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Angels, Demons, and Free Will

In common vernacular of today, angels have become synonymous with moral goodness and virtue, while demons are intrinsically connected to evil and moral wrongdoings. People picture guardian angels with a halo of light descending from heaven to protect them from the evil demons cloaked with flames rising from the pits of hell. A simple google image search reveals countless images of angles full of light and positive imagery, a direct counterpoint to the darkness and fire of a similar demon image search. The connection between angels, demons, and their moral compass has become so ingrained within our culture that the words angel and good, and demons and evil are interchangeable. This was not the original purpose of angels and demons within mythology though. At their creation, these beings were both morally ambiguous allowing them to be good or evil. Even within the New Testament, demons and angels had become less morally ambiguous but they are not on the opposite sides of the spectrum as seen today. How did these beings move from the moral ambiguity of their creation to being the paragons of good and evil they are today?

From their creation within early Jewish tradition and ancient Greek mythology, angels and demons have slowly moved from ethical ambiguity to opposite ends of the spectrum. As writers explored these mythological beings over the course of Jewish and then Christian tradition, the morality emerged. Demons came from the daemons of ancient Greece, who were mythological figures ranging from the great gods of the pantheon to the minor spirits of the forest. Most importantly, daemons were morally ambiguous figures who could be good or bad, which was a trait transferred to demons at this time. Within 1 Enoch, an early Jewish writing,

angels were the main focus of the piece, specifically the choice of angels to be good or bad. In these early texts of angels and demons, both were ethically ambiguous with individuals being good and bad. Within the 1st Century CE, the first Christian writings explored the ideas of angels and demons. In the Book of Revelation (90-95 CE), demons were becoming more closely associated with wickedness as only evil demons are shown, but the idea of good demons still existed. Angels remain completely morally ambiguous within this text as well. Moving into the 2nd Century CE, writers, such as Justin Martyr, continued to explore the definition of these beings. Demons became completely evil and angels began to be more closely associated with goodness within these texts. In the 3rd Century CE, Origen determined that demons were fully evil and meant to corrupt humans, while good angels were taking more of a precedent over bad angels. Eusebius, writing in the 4th Century CE, finalized the death of the moral ambiguity of these beings as his angels become only good and his demons only evil. The change within each of these texts that created the change of morality comes down to the presentation of free will. Angels and demons were portrayed as morally ambiguous in early writings due to their free will, but as they became separated by a rigid definition of moral duality, their free will disappeared.

In his 2010 article, “When Did Angels Become Demons,” Dale Martin¹ explored the connection between angels and demons from their creation to Christian writings. He argued that for most of their history, angels and demons were separate beings. From the earliest translations of Jewish texts to Greek, demons were translated as daemons of Greek mythology and angels were messengers. The Greek daemon was a morally ambiguous figure referring to minor spirits to “[e]ven the high gods were called daimons at times, as in Homer and Hesiod.”² By connecting

¹ Dale Martin, “When Did Angels Become Demons?”

² Martin, 662.

the demons of Jewish and Christian mythology to these Greek figures, the translators were establishing the ambiguity of these figures. The demons of Jewish and Christian tradition were not evil or bad but had the free will to choose, as shown through the original connotation of the word. Likewise, angels were not translated to a word that had a specific connotation but were merely messengers. These messengers had the capability of good and evil. Angels and demons at their very creation were not associated with a positive or negative connotation, but were instead merely supernatural beings within Jewish and Christian tradition who had the capability of being good or evil.

1 Enoch was an early Jewish writing that tells about the fall of the angels from heaven. In this, 200 angels began to lust after mortal women and fell to Earth in order to be with them. They slept with the women, who then gave birth to monstrous giants, and the angels lived on Earth corrupting the humans and leading them into lives of sin. Eventually, God sent his holy angels down to Earth to cast the wicked angels into pits of punishment where they would stay until the end of the earth and clear the earth of sin. In this piece, the portrayal of angels shows the conflict between the good angels and bad angels. The angels who chose to follow God are shown punishing their brethren who chose to revolt in direct conflict with one another based on their choice of morality. The text has to clarify which angels belong to which side, stressing the aspect of holiness or wickedness for each angel: “And these are the names of the holy angels who watch. Uriel, one of the holy angels, who is over the world and over Tartarus. Raphael, one of the holy angels, who is over the spirits of men. Raguel, one of the holy angels who takes vengeance on the world of the luminaries. Michael, one of the holy angels, to wit, he that is set over the best part of mankind and over chaos. Saraqael, one of the holy angels, who is set over the spirits, who sin in the spirit. Gabriel, one of the holy angels, who is over Paradise and the

serpents and the Cherubim.”³ One of the most defining traits of the angels listed is their choice to follow god. The repetition of ‘holy’ stresses the choice of the angels and the war between them. Angels, as a race, are morally ambiguous and have the choice of following God or rebelling against him.

