

Satyrs

Peter Cox

TWICE IN ISAIAH (13:21; 34:14) satyrs are mentioned. In mythology a satyr is a demon. Here is a quote from Wikipedia: "Satyrs are most commonly described as having the upper half of a man and the lower half of a goat or, less commonly, the lower half of a horse. They are also described as possessing a long thick tail, either that of a goat or a horse. Mature satyrs are often depicted with goat's horns, while juveniles are often shown with bony nubs on their foreheads. Attic painted vases depict satyrs as being strongly built with flat noses, large pointed ears, long curly hair, and full beards, with wreaths of vine or ivy circling their heads. Satyrs often carry the *thyrsus*: the rod of Dionysus tipped with a fir cone.

"In the King James Version of the Bible, Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14, the English word 'satyr' is used to represent the Hebrew *sh'irim*, 'hairy ones'. In Hebrew folklore *sh'irim* are a type of demon or supernatural being which inhabits waste places. There is an allusion to the practice of sacrificing to the *sh'irim* (often translated as 'devils') in Leviticus 17:7 and 2 Chronicles 11:15. They correspond to the 'shaggy demon of the mountain-pass' (*azabb al-akaba*) of old Arab legend. Christian mythology demonised all pagan nature spirits such as satyrs by associating them with demons and devils, though they do resemble the Jewish goat-man demon Azazel, to whom the scapegoats were sent. The herdsmen of Parnassus also believed in a demon of the mountain who was said to be the lord of hares and goats."

In view of this tradition, what does the Scripture actually mean? The clue is to be found in Leviticus 16, where we have the details of the scapegoat. Would God have required the sacrifice of a 'demon'? Of course what we have here is the sacrifice of a goat (Heb. *sair*), with another goat being released into the desert. Likewise in Numbers 28 the sin offering was a goat (again *sair*), not a 'demon'.

Gesenius' Hebrew Lexicon informs us that *sair* means "hairy, shaggy, rough, a he-goat". So the answer to the problem, as so often is the case, is



Picture: xerones/Wikimedia Commons

Satyr in a Roman mosaic.

that the early translators have followed pagan traditions rather than a straightforward translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. They were not helped by the translators of the Greek Septuagint (or, more correctly, the Alexandrian version), who for some reason or the other translated *sair* in the Isaiah verses by the Greek *onokentaros*, which is, according to the Greek lexicon, a tailless ape. As they correctly translated *sair* in Leviticus as a goat, we are led to suppose that by 285 B.C. the seventy-two Jews who did the translation from Hebrew into Greek for Ptolemy Philadelphus were under the influence of demonology.

The reference in Leviticus 17:7 and 2 Chronicles 11:15 mentioned in the above Wikipedia extract is to the same Hebrew word *sair*, so in the context it appears that the Israelites were worshipping images of goats as well as calves, despite what the various translations say (some have 'demons' whilst others have 'satyrs' and yet others correctly have 'goats').

So, back to Isaiah 13:21; 34:14, these verses simply mean that, when God overthrew Babylon and Edom, the wild goats would join in with other animals and birds inhabiting the desolate places.