

THE GREAT DRAGON

The Nature and Limits of Satan's Power

Keith Ferdinando

One reality of the African experience which has not been adequately touched by the gospel is the reality of Satan and his kingdom of darkness. Two extreme approaches challenge the African churches today: one that ignores the demonic powers and thereby leaves the Christians defenseless against the attacks of Satan; the other which has integrated the African traditional preoccupation with the powers of Satan and inadvertently magnifies the presence and power of the evil spirits in the Christian church. What is desperately needed is a balanced biblical approach to Satan that arises from a study of the biblical text. In this first article of a two-part series on Satan, Dr. Ferdinando expounds the biblical teaching on the nature and limits of Satan's power.

Throughout the Bible there are references to the existence of an unseen realm of created supernatural beings whose activities impinge on the visible world of men and women. It is divided between those which are obedient to God and those perceived to be hostile to him, to humankind in general, and to the church in particular.

THE KINGDOM OF SATAN

The New Testament writings are united in their approach to supernatural evil, despite variations of emphasis among them. Specifically, they almost all maintain the existence of one evil being of particular importance, commonly called the devil or Satan but identified also under a wide variety of other names. By the name of Satan he first appears in three Old Testament passages (1 Chron. 21:1; Job 1-2; Zech. 3:1), although the serpent of Genesis 3 is unmasked

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as Satan in the New Testament (2 Cor 11:3,13-15; Rev. 12:9; 20:2) and there are other possible intimations of the existence of a pre-eminent supernatural being of evil. In the literature of post-biblical Judaism various names are given to the leader of the rebellious angels, including *Mastema*, *Satanael*, *Samael*, *Beliar* and *Devil*.

Little apparent interest is shown in his *metaphysical nature*, but he is certainly conceived in personal terms rather than as a force or principle. Hence personal attributes are ascribed to him, such as intelligence (2 Cor. 2:10; Eph. 6:11), will and intention (Lk. 22:31; 1 Pet. 5:8; Rev. 12:9ff.; 20:3,8), and deliberate, conscious action (Jn. 8:44). Moreover the suggestion that he rules other spirit beings, the reports of his encounter with Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1ff., par.), and the way in which his name is juxtaposed with that of Christ (2 Cor. 6:15), or of God (Jas. 4:7), all point in this direction.

Theologically this is a point of considerable importance. If Satan were to be understood as merely a personification of *forces* of evil, one would be obliged to conclude either that those forces derived from God, that is from his nature or his works, or that they were co-eternal with him. In consequence either his goodness or his sovereignty would necessarily be called into question, as also the ultimate triumph of good over evil. However the notion that Satan is a being created perfect by God but who corrupted himself by an act of his own self-determination, maintains both God's sovereign rule and his holiness.

Satan emerges in the Bible as the supreme enemy of God and of his works of creation and redemption. The Hebrew term, *satan*, itself means adversary. Some of the titles given him, such as 'ο το κρατος εχων του θανατου (*him who holds the power of death*: Heb. 2:14f.) and ανθρωποκτονος (*murderer*: Jn. 8:44), suggest that the destruction of humanity is among his most important defining characteristics. In Revelation 9:11 the ruler of the demonic scorpions which torment sinful humanity, called *Abaddon* or *Apollyon* which both mean 'Destroyer', is also most likely Satan himself. Following the work of Christ his hostility is focused particularly on the church whose members have been saved from sin and death, and from his own tyranny. Accordingly he is portrayed as the lion, 'looking for someone to devour' (1 Pet. 5:8) and the dragon who attacks the woman and 'her offspring' (Rev. 12:13-17), while Paul exhorts the Ephesians to take up spiritual weapons against him (Eph. 6:10-20). Such representations are thoroughly consistent with the three Old Testament references to Satan noted above, in all of which he is seen pursuing the destruction of those identified as servants of God: David, Job and the high priest Joshua.

In the fourth gospel Satan is the only disobedient supernatural being to play any significant role; the only references to demons are those in which Jesus' opponents seek to denounce him as one demon-possessed (Jn. 7:20; 8:48,52; 10:20f.). However, elsewhere numerous passages suggest that Satan is supreme among a host of evil spiritual beings - demons, angels and 'principalities and powers' - which also appear to be personal in nature.¹ In the synoptic gospels demons speak to Jesus and, like Satan himself, demonstrate will and intelligence (as in Mk. 1:24; 5:12). Moreover the synoptists emphasise the unitary nature of the demonic realm under Satan's control much more than was generally presupposed within Judaism.

There is evidence of a definite shift of emphasis from the operation of individual demons to the view that they formed part of the kingdom of Satan. ... Jesus regarded the operation of evil through the demons as part of the activity of Satan. ... [he] does not have an atomistic view of the world of evil, but sees it as a unity under Satan.²

This is not to deny that some postbiblical literature assumed a connection between Satan and demons, but generally demons were seen as isolated, individualistic agents of misfortune. Jesus' words in the Beelzebul controversy (Matt. 12:25-29; Mk. 3:23-7; Lk. 11:17-18), by which he repudiated the accusation that he was driving out demons by the power of the prince of demons, clearly identified them as agents of Satan's power, part of his kingdom and household, and thereby revealed Satan as the ruler of a demonic empire.