Demons were rarely mentioned in the text and only as associates of the wicked angels. For example, in Chapter 19, the text states, “And Uriel said to me: 'Here shall stand the angels who have connected themselves with women, and their spirits assuming many different forms are defiling mankind and shall lead them astray into sacrificing to demons as gods, (here shall they stand,) till the day of the great judgement in which they shall be judged till they are made an end of.’”⁴ In this quotation, demons are shown working with the wicked angels to corrupt mankind. While never stating outright that demons were only wicked, the focus upon evil demons showed demons beginning to lose their moral ambiguity. When pieces only focused upon wicked demons, an assumption began to develop that the only type of demon that existed is a wicked one. At this point, demons still had the free choice to be evil or good, but the choice was starting to disappear.

In a voyant analysis (Fig.1) of the links between words of 1Enoch, several trends appear in the portrayal of angels. Demons were described so rarely in the text, that a diagram of word connection would be misleading due to the small sample size, so they are not mentioned within the angel diagram or even given a diagram of their own. The angels are directly connected to both holy and chaos, representing their choice between the two. The words heaven and accursed also appeared in the diagram furthering the idea of angels choosing evil and thus facing the

³ 1 *Enoch* 20:1-8.

⁴ 1 *Enoch*, 19:1-2.

punishment of God or siding with god and living in heaven. Another major part of this diagram is the importance of specific angels and the idea of individualism. In this text, the choice of each angel plays a major part as shown through the importance of individual angels. This image highlights the ambiguity of angels within the Jewish text.

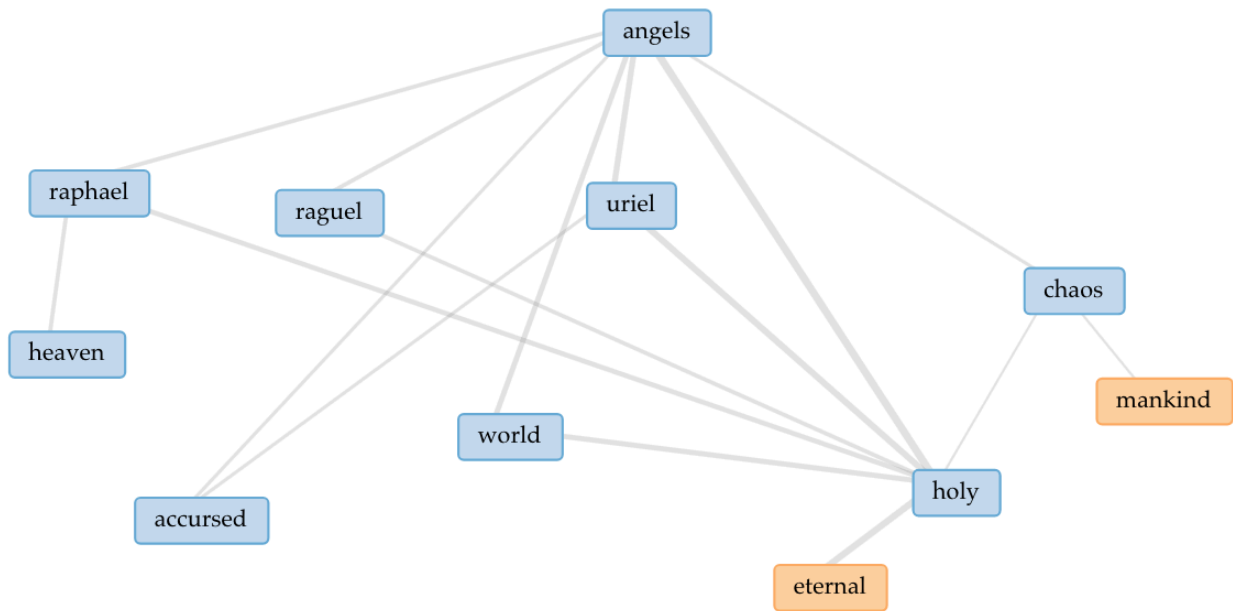


Figure 1: Voyant Analysis of 1 Enoch

In the first century, The Book of Revelation emerged, which would eventually become a part of the New Testament. This piece followed a similar trend to Enoch wherein the angels are morally ambiguous and demons retain their free will, but are beginning to lose it. There were still angels on both sides of the moral divide, some supporting heaven, and some supporting hell. Satan appeared in this text as a fallen angel who was cast down from heaven with his supporters and now is in an eternal war against god.⁵ In this war, there are the good angels fighting for heaven, and the bad angels fighting for Satan: “Michael and his angels fought against the dragon,

