

Of Spooks and Wraiths
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Isa 13:21 – 22

(BHS)

(1599 Geneva Bible)

וְרִבְצוּ-שָׁם צִיִּים
וּמְלֵאוּ בְּתֵיבָהֶם אֲחִים
וְשָׁכְנוּ שָׁם בְּנוֹת יַעֲנָה
וְשַׁעִירִים יִרְקְדוּ-שָׁם:

But ^aZiim shall lodge there,
and their houses shall be full of Ochim:
Ostriches shall dwell there,
and the Satyrs shall dance there.

וְעָנָה אִיִּים בְּאֵלְמִנְוֹתָיו
וְתַנִּים בְּהֵיכְלֵי עֲנָג
וְקָרוֹב לְבֹא עֵתָהּ
וְיָמֶיהָ לֹא יִמָּשְׁכוּ:

And lim shall cry in their palaces,
and dragons in their pleasant palaces:
and the time thereof is ready to come,
and the days thereof shall not be prolonged.

Geneva Bible has this note, “aWhich were either wild beasts, or fowls, or wicked spirits, whereby Satan deluded man, as by the fairies, goblins, and such like fantasies.” Since demons like to ride on desert fauna, John Geyer (1999) suggests that to mention one might imply the other. His article inspired this essay; my Isaiah bibliography is available.

In red are six words needing comment. NASB, NIV, NLT, Amp, etc., identify these as emblematic wildlife that encroached after Babylon’s fall. ESV calls the *ziyim*, “wild animals;” *’ochim*, indoor “howling creatures;” daughters of *ya’anah*, “ostrich;” *sa’ir*, dancing “wild goats;” *’iyim*, palace-dwelling “hyenas;” and *tannim*, “jackals” in nice mansions.

But in Psa 74:14 (a creation poem) the “people of the *ziyim*” ravened the primordial multi-headed Leviathan; they seem epical there and not mere wasteland scavengers. Look again at *sa’ir*. The middle radical is a guttural stop which can be represented with *t*, yielding “satyr” (per KJV, RSV, Jub, etc.).

Israel reckoned them deities (Lev 17:7; 2 Chr 11:15). Remember that the Old

Greek was the ancient church's Bible (and still is for the Orthodox). It renders *sa'ir* as *daimonia*, "demons"—desert phantasms or specters.

Greek Isaiah glosses line 3's "daughters of *ya'anah*" as *seirēnes*, mythological "sirens." This shows that an ancient interpretative tradition understood them to be infernal fiends of the wild. This is probably reflected in Rev 18:2. The onomatopoeic *'ochim* (cry "ooookkEEEEem!") are "dragons" in the Vulgate. Greek glosses *'iyim* as *ono-kentauroi*, "donkey centaurs." (Weird, huh?) KJV, Jub, YLT, etc., gloss *tannim* as "dragons" (Latin, *sirenae*, "nymphs").

Note also references to Lilith (see Isa 34:14 in NRSV; Luther Bible glosses *Kobold*, a mythical goblin), flying fiery snakes—i.e., dragons (14:29, 30:6), seraphim (basically the same thing, Isaiah 6), an underworld inhabited with conscious ghosts (Isa 14:9 – 21), and more. This is the traditional treatment of Isaiah that spanned the ancient church, continued through the Middle Ages, was preserved in English versions like King James, and now, only in the past few decades, has been abandoned and mostly forgotten by Evangelicals. (I told people that the book I was reading featured satyrs, dragons, Lilith, ghosts, and centaurs. No one guessed Isaiah!)

Chapter 13 describes Babylon's fall. Without Yahweh's grace, its land laid desolate, a haunt of shades and creeps. Exiled Israel was separated from their homeland by an eerie and antipathetic region like this—a spiritual (not just topographical and political) no man's land. Yahweh would build a highway through it (35:5 – 10). By the way, Jesus said that unclean spirits don't like desert places, but seek out people like oases (Luke 11:24). Weird, huh?

Some translations prefer to be naturalistic—for the very readership that claims to believe in miracles. In the past, liberals sought to demythologize

Scripture. Is it now Evangelicals, seen in the very Bibles that cater to our taste? (This reminds me of the “spirit of a python” in Acts 16:16; the snake element is obscured in most versions). I wonder if American Dispensationalism, with their literalist hermeneutic, has influenced us to be leery of anything unscientific, making us most comfortable with realistic and concrete translations. Since we know satyrs don’t literally exist, we can’t abide Isaiah treating them as if they were real. (And if we allow mythology in Isaiah, what happens to Genesis?)

But this comes with a subtle price. Do we also lightly dismiss the pregnant God (Isa 46:3 – 4)? Or too quickly pass over Eden as prophecy (51:3)? Are we unmoved by the infatuated Lord delighting in his bride (62:4 – 5), or donning armor to fight (59:17)? Do we even think the grave warnings against callous orthodoxy don’t apply to us (1:15)?

In a scientific and secular age it’s difficult to enter the mindset of Scripture. It’s hard to remember that although police arrest Christians, *diabolos* is behind it (Rev 2:10). The aery host is active (Eph 2:2). Don’t forget to pray against the Adversary! Jesus disarmed the demonic hordes (Col 2:15). The sprites and monsters have been routed. Lucifer no longer deceives the nations, since he has been bound (Rev 20:2 – 3; Matt 12:29). So go forth, Christian people, and trample those spooks and wraiths under your feet (Rom 16:20). The very *pylons of Hades* cannot prevail against us (Matt 16:18)!