

A Biblical Examination of the Concept of Ruling Spirits

More than Meets the Eye

In the pages of Scripture one is confronted with a view of reality quite at variance with the skeptical materialism of Modernism. Without denying the reality of the material universe or the natural causes behind it, biblical writers presuppose the existence of an unseen world that significantly impacts natural things. Taking the Bible's view of reality at face value, ancient Christians confessed that God's universe includes both things that can be materially perceived and things that cannot: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible" (*The Nicene Creed*). Part of that invisible universe consists of spiritual beings created by God, the "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14).

Apocalypse as an Unveiling of the Real but Invisible World

The Greek word that is transliterated "apocalypse," ἀποκάλυψις, literally means "uncovering" (Danker 2000, 112). There is an incident in the life of Elisha that profoundly illustrates an aspect of this kind of revelation:

'When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.' (2 Kings 6:15-17)

This revelation enables Elisha's servant to see the preternatural world, a world that is normally hidden from human observation and which must be "uncovered" in order to be comprehended. Though they were vastly outnumbered by the Syrian army, the reality was not as met the eyes of Elisha's servant, for both he and Elisha had been protected all along, and there was no need to fear. The revelation did not alter reality; it simply allowed Elisha's servant to see the truth of a more complete reality than he could comprehend by his unaided material senses: he and Elisha were under the protection of the heavenly hosts.

Divine Cosmogony and the Presence of Evil

Part of the more complete reality that lies outside the pale of natural human observation consists of malevolent spirits. All of these spirits were created as good, but they have undergone radical change. That should not be surprising as the world that can now be observed is a twisted and painful form of the world God originally created. God created a “good” world (Genesis 1:4-31), but he embedded law into the reality of his creation, with good and evil consequences flowing out of human choice: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17). Human beings violated God’s commandment, and the creation itself was altered by the curse that formed in response to human sin: “Cursed is the ground because of you” (Genesis 3:17). “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men” (Romans 5:12). As a result of human sin, the world became corrupted and pregnant with suffering: “The creation was subjected to futility . . . bondage to corruption . . . the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Romans 8:18-22). One element in this cosmic groan involves the angels who rebelled against God and became malevolent spirits. Satan and other evil spirits are creatures of God, but they have been so radically changed by the presence of evil that they bear little resemblance to their original, sinless state.

Satan’s Rebellion

The Bible does not give a straightforward prose account of the origin of Satan, as Satan, but it does allude to his fall from divine favor in two apocalyptic passages that pull back the curtain:

‘How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.”’ (Isaiah 14:12-14)

“You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering . . . crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You

were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground.” (Ezekiel 28:12-18)

The passage from Isaiah is ostensibly addressed to “the king of Babylon” (Isaiah 14:4), while Ezekiel speaks to “the prince of Tyre” (Ezekiel 28:2). Yet what is in view in both cases is not mere hyperbole, but an apocalyptic pulling back of the veil to reveal that God’s people are facing foes far more powerful and sinister than the rulers of an empire and a city-state. It is as if the spotlight has swiveled from off the actor on the forestage and onto a hideous figure revealed behind the now rising curtain, focusing on the real source of the evil power behind Babylon and Tyre. This figure in the background is the one who showed Christ “all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, ‘To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will’” (Luke 4:5, 6). It is the same character about whom, along with his minions, Paul wrote: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Paul was not saying that human beings have no earthly opposition, but he is directing his readers to the ultimate cause behind persecution: Satan and his hosts of rebellious spirits.

Diversity of Evil Spirits: Satan

Ephesians 6:10-12 is a major New Testament passage for understanding spiritual warfare:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

First, it distinguishes between the devil and other evil spirits: “that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11). Devil (*diabolos*, διάβολος) is the Greek word the rabbis chose to translate the Hebrew word Satan (שָׂטָן) in the Septuagint. In biblical Greek, it is never used in the plural except when

