

*Powerful Diabolical Forces Under the Sovereign Rule of God*

Even though the Bible attributes great power to Satan and evil spirits, nowhere are they seen as being out from under God's sovereign control. Perhaps no book of the Bible illustrates this better than the book of Job. Before Satan can attack Job, he must first obtain divine permission (Jb 1:12; 2:6), because God had previously made Job off limits to Satan and "put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has" (Jb 1:10). The book of Job illustrates how God sovereignly rules over both the natural world and the activity of Satan, but the book does not give a philosophical explanation of how God does this. The author of Job simply accepts that God is in absolute control of the natural world while at the same time understanding that natural events do have natural causes. Job does not attempt to establish boundaries of delineation between natural events and the hand of God the way that modern Western people do. Life may be viewed correctly under the model of cause and effect within a natural universe, and all the catastrophic events recorded in the first two chapters of Job are described for what they are: natural phenomena with natural causes behind them. While lightning is called the "fire of God," there is no hint of an Olympian Zeus casting down lightning bolts or of any other such suspension of the chain of nature (Jb 1:16). Job's children are killed

because “a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house” (Jb 1:19). Sabean and Chaldean bandits raid Job’s goods and put his servants to the sword, acting according to their own wills, not as puppets being manipulated by supernatural strings (Jb 1:15, 17).

Yet life is also viewed correctly as the unfolding of the plan of an utterly sovereign God, and all the catastrophic events recorded in the first two chapters of Job may truthfully be described for what they are: the outworking of God’s eternal decree. In the epilogue of the book, the author describes Job’s agony as “all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him” (Jb 42:11). Without making God the author of sin and without ever offering an explanation of how God’s decree is actually carried out in the material universe, the book of Job simply accepts the reality that it is God who has ordained all of this tragedy, employing the Hebrew word *ra* to describe it (רעה): “injury, wrong, misery, evil, trouble” (Koehler and Baumgartner 1958, 899-900).

However, the book of Job presents yet a third paradigm for understanding reality, a paradigm apparently unknown to the protagonist, Job himself: the conflict between Yahweh and Satan. That conflict is

revealed to the reader in the apocalypse that is part of the prologue to the book:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" (Jb 1:6-8).

This apocalypse unveils the conflict that lies behind the whole book, yet Job himself remains utterly unaware that such a conflict exists, even after the Lord speaks to him from the whirlwind. In this conflict between the Lord and Satan, Satan becomes Job's great antagonist, but Job experiences his suffering simply as the result of natural things. The prologue makes this plain: "Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Jb 2:7), yet Job's torturer remains behind the veil. While Job accepts by faith that these tragedies are ultimately under the control of God, he is never given a glimpse of the malicious supernatural being that delights in torturing him.

As with how it deals with the connection between the natural and supernatural worlds, the book of Job does not compartmentalize the

impact of the conflict between the Lord and Satan. The book simply accepts this paradigm for understanding reality as real, alongside the paradigm of the natural cause and effect world of ordinary human experience and the paradigm of the ultimate sovereignty of God over all things. All three paradigms are real and conterminous. The tragic events Job undergoes are natural things with natural causes. Yet these events are the outworking of a supernatural conflict between the Lord and Satan, a conflict that is every bit as real and every bit as impacting as the material causes that connect events within the natural world. And all of these things are under the overarching sovereignty of God, a God who is even involved in the death of sparrows (Mt 10:29). It is as if three witnesses to the same event were to testify in court under oath, and each witness told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Yet each witness told a different story, and while their stories did not contradict each other, at no point were their accounts exactly the same.

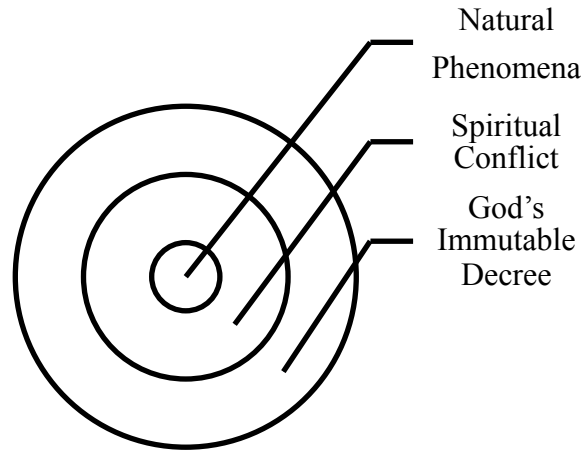
It should not surprise the reader to discover that the Bible simply assumes certain things to be true without attempting to reconcile and delineate them the way that modern Western thought sometimes attempts to do. While the Bible is one of the pillars on which Western Civilization rests, it is not itself a product of Western thought. The Bible

often assumes certain things to be true that may seem to be contradictory to the mind of the rationalist. How can Jesus of Nazareth be fully divine and fully human, and yet one person? How can there be only one God, yet three distinct persons who are God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? How can God be completely sovereign, and yet human beings remain free moral agents, fully accountable for their own authentic choices? The Bible proclaims that all of these things are true, without ever explaining how they can be true other than in pointing to the greatness and majesty of God.

This can be illustrated with the following chart consisting of three circles. The outermost circle represents the universe as governed by God's eternal decree in his works of creation and providence. Included within this large circle are two smaller circles, one within another. This illustrates that these things function within God's plan and that nothing is outside his decree.

The innermost circle represents the natural world where natural phenomena have natural causes; natural life is governed by natural means, subject to the laws and patterns that can be observed in nature. Yet this circle exists within the larger circle of God's eternal

decree: natural things have natural causes, and yet these events take place within God's providence, never outside it.



The middle circle represents the universe in spiritual conflict; it is enclosed within the larger circle because the activity of evil spirits is part of the unfolding of God's providence, and neither Satan nor any other spirit ever acts outside of God's sovereign decree. But the middle circle also surrounds the smaller circle of natural phenomena. As in the case of the trials of Job, Satan is able to manipulate natural phenomena to destroy Job's wealth, kill his children, and destroy his health, yet Satan does this without suspending natural causes. Job's suffering is part of the bigger picture, the conflict between the Lord and Satan, and that conflict is under the overarching, sovereign purpose of God.