

Screwtape: The Real World

While working on the notes for C.S. Lewis' [The Annotated Screwtape Letters](#), I decided to do a little reading about the real world of demons. I picked up [Hostage To The Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Contemporary Americans](#) by Malachi Martin, a remarkable study that was meticulously researched and lucidly written without succumbing to sensationalism. It was an unnerving and horrific reading experience – certainly not for the spiritually weak or easily frightened.

I assume you know that Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* was a fictional correspondence between a senior demon to its nephew giving instructions about how to effectively tempt and corrupt a human. It is a masterpiece of wit, insight and satire. But what I didn't fully appreciate until encountering [Hostage To The Devil](#) was how closely Lewis captured the demonic world in *The Screwtape Letters*. More remarkably, he captured that world at a time when it was academic suicide to believe in the demonic.

Here's what I learned about demons and their world from both books.

1. First, the world of demons truly centers around devouring. Screwtape instructs his nephew Wormwood that humans are merely food for demons. "Our aim is the absorption of its will into ours, the increase of our own area of selfhood at its expense," he writes. Then Screwtape continually reminds his nephew Wormwood of the possibility of being devoured for his mistakes. He warns: "bring us back food or be food yourself." Even terms of affection between uncle and nephew are food-related and always presented with a clear threat. Though *Hostage To The Devil* isn't as comically overt, the sense of spirits and souls being devoured is pervasive.

Both echo Saint Peter's reminder in his first letter: "Be vigilant, watch. Your adversary the devil is a roaring lion who walks about seeking whom he may devour" (5:8). And the simple lesson is clear: apart from God, we're all merely part of one food chain or another.

2. Second, demons are not as organized as we might think. Lewis envisioned *Screwtape* as the ultimate bureaucrat, which is perfect if you think of bureaucracy as an incompetent and inefficient entity that seeks only of its self-survival. Demons, I learned from both books, are in a constant state of competitive selfishness – even at the expense of losing the very souls they hope to corrupt. There is little cohesive or coordinated effort, except when it's forced on them through a tyrannical hierarchy based on fear. Lewis makes much of this comedically. Martin's case studies demonstrate it as a matter of terror.

3. Third, demons are not all-powerful. Lewis makes this clear in his introduction to *Screwtape*. Satan is not the opposite of God, he's the opposite of the [Archangel Michael](#). Hollywood and fiction-writers have elevated Satan and his minions to an almost omniscient and omnipotent position. Lewis keeps Satan and the demons in their proper places and reminds his readers that it would be as wrong to over-estimate Satan's power as to under-estimate it. Likewise, one sees both the brutal strengths and brutish weaknesses of demonic forces in *Hostage To The Devil*.

4. Fourth, demonic activity is only effective when partnered with Human Will. A demon cannot force a human to do anything. It can only nudge, persuade, entice and deceive. The human must agree for anything substantial to happen. The entirety of *The Screwtape Letters* explores the psychological manipulations and rationalizations a demon might employ with a human "patient." All of the possessed in *Hostage To The Devil* were complicit with the demons around them. Human Will is the essential component, just as it was in the beginning with Adam and Eve.

5. Fifth, the intrusion of the demonic into the world of humans is as distasteful to demons as it should be to humans. *Screwtape* thinks of humans as cattle, little more than vermin, and cannot fathom how God could love the "hairless bipeds." (In fact, *Screwtape* must reassure himself that God does not love humans, but is only pretending to for some warped reason.) Any notion put forward by Satanists, movies or books that demons actually care about humans or wish to share power or prosperity with them is a lie. Demons wish only to devour or possess or use humans to thwart God. There is no middle ground, no deal, no three wishes, no affable wink and a nod. Just read the five cases in *Hostage To The Devil* to see.

In many ways *The Screwtape Letters* and *Hostage To The Devil* are complementary books. Read the first to see how we are lured into a relationship with the demonic, then read the second to see what becomes of that relationship. There is something good to be said of having the devil scared out of us.