describing human beings who are engaging in slander (1 Timothy 3:11; 2 Timothy 3:3; Titus 2:3), and in the singular it always refers to Satan. In addition to using *diabolos* to describe this arch-enemy of God, the New Testament writers also refer to him as Satan (Σατανᾶς), a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew noun, *satan* (שָׂטָן), taken from the Hebrew verb *satan* (שָׂטַן), meaning to “bear a grudge, cherish animosity,” and related to the Hebrew noun, *sitnah* (שִׂטְנָה) “accusation” (Koehler 1958, 918-919). It is a virtual proper name for this fallen creature. In Revelation 12:9, Satan is also called “that ancient serpent” (ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος), an obvious allusion to the *nachash* (נָחָשׁ, in Greek, *ophis*, ὄφις), the creature who spoke to Eve in the Garden of Eden, tempting her and bringing misery on humankind (Genesis 3:1-19). He is also called “the great dragon” (ὁ δράκων ὁ μέγας), connecting Satan and certain of his agents with the chaos monsters described in the Old Testament. *Drakon* (δράκων) translates the Hebrew word *tannin* (תַּנִּין). Old Testament authors alluded to pagan mythology to proclaim the power and majesty of the one true God:

“It was you who split open the sea by your power; you broke the heads of the monster in the waters. It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan (Greek: *drakon*, δράκων; Hebrew: *livyathan*, לִוְיָתָן) and gave him as food to the creatures of the desert.” (Psalm 74:13-14)

“Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab (Hebrew: *rahab*, רָהַב) to pieces, who pierced that monster (Hebrew: *tannin*, תַּנִּין) through?” (Isaiah 51:9)

What are the “gods” of chaos, the dragons of the deep, such as Tiamat (Leviathan, Rahab), compared to Yahweh? (Job 9:13; 26:12; Psalm 89:10; Isaiah 51:9; Ezekiel 29:3)

Diversity of Evil Spirits: Other Spirits

Satan is distinguished from the spiritual agents through whom he carries out his mission: “We . . . wrestle against . . . the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). While there is only one devil, or Satan, the spirits described in verse 12 are all plural: they are rulers (τὰς ἀρχάς), authorities (τὰς ἐξουσίας), the powers of the darkness of this age (τοὺς κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκότους τούτου) and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (τὰ πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις).

Ephesians 6 establishes that even mature believers should expect that they will have to deal with these evil spiritual creatures, for no less a person than the Apostle Paul describes himself as engaged in a struggle (pale, πάλη), a word originally meaning “wrestling” (Danker 2000, 752). While there is no evidence that a true Christian can actually be possessed by an evil spirit, these spirits are able, nonetheless, to put thoughts into Christians’ minds. These enticing manipulations are described in Ephesians 6:16 as “the flaming darts of the evil one.” As the entire book of Revelation makes clear, Satan and the evil spirits in league with him exercise some authority and control within this world, and their evil actions impact Christians. They are set in opposition to Christ and his Church.

In his parable of the haunted house, the Lord Jesus teaches that there are different kinds of evil spirits:

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation. (Matthew 12:43-45; cf. Luke 11:24-26)

While Matthew and Luke’s choice of the Greek word for “other” (ἕτερος as over against ἄλλος) implies another of a different kind, this word can be used for another of the same kind, and these two Greek words are sometimes used interchangeably (Danker 2000, 399). However, Jesus is quite explicit when he states that some evil spirits are more evil than others: “It goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil (πονηρότερα comparative of πονηρός) than itself” (Matthew 12:45). While one is tempted to roam off into speculation exactly as to how some evil spirits are better or worse than others, caution is called for.

“Jesus asked his father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him’” (Mark 9:21-22). Other spirits are gifted at deception and impose legalistic religious standards, attempting to bring believers into bondage to man-made rules and regulations:

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require

abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” (1 Timothy 4:1-3)

1 Timothy 4:1 mentions things “taught by demons.” In classical Greek the word demon (Greek: *daimonion*, δαιμόνιον) refers to a “divine Power, Divinity, inferior divine being, evil spirit” (Liddell 1977, 365). The rabbis used this word in Deuteronomy 32:17; Psalm 91:6; 96:5; 106:37; Isaiah 13:21; 34:14 and 65:3, terming the pagan gods “inferior divine beings,” as for example in Deuteronomy 32:17: “They sacrificed to demons (Hebrew: shed, שֵׁד; Greek: *daimonion*, δαιμόνιον), that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded.”