⁵ Revelation, 12:9 (New International Version).

and the dragon and his angels fought back.”⁶ Angels within this text retained their free will, and thus their moral ambiguity, to choose between heaven and hell. Demons did not appear often in this text, but again each time was in a negative context. While technically the demons were still able to be morally good, only the wicked ones were shown. This continued to connect the demons more intrinsically with evilness. The ability for demons to choose to be good was disappearing from the written tradition. The Book of Revelation continued to define the moral spectrum of angels and demons.

In the second Century CE, writings such as *The Second Apology* by Justin Martyr continued to explore the morality of angels and demons. In this, he retold the fall of the angels recorded in 1 Enoch with one major difference. In his retelling of the story, demons were the children of the fallen angels. As Martin found, this was the moment wherein angels and demons are no longer separate beings but linked together.⁷ The piece states that God “. . . committed the care of men and of all things under heaven to angels whom He appointed over them. But the angels transgressed this appointment, and were captivated by love of women, and begot children who are those that are called demons; . . . and among men they sowed murders, wars, adulteries, intemperate deeds, and all wickedness.”⁸ Angels retained their ability to be good or evil, but by this point, demons had become linked completely with evil, without any ability to be good. Their free will disappeared with their ability to choose their own morality. Justin Martyr actually gave the ability to choose morality as the definition of free will when discussing angels: “But since God in the beginning made the race of angels and men with free-will, they will justly suffer in eternal fire the punishment of whatever sins they have committed. And this is the nature of all

⁶ Revelation, 12:7 (NIV).

⁷ Martin, 657.

⁸ Justin Martyr, Chapter V.

that is made, to be capable of vice and virtue.”⁹ The angels retained their free will within this piece because they could choose to be good or evil, but the demons had lost that ability. Some scholars debate whether the angels made their own decision to fall or were following Satan,¹⁰ but either decision is a choice of virtue and vice thus fitting the definition of free will. In order to make demons the embodiment of evil without the capability of good, Justin Martyr, and the rest of the written tradition, stripped them of their free will.

In a voyant analysis (Fig. 2) of the connections between words, similar trends emerge between demons and angels in *The Second Apology* by Justin Martyr. Angels and demons, for the first time, are connected with one another, representing this new relationship between the two beings. Angels are connected to eternal, representing heaven and God, but also with wickedness. Demons, on the other hand, are only connected to wickedness, and furthering their separation from the holy beings, they are also tied with men whom they lead down the road to corruption. Ideas of free choice are beginning to appear in connection to the angels and demons, with free will only being attributed to angels, and the connection between choice and sin. Angels retain the choice of free will to be sinful, whereas demons are sinful without the choice to be holy.

⁹ Justin Martyr, Chapter VII.

¹⁰ Jeffery Russel, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition*, 64-66.

