DEMONOLOGY (de-mən-o-lə-je), the study of demons or of beliefs concerning them; also, the doctrine of the existence of demons. The term comes from the Greek daimon, meaning "spirit," and in ancient times referred to spiritual beings inferior in rank to the gods but capable of influencing human affairs. Originally demons were neither entirely good nor entirely evil, but in time a distinction developed between good spirits and evil spirits. In Christian writings "demons" were evil spirits associated with Satan. It became common practice to refer to all the spirits and deities believed in by peoples outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition as demons. In this view pagan peoples have been described as devil worshipers. In fact primitive peoples believe in a great variety of spirits, many of which do not have the qualities of devils. There are, for example, guardian spirits, which may be spirits of animals or of ancestors.

From early Christian times evil spirits were charged with causing diseases (epileptic seizures, for example) by "possessing" humans. Belief in spirit possession is evident in the New Testament and gained wide acceptance in medieval Europe. This concept of the power of demons became associated with belief in witchcraft.

Demons (lesser spirits, not necessarily entirely evil) appear in the legends of nearly all parts of the world. Some are given human or near-human form, as the giants of German legend, the trolls of Scandinavia, and the jinni of the Muslim world. Others have animal shapes—werewolves and witches' cats, for example.

Consult Kittredge, G. L., Witchcraft in Old and New England (1929); Oesterreicher, T. G., Possession, Demonic and Other (1930); Michelet, Jules, Satanism and Witchcraft (1955).

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See also Exorcism; Satan; Spirit Possession; Witchcraft.

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