The Bible uses the word spirit (both in Greek, *pneuma*, πνεῦμα, and in Hebrew, *ruach*, רוּחַ) in connection with a variety of human evils and emotions. While such expressions are read with Post-Enlightenment eyes as simply describing human emotions and drives, it is doubtful that the original readers would have thought of them as mere human emotions. The Bible talks about spirits of jealousy (Numbers 5:14, 30) and whoredom (Hosea 4:12). In Mark 9:25, the Lord Jesus addressed a particular demon as, “You mute and deaf spirit.” Blindness was caused by a particular spirit (Matthew 12:23), and Luke 13:11 speaks about the crippling work of another spirit: “a woman who had had a disabling spirit (πνεῦμα ἀσθενείας) for eighteen years.”

Yahweh and the “Gods” of the Nations

Satan is distinct from other evil spirits, and those other spirits differ from one another with apparent hierarchies of power and evil. One class of evil spirits stands out in particular in Scripture, the so-called gods of the nations. In his dispute with the Ammonite king, Jephthah argued: “Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess?” (Judges 11:24) Walther Eichrodt comments:

“It is easy enough to show that in ancient Israel the reality of other gods beside Yahweh was still a fact to be reckoned with. The very fact that a particular name was chosen for Israel’s own God, however lofty the conception of his nature displayed in the meaning of this name, proves that men felt the need of special nomenclature to distinguish this God of theirs from the other gods, whose existence must therefore have been assumed without question. In addition, however, there are unambiguous statements to this effect. Among the best known is that of Judges 11.23f., where Jephthah rejects the claim of the Moabites to a part of the territory east of Jordan on the grounds that only what Chemosh gives to the

Moabites and Yahweh to the Israelites can properly be regarded as their just and legal possession . . . Some may be tempted to fall back on the theory that they represent only the lower, popular outlook, and that the convictions of the religious leaders must be placed more in the foreground of the total picture. Such a suggestion is not totally invalid, at least in so far as these pieces of evidence clearly do not provide the only or the whole story about Yahweh's relation to the gods. They do, however, receive strong support from those hymns which extol Yahweh as the highest and the one without peer among the gods, such as Ex. 15.11; Pss. 89.7; 95.3; 97.9; or, which describe his jurisdiction over them, as in Deut. 32.8 Ps. 82.1." (Eichrodt 1961, 220-221)

Inasmuch as Jephthah speaks during the time of the Judges, one should be cautious as to how far his remarks are pressed as expressing divinely sanctioned theological truth. However, while the Bible recognizes the existence of these other supernatural beings, the "gods" of the nations, it never views them any other way than as creatures. They are demons of the rabbis, and this understanding goes back to the time of Moses, as cited above in Deuteronomy 32:17. In the New Testament, Saint Paul affirms this Old Testament understanding: "No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Corinthians 10:20-21).

While the Bible regards these evil spiritual beings as demons, creatures ultimately under God's sovereign rule, it in no way regards them as powerless. Second Kings 3:26-27 describes a scene that modern readers are likely to gloss over. The king of Moab has failed to rebuff the Israelite coalition, and now he resorts to a most extreme measure: he sacrifices his firstborn son. The national god of Moab is Chemosh, a god who, like Molech, demanded human sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5). The implication of the text is that when the king of Moab sacrificed the heir apparent, Chemosh came to the aid of the Moabites and poured out his fury against Israel so that they departed:

"When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him 700 swordsmen to break through, opposite the king of Edom, but they could not. Then he took his oldest son who was to reign in his place and offered him for a burnt offering on the wall. And there came great wrath against Israel. And they withdrew from him and returned to their own land." (2 Kings 3:26-27)

Eichrodt comments, “II Kings 3.27 assumes that every people and country has its own protector deity, and that he may prove effective in power against Israel” (Eichrodt 1961, 221).

Territorial Overseers

On the eve of the end of the Babylonian Captivity in 539 B.C., an angelic visitor appears to Daniel with a revelation from God:

“Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia.” (Daniel 10:12-13)

It is likely that Daniel’s angelic messenger is the archangel Gabriel, the same angel who appeared to him earlier (Daniel 8:16; 9:21). Several other things are certain in these two verses. First, Daniel is told that God had answered his prayer on the first day that he began to pray, but God’s answer had been delayed three weeks because of spiritual opposition. Then he is told that had this angelic messenger not received reinforcements from the archangel Michael, Daniel would still not have God’s answer to his prayer. This adversary who was able to thwart the mission of an angel of God is called “the prince of the kingdom of Persia.” Inasmuch as angels are repeatedly shown in Scripture to be more powerful than human beings (2 Samuel 24:6; 2 Kings 19:35), this “prince of the kingdom of Persia” who restrains an angel of God cannot be human; he must be one of those “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” about whom Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:12.