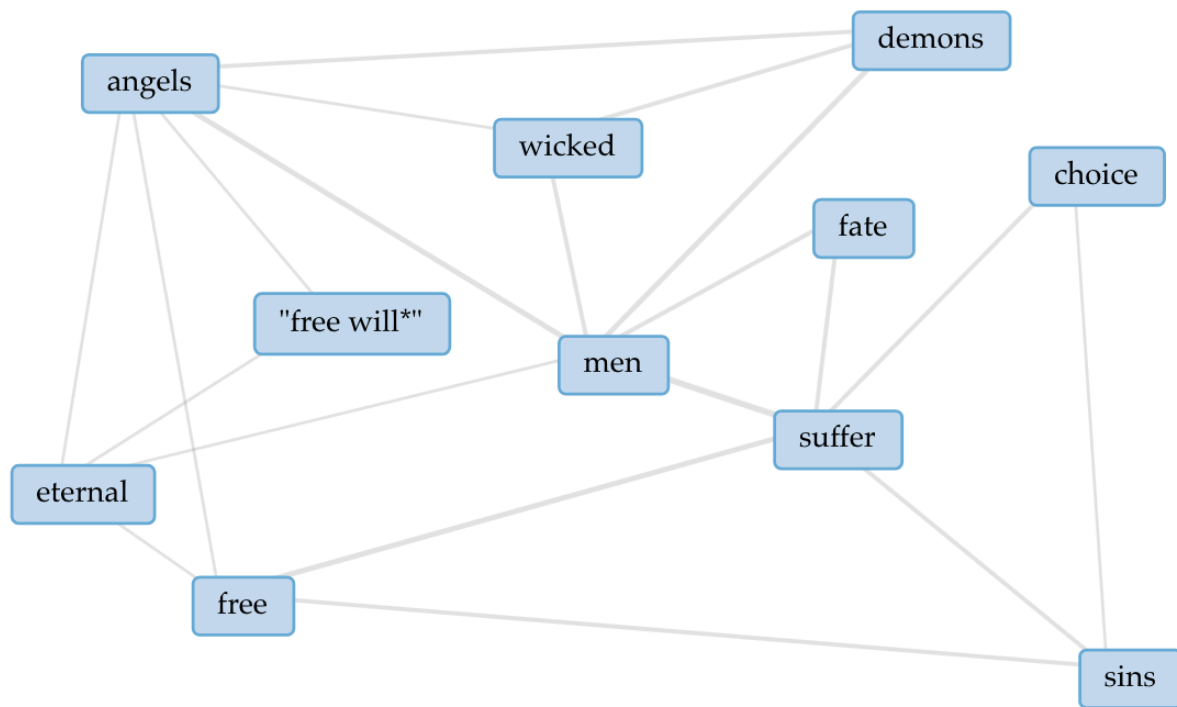


Figure 2: Voyant Analysis of *The Second Apology* by Justin Martyr Chapters V and VII

In the third Century CE, Origen published *Contra Celsum* in 248 CE, which was an essay refuting points brought up by the pagan Celsus. In this piece, he combated the points against Christianity brought up by outsiders, one of which was the role of angels. Celsus claimed that angels were either polytheistic gods, and therefore Christianity worships more than one, or that they were demons in disguise.¹¹ In his response to this, Origen further developed the definition of angels. When describing angels, it was only the holy angels that got mentioned and that man should endeavor to follow their example for they were the embodiment of all things holy: “it is enough to secure that the holy angels of God be propitious to us, and that they do all things on our behalf, that our disposition of mind towards God should imitate as far as it is within the power of human nature the example of these holy angels.”¹² In his definition, angels were

¹¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* V:2.

¹² Origen, V:5.

becoming less morally ambiguous, as only positive angels were focused upon and the idea of evil angels is becoming less and less common. There was still the possibility of evil angels, so technically their free will still existed, but the focus on only morally good angels mirrored the focus on only morally bad demons. At this point, demons were only morally wicked,¹³ and this started by only focusing upon the wicked demons and not mentioning the good ones. Within Origen, angels retained their free will, the ability to choose to be good or evil, but it was beginning to disappear just as it did for the demons.

In a voyant analysis (Fig. 3) of Book V of *Contra Celsum*, the trend of angels becoming more closely associated with positive imagery becomes more apparent. The words most closely associated with angels are God and heaven, whereas the only negative words within Christian tradition associated with them are magicians and gods. When these words are used in association with angels though, they are either in a quotation of Celsus' original refutation or in the context of angels not being similar. Demons remain only associated with words that have a negative connotation such as wicked and corrupting men. The lack of connection between the angels and demons, and the focus upon morally good angels versus the morally bad demons, shows continued movement away from both beings having the moral ambiguity in the beginning.

¹³ Origen, V:5.

