluvian giants. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the primary activity of demons within several early Christian texts is the usurpation of human bodies. Contrasted with the disembodiment of the demons is the potent corporeality of the Christian exorcist, beginning with Jesus of Nazareth and extending to depictions of his followers in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

In Chapter 2, I turn to another tradition of “bodiless” demons, found in the *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, a text written by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century church father Ignatius of Antioch. The letter attempts to counter the idea, popular among some Christians, that Jesus only “seemed” to have a body during his earthly ministry. Ignatius claims that any Christian who believes in such a phantasmal Jesus will be “just like what they believe,” that is, they will be “bodiless and demonic.” Furthermore, Ignatius condemns his opponents to a “bodiless” and “demonic” afterlife. Ignatius is here countering a belief, found in certain Christian sources, that anticipates liberation from a fleshly body and the enjoyment of an unencumbered spiritual afterlife. The Antiochean bishop twists this eschatology into a sardonic parody: these Christians will not become benevolent spiritual beings, but evil demons! Ignatius insists that to avoid this unsavory end, his readers must recognize the “fleshly” reality of Jesus’ body by participating in the Eucharist, which, he claims, represents the “flesh and spirit” of Christ.

In Part II, I examine early Christian constructions of demonic corporeality that, unlike those traditions in the canonical gospels and letters of Ignatius, emphasize demons’ possession of subtly material bodies. In Chapter 3, I explore the function and interpretation of Paul’s exhortation to his readers in 1 Corinthians that they not mix the “body of the Lord” with the “table of demons” by participating in both the Christian Eucharist and the traditional Hellenic animal sacrifice. Paul’s statement itself, which draws on a long line of Jewish condemnation of non-Jewish sacrifice, implies that demons possessed some form of body that was nourished by the meat offerings of animal sacrifice. Later interpreters of 1 Corinthians, including Clement of Alexandria, build on Paul’s rhetoric by portraying the demonic body as one that has become “fattened” and grotesque due to its excess consumption of sacrificial fumes. Clement contrasts the demons’ corpulence with his construal of the ideal Christian body: chaste, thin, and constantly engaged in ritual contemplative practices designed to “strip away” the material body.

In the fourth chapter, I explore the entwining of demonic and Christian bodies in the writings of Tertullian of Carthage. In his *On the Soul*, Tertullian emphasizes the pervasive attachment of demonic spirits to the human soul that stems from inadvertent participation in demonolatry via Roman “religious” rites (i.e., worship of the Roman gods, or participation in any activities that are associated with certain deities). The only method by which Roman citizens can remove their attendant demonic spirit is through Christian baptism, a rite that Tertullian views as essential in the creation of a new, demon-free Christian body. The only way to ensure the endurance of one’s Christian corporeality, Tertullian argues, is by maintaining Christian habits in daily life and eschewing all activities infected by Roman demonolatry.

As can be seen by this brief overview, early Christians depicted the demonic body in widely

divergent ways. Whether disembodied or corporeal, fattened or ethereal, depictions of demonic corporeality were as diverse as the Christians who articulated them. And yet, a consistent feature of early Christian demonologies is the way in which demonic bodies are connected with their human counterparts. On the one hand, demons served Christian writers well in articulating ideal visions of the Christian body - Ignatius' "bodiless" demons help him articulate positive understandings of human "flesh," while Clement's gluttonous demons helped him make the case for more restrained diets among his readers. Thus my research shows how early Christian demonology can be enlightening not only for what ancient thinkers said about demons, but how they understood other aspects of the human experience and culture.

As an additional point, my work stresses that ideas regarding demons did not remain "merely" ideas (if there is such a thing) - rather, they formed important rationales and explanations for various early Christian rituals (e.g., exorcism, baptism, and the Eucharist). In this way, ideas regarding demonic bodies had material effects on how Christians carried out their faith.

Finally, with its attention to nonhuman entities, my project strives to situate the human body as one entity amidst a complex ecosystem of assorted things and organisms. For many ancient Christians, the human body did not exist in a discrete realm separate from and superior to "nature." Rather, there existed only a fluid and permeable boundary between the tenuous materiality of the human body and its adjacent environments. In better appreciating this aspect of Christian embodiment and the Christian cosmos, we might not only come to a better understanding of Clement's disdain for meat, but begin to consider how our own bodies are themselves part of the many environments that make up our world.

If you want to learn a bit more about Travis, go here to his college page:  
<https://www.wittenberg.edu/academics/religion/travis-proctor-phd>

**This post is free and open to the public. To access all the posts on the blog, all you need to is join! You get five interesting and informative posts a week, for a very small fee — and the entire fee goes to charity.**



[Jesus as Single: An Actual Argument!](#)  
[Was Jesus Intimate with Mary Magdalene?](#)