At the time of this angelic revelation to Daniel, the Jewish people were under the authority of the Persians. The implication is that the prince of Persia had been able to rise up over the spirit who was over Babylon. The power of the Babylonians’ prince was now in eclipse, as the Persian prince had begun his ascendancy of control over world affairs. But Daniel is told that the Persian ascendancy would not last and that there would arise another spirit, the spirit of Hellenism. Daniel’s messenger warns him: “But now I will return to fight against the prince of Persia; and when I go out, behold, the prince of Greece will come” (Daniel 10:20). Once again, Daniel’s messenger tells him that he will need angelic reinforcements to deal with this other demonic prince: “there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince” (Daniel 10:21). The angel then proceeds to give Daniel a very detailed prophecy about the future (Daniel 11), a history that

begins with the last of the Persian kings and goes down at least as far as the Hellenistic tyrant, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.).

In view of the focus on Persian and Greek history that follows, the references to the prince of Persia and the prince of Greece would most naturally have been understood by Daniel's first readers as referring to the evil ruling spirits behind these two empires, what may be called territorial spirits. These spirits dominated, and in some sense, "protected" their subject nations as the Canaanite demon-gods had prior to the Conquest (Numbers 14:8-9 see below) and as Chemosh had done for the Moabites (2 Kings 3:26-27). As a general rule, with certain notable exceptions recorded in Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah notwithstanding, as a general rule, the Jewish people enjoyed much more freedom to practice their faith under the Persians than they did under the Greeks. The dominating spirit of the Persians was gentler than that of the Greeks. The Persians embraced a multi-cultural tolerance throughout their empire; the Hellenists, following the dream of Alexander the Great, were obsessed to make all men Greek and were willing to use the most cruel means to force their monolithic culture on others, as 1 Maccabees 1:1-4:61 makes graphically clear.

One is reminded of the German term for spirit, *geist*. When a particular *geist* dominates an age, one may think of it as a *Zeitgeist*, "the spirit or genius which marks the thought or feeling of a period or age" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1971, 3868). The nature of a culture cannot be found in natural analysis alone, but one must use natural analyses to point to the prevailing spirit influencing a culture. A clue as to the presence of a rival *Zeitgeist* appears when the thinking and actions of people in another culture appear to be insane to the outside observer. In other words, human beings are not completely rational creatures. Not only has sin impacted their ability to reason, supernatural powers of evil blind people to the realities around them. They are, in effect, "colorblind" to their own presuppositional biases that underlie their world and life view, in part at least, because the dominant *Zeitgeist* has helped to shape their *Weltanschauung* and influences them so that it is very difficult for them to see their underlying cultural and intellectual biases.

That is one reason why certain places are more difficult to penetrate with the gospel than others and why there are opportune times to advance the cause of Christ in particular places and not in others. This may account for the Holy Spirit's preventing Paul from traveling further east when he was in Asia Minor: "And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (Acts 16:7; 16:6-11).

As was mentioned above, the idea that some spirits not only dominate but protect their subject nations can be seen in the conquest of Canaan. When ten of the twelve Israelite spies bring back an evil report, telling the people that the forces against them are too great to overcome, Caleb and Joshua respond:

“If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.” (Numbers 14:8-9)

The word translated “protection” is the Hebrew word for shade (*tseḇ*, צֶל), a word often used in the Psalms to describe God’s sheltering protection for his people: “Hide me in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 17:8; cf. Psalm 36:7; 57:1; 63:7; 91:1; 121:5). While there is the possibility that Joshua and Caleb could be referring to some kind of natural protection, as for example, the Canaanites being under the protection of a suzerain state, the more likely sense is that they understand Israel’s God to have disarmed the rulers and authorities of the Canaanites in a foreshadowing of the victory of the Lord Jesus over the dark forces by his resurrection where Jesus is said to have “disarmed the rulers and authorities” and “put them to open shame, by triumphing over them” in his cross (Colossians 2:15). This meaning also fits well with the theological perspective of the rest of the Torah as when God declares in Exodus 12:12, “and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments.” As has been demonstrated, Moses understood that the gods of Egypt were demonic spirits.