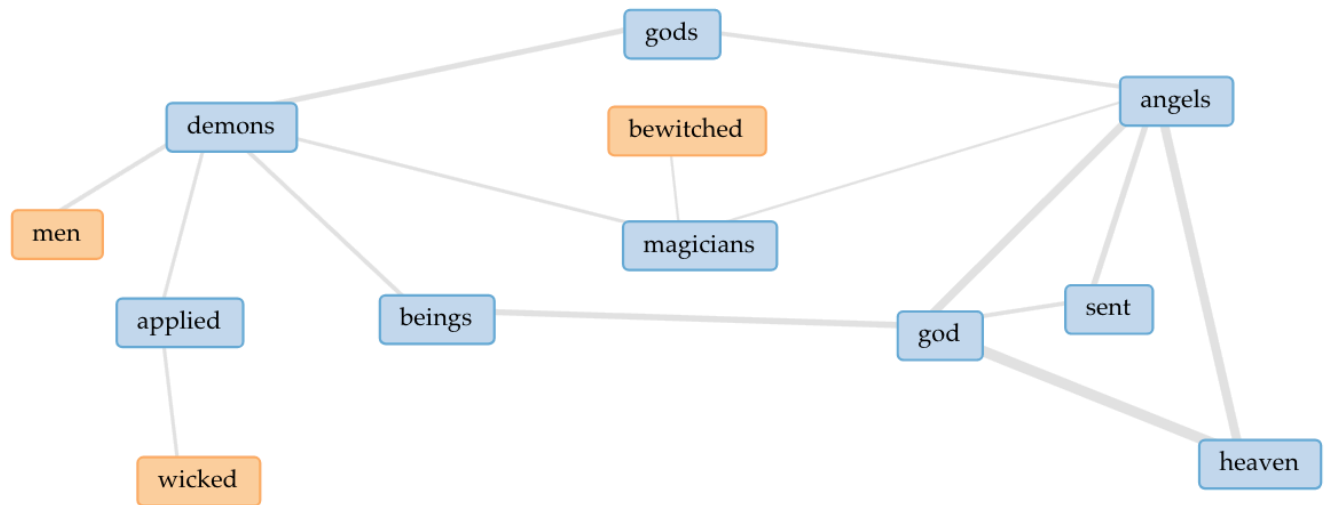


Figure 3: Voyant Analysis of *Contra Celsum* Book V

By the time that Eusebius is writing in the 4th Century CE, angels have finished the shift from moral ambiguity to the paragons of moral goodness that they are known for today. In his first chapter, Eusebius states that God “. . . fills the powers of angels and spirits beyond the heaven and the Cosmos, and the beings who have mind and reason, at once with life, and light, and wisdom, and all virtue, and every good thing from Its own treasures . . .”¹⁴ The possibility of bad angels has been removed from the equation, and yet Eusebius claimed that they still had free-will.¹⁵ This is in direct conflict with the definition of free will laid out by Justin Martyr, wherein free will requires the ability to choose between virtue and vice. Despite his claim of free will, the angels in his text were never allowed to express any but rather serve as lieutenants to God or Jesus.¹⁶ It was not a choice to serve god but rather simply an aspect of their character. In chapter 10 of book IV, the phrase used to describe the behavior of angels is that they “served according to their wont”¹⁷ or in other words, that they served habitually or how they were

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica*, Chapter 5.

¹⁵ Eusebius, Chapter 1.

¹⁶ Eusebius, Chapter 6.

¹⁷ Eusebius, Chapter 10.

supposed to. In the original Greek, the word generally means according to their tendencies or as they were accustomed to. None of these definitions mean the angels chose to follow god or be morally good, but rather supports that they did not have the ability to choose an alternative. In order to create completely morally virtuous angels, Eusebius was unable to portray any free-will for the angels.

In a voyant analysis (Fig. 4 & 5) of Book IV of the *Demonstratio Evangelica*, the divide between angels and demons is crystal clear. The demons within the text are only referred to as bad. Using words such as envy, cunning, and destruction, there is no doubt to the moral alignment of these figures. Demons are wholly bad within the text without the ability to be virtuous. Likewise, angels are only referred to with positive words. Terms such as defend, heaven, and divine highlight the virtues of angels without any room for vice. Free will, at this point, is nonexistent for these two beings as the ability to choose a morality has been removed.