One is tempted not to mention a passage in the song of Moses because it involves criticism of the Masoretic Hebrew text and is conjectural. It is the weakest link in the chain of evidence, and the argument as a whole does not depend on it, having been established by numerous passages. However, if the Septuagint reading is correct, it does afford additional confirmation and further fleshes out how these things were viewed as far back as Moses. The Greek Septuagint gives the following about subordinate spirits who dominate nations, ages and cultures: “When the Most High divided the nations, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God. And his people Jacob became the portion of the LORD, Israel was the line of his inheritance” (Deuteronomy 32:8-9).

The Septuagint replaces “the sons of Israel” (יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֵי) with “the angels of God” (ἀγγέλων θεοῦ). This has found support in the Dead Sea Scrolls (the reading could be either אֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי or אֱלֹ בְּנֵי). Patrick W. Skehan sheds light:

“Mention should first be made to another Qumran fragment . . . Deuteronomy 32:8 is unquestionably the source . . . The result is our first evidence in an ancient Hebrew manuscript for the reading of *lemispar bene El*, regularly inferred from the LXX form of this verse and surely original. . . .” (Skehan 1954, 12-15)

Gerhard von Rod comments: “He subordinated one nation to each of the heavenly beings who had to take care of it like a guardian angel” (von Rod 1962, 196). Von Rod’s comments are supported by the Apocryphal book of Sirach: “He appointed a ruler for every nation, but Israel is the Lord’s own portion” (ἐκάστω ἔθνει κατέστησεν ἡγούμενον, καὶ μερὶς κυρίου Ἰσραὴλ ἐστίν, Sirach 17:17, Revised Standard Version).

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 (Job 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” (Job 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 (Job 1:16). Job’s children are killed because “a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house” (Job 1:19). Sabeans 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 (Job 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" (Job 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 (רָעָה): "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?" (Job 1:6-8).

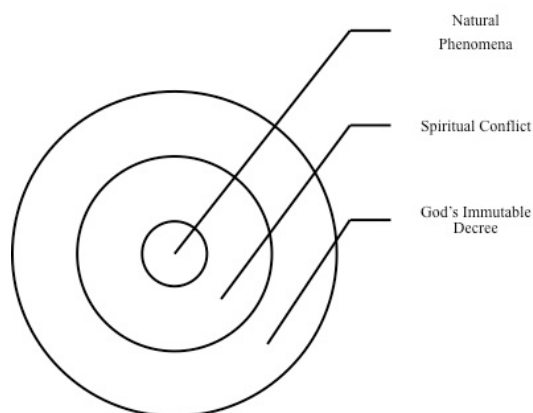
This apocalypse unveils the conflict that lies behind the whole book, yet Job himself remains utterly unaware that such a conflict exists, even after the Lord speaks to him from the whirlwind. In this conflict between the Lord and Satan, Satan becomes Job's great antagonist, but Job experiences his suffering 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" (Job 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.

Evil Spirits Serve God's Ultimate Purpose

It is important to affirm divine sovereignty as extending over evil spirits' activities, as illustrated in the lying spirit who enticed King Ahab to go to his death:

'Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the LORD said, "Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, "I will entice him." And the LORD said to him, "By what means?" And he said, "I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." And he said, "You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so." Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you.' (1 Kings 22:19-23)

The story in Kings is not an isolated account. Throughout the biblical narrative, such things occur, as in Judges 9:23: "And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech." King Saul is sovereignly subjected to a spirit that brings depression, paranoia and rage: "Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the LORD terrorized him" (1 Samuel 16:14). "The next day a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his

house while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand. And Saul hurled the spear, for he thought, 'I will pin David to the wall.' But David evaded him twice (1 Samuel 18:10-11). Therefore, even though the rise of Islam is likely foretold as having come up out of the Abyss in Revelation 9, Islam's inception and progress do not take place in the absence of a sovereign and holy God. The Old Testament prophets constantly warned Judah and Israel that it was Yahweh who raised up barbarous kingdoms whom he used to chasten his people: "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets" (Isaiah 10:5-6).

Islam Serves God's Ultimate Purpose

If people compare closely the standard for the Church of the New Testament with the state of the Church near the time of the birth of Muhammad, it is quite apparent that it had drifted very far from the simplicity of the gospel into works righteousness, idolatry, and superstition. Instead of a Church utterly dependent on the Lord Jesus Christ to revive and protect her by the power of his Holy Spirit, the Church had tended to become a department of state as the centuries passed from the time of the Edict of Milan. Classical Protestant expositors of Revelation saw the chastening hand of God in the swarming hosts of Islam. Yet in spite of this chastisement:

"The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts." (Revelation 9:20-21)

Evil Spirits and the Crossing of the Rubicon of Redemptive History

It is only in the consummation of the ages that evil spiritual activity finally comes to an absolute end when after Satan has been loosed for a season, he meets his final destruction in the lake of fire: "Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations . . . but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:7-10).

Yet before his being cast into the lake of fire, he was to be bound and then released. It is not complete binding, nor is it a total captivity; rather, his binding is in reference to limiting his ability to deceive the nations as the gospel was spread into his former territories: “so that he might not deceive the nations any longer” (Revelation 20:3). Christ speaks of the binding of Satan in Matthew 12:29. Matthew 12:22-32 contains the account of Jesus’ healing a demon-possessed man. Being freed from his bondage to Satan, this formerly blind and dumb man now both saw and spoke. This wonderful sign had eschatological significance to the Jewish people, who responded in amazement by saying: “Can this be the Son of David?” (Matthew 12:23) Realizing the effect of the healing on the people, the Pharisees sought to undermine the power of Jesus by saying that he cast out demons by the power of the prince of demons, Satan (called contemptuously by the name of the dung god, Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies, hearkening back to Hebrew, **בְּבַעַל**, זָבִיב).

Jesus refutes the Pharisees’ charge and then presses the point of what the people had been saying about the Messianic kingdom: “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). The force of this passage must not be missed, for the Lord Jesus here proclaims that the Messianic age has already begun. He speaks of the arrival of the kingdom of God, not in a future tense, but in a past tense. The presence of the kingdom of God means that Satan’s kingdom will now be plundered, but this plundering is not possible without the previous binding of Satan: “Or how can someone enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house” (Matthew 12:29). But what is the healing of the demon-possessed man but the plundering of Satan’s kingdom? And this means that Christ had to bind the devil, in some sense, prior to this healing. The healing was evidence to the Jewish people that the kingdom of God had come and that Jesus was none other than the Messiah who, having bound Satan, would now spoil his house.

What did Jesus’ death and resurrection accomplish? Among other things, they bound Satan so that his captives could be freed from his tyrannical kingdom and transplanted into the kingdom of grace: “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out” (John 12:31). Thus the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry marks the beginning of the end for Satan; and Jesus’ blood seals the devil’s doom. In light of his coming death, Jesus sent out his disciples: “He gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:1-2). The disciples met with success: when the seventy returned to Christ, they reported “with joy,

saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’” (Luke 10:17) Jesus responds by saying, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you” (Luke 10:18, 19). This promise sheds light on the great commission. Because the Lord Jesus had in some sense bound the “Strong Man,” the Church would now have success as she preached the gospel among the pagans. Where the gospel would be preached, the nations would be won to the Savior because Satan had become limited in his power. Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, these evil creatures had attempted to thwart his mission, but by his death and resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ had now defeated Satan and dealt the death-blow to the Prince of darkness: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

However, rather than this deadly blow immediately stopping all Satan’s activity, his defeat at the hands of Christ serves to intensify his rage against the people of God “because he knows that his time is short! And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child” (Revelation 12:12-13). “Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 12:17). That is why the activity of evil spirits does not end with the four Gospels. The New Testament records constant conflict between Satan’s kingdom and Christ’s. Whenever Christ’s disciples invade new territory, they encounter these wicked spirits, as when Philip went down to Samaria: “For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed” (Acts 8:7). During the time that Paul was working in Philippi, he was repeatedly accosted by a young woman who foretold the future by means of an unholy spirit (πνεῦμα Πύθωνος, Acts 16:16). But while others attempt to use Jesus’ name in overcoming these evil spirits and fail (Acts 19:13-16), nowhere does Scripture record a case where the Church after Pentecost ever fails to deal victoriously against them in setting prisoners free.

When the Church ceases to take her stand on the pure gracious gospel that celebrates what God accomplished in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, she is impotent against the hosts of hell. How else does one respond to the manifest defeat and subjugation of the Visible Church in these great waves of Islamic conquest in the seventh and fifteenth centuries, or the ultimate failure of

Christendom to take back the Holy Land from the people of Muhammad in between?