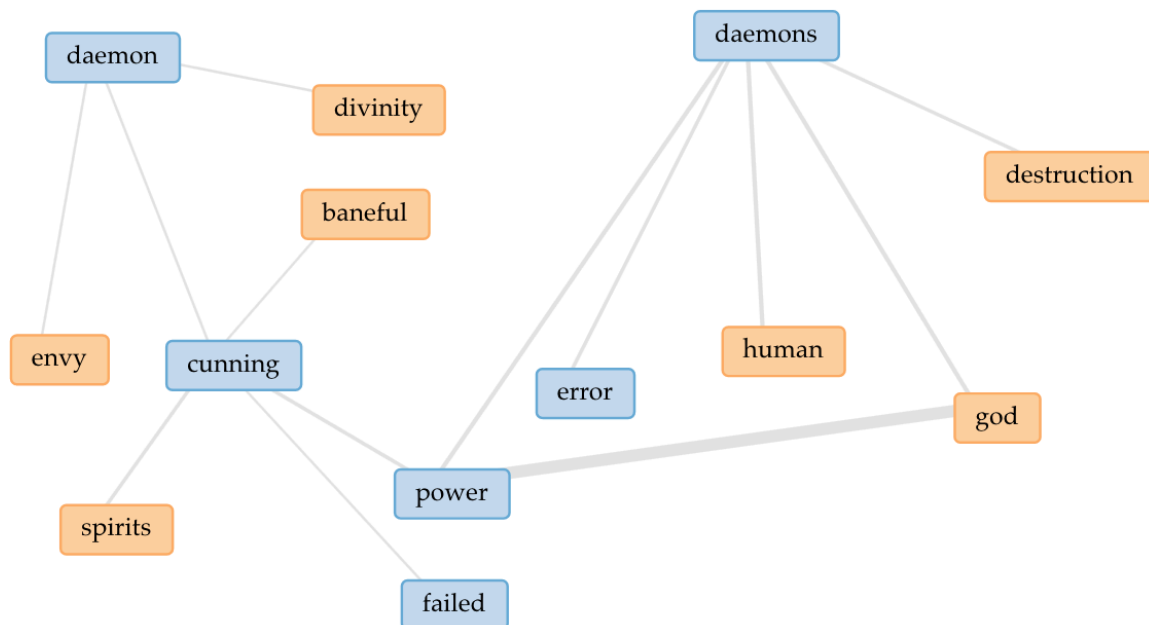


Figure 4: Voyant Analysis of word Daemon in *Demonstratio Evangelica* Book IV

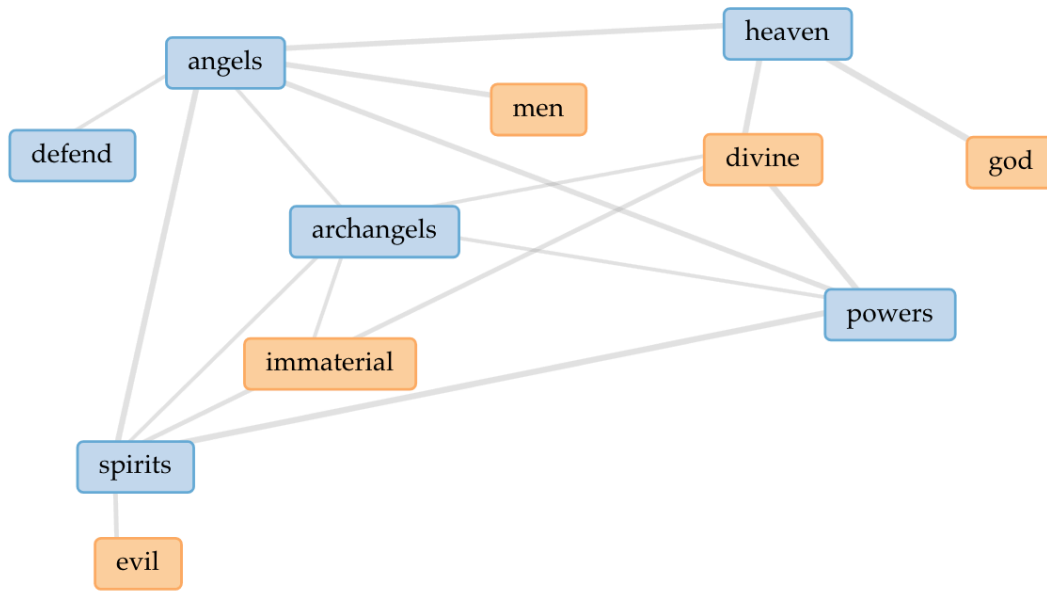


Figure 5: Voyant Analysis of word Angels in *Demonstratio Evangelica* Book IV

The definition of morality for angels and demons experienced a transformation from their creation to the early Christian writings in the c4th Century CE. Moving from morally ambiguous figures who could be good or bad, angels and demons became forced into a rigid duality of good and bad. As Justin Martyr defined free-will as being “capable of virtue and vice,”¹⁸ angels and demons had lost their free will over the course of the written tradition. In 1 Enoch, a Jewish text, both angels and demons had the ability to be good or bad, but by the time of Justin Martyr in 150-60 CE demons were only capable of evil. Several hundred years later, Eusebius took the free will away from angels as well when he removes their ability to be evil. To create the moral duality of all wicked demons and all good angels, the free will of these beings was stripped away. Having started out as morally ambiguous figures, angels and demons were slowly forced into a moral dichotomy with angels representing virtue and demons representing evil by the early Jewish and Christian writers up to the 4th Century CE.

¹⁸ Justin Martyr, Chap. VII.

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