Scripture anticipates not only an intensification of persecution but apostasy from the Biblical gospel: “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30). Throughout two millennia, the Church has experienced cycles of purity and ensuing blessing, followed by indifference and apostasy and the chastening hand of God. As the Lord Jesus warned in response to news about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had shed and the eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, providence is not only hard to read; it is dangerous when it is read with self-righteous spectacles (Luke 13:1-5).

The Church has faced tremendous warfare throughout twenty centuries. Indeed, Christ’s own apostles were sometimes hindered in their mission. In the time between the “now” of Christ’s victory at the Cross and Empty Tomb and the “not yet” of his coming in glory, the Church experiences both great blessing and intense suffering as the defeated hosts of hell mount their last furious and desperate attack before they are finally crushed underneath the feet of Christ and compelled to bow and to confess him as LORD to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11; Romans 14:9-11; Isaiah 45:23). However, “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him” (Hebrews 2:8). That is why Saint Paul wrote to the Church at Thessalonica: “We wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us” (1 Thessalonians 2:18). And he warned Timothy that in the future demons would be successful in bringing destructive heresies into the Church (1 Timothy 4:1-5). The Apostle John warned:

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.” (1 John 4:1-3)

Whether it is by means of fanning the flames of persecution or by means of introducing heresies, the activity of evil spirits remained a clear and present threat throughout the history of the Church in the first century, and this activity climaxes in the last book of the New Testament where the veil is pulled back and one is permitted to see the ultimate cause of evil in this world. However, one must keep

in mind that these passages in no way imply that God is not fully sovereign over everything; rather, they must be understood in terms of the reign of Christ as the mediator king at the right hand of the Father, fulfilling a mission that has been secured but not yet fully applied: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (Psalm 110:1). In this time before the Lord Jesus Christ’s return, the Church still faces dreadful enemies, and according to the tradition of Biblical interpretation for over a thousand years, Islam is one of the principal dangers the Church faces.

As Christians reflect on the fourteen hundred year struggle between Islam and Christendom and the two great waves of invasion Islam successfully mounted, they should give special consideration to the present time. If the Church was encumbered by legalism and idolatry and crippled by dependence on worldly things when she was overcome in the seventh and fifteenth centuries, what is the state of Christendom today? The answer to that question, sadly, is that Christendom has almost ceased to exist. With the exception of post-revolutionary France, from Britain to Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe self-consciously confessed Christ as Lord. In the wake of two world wars, Europe has substantially thrown off the easy yoke of Christ and largely embraced a sterile secularism on the one hand, and returned to paganism on the other. North America is not far behind. Within the lifetime of the present author, the United States has turned from recognizing Christ to forbidding prayer and the reading of Scripture in her most vital institutions. At present the West, particularly the United States, is engaged in a great struggle against international terrorism, but it is increasingly reluctant publicly to acknowledge the real enemy. That enemy is not people in the Middle East; it is not even Muslims. Rather, it is the spirit of ancient Islam as expressed in the Quran and Hadith.

Several concerns grow out of this understanding. First, when Christians attempt to share their faith in Christ with Muslims, they must remember that they are up against more than what blinds others to the gospel. The Protestant Reformers saw Islam as the supernatural thing let loose out of the abyss in Revelation 9. The ruling spirit over it is very powerful, indeed. The demons who serve that spirit keep people in bondage through a variety of means, both natural and supernatural (Chapter 10, Appendix A). But God gives victory when people pray earnestly, as they lay hold of the promises of God by faith in the finished work of Christ. God’s Word never returns void (Isaiah 55:10-11). There is no greater tool to defeat this deadly spirit than truly to befriend a Muslim and build that relationship through prayer to the point that the Christian can give the Muslim a copy of the Bible in his or her native language.

Secondly, while no one can accurately predict the unfolding of providential events before the Lord returns, it is important for Christian ministers to prepare their people for events that appear to be on the horizon. In the light of history, it appears that Islam is mounting a third wave against Christendom. But sadly, Christendom has almost ceased to exist, and the secular societies that have replaced it are impotent to fight this force. People who have no hearty trust in God and his Word seek their comfort and security from the things of this world. They are no match for people who see the goal of this life to be prepared for life after death. Western efforts to temper the Quranic version of Islam has not met with lasting success, and if Christian scholars of the past centuries are correct, the West is stirring up a swarm from out of the abyss. The solution is not to be found in the foreign policy of the United States or in its massive military strength. The call to arms is a call to spiritual battle: “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

The beginning of that spiritual warfare is prayer for true revival to come to the Christian Church. It is a prayer of personal repentance for one’s failure to love his neighbors, including the immigrants whom God has sent. It is a prayer for a heart to love others even when the Christian finds their customs strange and even frightening. It is a prayer that God would apply the finished work of Christ and continue to “bind the strong man,” in this case, the principality over the Islamic Ummah. And it is prayer deeply rooted in the truth that while God’s will is always done on earth, it is not yet done in the same way that it is always done in heaven (Matthew 6:10). True prayer presses God for the consummation because that is when the Lord Jesus will return, and that is when the will of God will always be done on earth exactly as it is always done in heaven.

That prayer must be followed up with study so that the Christian will be able “to make a defense to anyone who asks . . . with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). There are many excellent books that can be used to that end, among them Bassam Chedid’s *Islam: What Every Christian Should Know*. The present author hopes that his small book (Appendix A) may serve that purpose, too. As believers pray and prepare for the future, it is essential that they do not lose heart. The success of the Church’s mission does not lie in the power of the state but in the power of the risen Christ who is seated at the Father’s right hand.

As the Church Awaits the Consummation

Not all things are clear concerning the future return of Christ, especially in terms of the sequence of their unfolding, but the Bible does point to an intense time of falling away when “the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” (2 Thessalonians 2:3). In no small measure the gospel has already triumphed over Satan around the world. Once God’s kingdom was confined to a little country in Palestine; now people from every nation have been released from Satan’s prison house and have become part of Christ’s heavenly kingdom of priests (Revelation 5:9-10; 1 Peter 2:9-10). Christians tend to forget the tremendous triumphs of Christ’s kingdom over the kingdom of the pernicious spirit who set his hosts to oppose the gospel. Countless millions of pagans have been saved from hell, and the gospel has reigned over the lost: Christian principles of philosophy, science, and government have had a tremendous effect in restraining wickedness during the era before the consummation. Even where there is a sliding back from these principles (Revelation 20:7-9), final victory is assured (Revelation 20:9-10).

As believers seek to follow the Lord Jesus faithfully until the time of his return, they must trust him even when the storm clouds gather and the abyss spews out her dark clouds of oppression. The Bible never gives such clarity about the future that the believer can know the details of what is about to happen. It was written to tell Christians how to live as the consummation of the ages comes, not as a guide that sets forth what one may expect to read in tomorrow’s newspaper. Again, the issue is confidence in God and his promises, optimism even in the face of this present darkness. As G. C. Berkouwer wrote:

‘Our difficulties with the New Testament proclamation of the future are not because of its complexity but because of its simplicity. The true New Testament eschatology sees through every secularized eschaton as an impotent effort by man to open the scroll. It dismisses every pessimistic view of history as rash and groundless. On guard against such errors and more and more immune to them, the “sons of light and sons of the day” (1 Thess. 5:5) do not calculate, but understand in patience and faith and expectation, and in the certainty that it was not in vain that Christ died in loneliness beyond the gates of Jerusalem.’ (Berkouwer 1972, 256)

During this time, the believer is subject to demonic attack, but never as before the death and resurrection of Jesus, and never without the confidence of 1 John 4:4, “Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

The very nature of the gospel centers in Christ's victory over the dark powers, and that is part of the message that must be proclaimed to fulfill the mission of the Church. When the ascended Christ gave Paul his great commission, he instructed him that he would deliver him "from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:17-18).

The Church must take seriously that outside of Jesus, humankind remains in bondage to the power of Satan: "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:1-2). Nowhere is that bondage greater for religious people than in the mosques of Islam, yet Muslims are no more depraved than the rest of humankind. Indeed, in terms of kindness and civil righteousness, many Muslims are far better people than those who confess to be followers of Christ but who deny him by their lives.

The Church must proclaim the victory that is in Christ who promised, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). And she must go into the world confident that evil spirits must yield to the authority of Christ, from the lowliest demon, to the highest ruling spirit, even to Satan himself, and certainly the power over the Muslim Ummah: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

'Because Jesus Christ is the first and the last (Rev. 22:13), the eschatological proclamation is strongly Christological. It is not "a supplementary piece of information added to dogmatic anthropology and Christology, but simply their transposition into the guise of the fulfilment." The clarion call of New Testament eschatology is to steadfastness until the end within a deceptive and antagonistic environment.' (Berkouwer, 1972, p. 250)

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