Similarly Satan is represented by Paul as the ruler of evil supernatural powers. The title 'ὁ ἀρχὼν τῆς τοῦ αἵρος' (*the ruler of the kingdom of the air*; Eph. 2:2) describes him as 'the prince of the demonic powers of the air'.³ The air

¹ Cf. Matt. 25:41; Mk. 3:22ff.; Eph. 6:10-11; Rev. 9:11; 12:7-9; 15:13.

² R. Yates, 'The Powers of Evil in the New Testament', *EvQ* 52 (1980), p. 99. Cf. J.D.G. Dunn & G.H. Twelftree, 'Demon Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament', *Churchman* 94 (1980), pp. 217-8; J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology I: the Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1971), pp. 93-4; W.G. Kümmel, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 44.

³ G.M.C. MacGregor, 'Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of St. Paul's Thought', *NTS* 1 (1954), p. 18; cf. A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1990), p. 96. W. Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 84, suggests that the expression refers to the cultural and spiritual atmosphere that envelops people, alienating them from God, and H. Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (Edinburgh & London:

was understood as the dwelling place of evil spirits,⁴ and may thus be seen as 'another way of indicating the "heavenly realm" which, according to Ephesians 6:12, is the abode of [the] principalities and powers'.⁵ The word, ἐξουσία, which normally means 'authority', here describes 'the sphere of the ruler's authority rather than .. that authority itself'.⁶ Satan is thus the prince of that domain in which demons operate, and the expression echoes Jesus' exposure of him as 'prince of demons'.

In Colossians and to a lesser degree Ephesians Satan himself is in fact somewhat eclipsed by what are usually collectively referred to as the 'principalities and powers' (cf. Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:15).⁷ The exact meaning of the vocabulary Paul employs here has been much debated but the beings referred to are best understood throughout his writings, as also in the one non-Pauline usage (1 Pet. 3:22), as those identified elsewhere as Satan's 'fallen' angels (cf. Matt. 25:41; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; Rev., 12:7-9).⁸ Thus in Colossians 2:15 God disarms them, makes a public spectacle of them, and triumphs over them in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:24-25 they are among the enemies Christ must destroy before handing the kingdom

Nelson, 1961), pp. 30f., takes a similar view. Such ideas may be present in the immediately following reference (του πνευματος του νυν ενεργουντος εν τοις υιοις της απειθειας), but contemporary notions of the denizens of 'ο ατηρ rule them out here.

⁴ Cf. W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 19; C.E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 60-1; C.L. Mitton, *Ephesians* (London: Oliphants, 1976), p. 83; R. Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), p. 91.

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 282. A.T. Lincoln, 'A Re-Examination of "The Heavlies" in Ephesians', *NTS* 19 (1972-3), pp. 469f., note 3, thus points out that 'it is not necessary to think that in Ephesians the "air" is one definite and distinct sphere while the heavlies are another'. Cf. also Lincoln, 1990, pp. 95-6.

⁶ Lincoln, 1990, p. 95.

⁷ The principal terms Paul uses are αρχαι, εξουσαι, δυναμεις, κυριότητες, θρονοι. In addition ονοματα (Eph. 1:21) and κοσμοκρατορες του σκοτους τουτου τα πνευματικα της πονηριας εν τοις επουρανιοις (Eph. 6:12) are used once only. The expression επουρανια και επιγεια και καταχθονια (Phil. 2:10) may refer to similar beings.

⁸ Cf. Schnackenburg, 1991, p. 272.

over to the Father. In Ephesians 1:21 and 1 Peter 3:22 Christ is exalted above the powers in heavenly glory; both texts exploit the imagery of Psalm 110:1 embedded in which are ideas of warfare and the subjection of the enemies of the one enthroned, and thus they both imply the powers' defeat and their submission to Christ, their conqueror.

Finally in Ephesians 6:12 the 'principalities and powers' can only be understood as evil spirits or 'fallen' angels, since the believer must struggle and take up spiritual armour against them. Moreover the description of spiritual conflict in Ephesians 6:10-20 again presupposes Satan's rule over the powers as part of his demonic realm. Since they are identified with Satan as the adversaries against whom Christians struggle, they must at least be allied with him (cf. 6:11-12). Furthermore, by listing them in apposition to 'αἱ μεθοδεῖαι τοῦ διαβόλου (*the devil's schemes*: 6:11) Paul seems to be defining more closely the agents by which Satan operates: 'The following enumeration of the evil powers brings to view the spiritual world subordinate to the devil, inspired and directed by him.'⁹ They are part of his empire, the instruments by which he wages war against the people of God but which will ultimately suffer the same fate as himself. Moreover Christ's death affects them in a way similar to that in which the Johannine writings and Hebrews understand it to affect Satan (Col. 2:15; cf. Jn. 12:31; Heb. 2:14-15). Thus when Paul speaks of 'principalities and powers', in that he is referring to the denizens of Satan's spiritual kingdom, it may be supposed that Satan is implicitly included as their head. Equally when in other writings the emphasis is on Satan, included are all those spiritual beings which are united in rebellion with him.

Satan's exercise of power is expressed not only in his rule over demons, 'fallen' angels and 'principalities and powers' but also in the domination he exercises on earth and specifically over fallen humanity. This is expressed in the New Testament in a number of ways, including certain titles which explicitly affirm it. In John's gospel the Lord Jesus Christ three times refers to Satan as 'ὁ ἀρχὼν τοῦ κόσμου τούτου [*the prince of this world*]: Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), and Paul describes him as 'ὁ θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου (*the god of this age*: 2 Cor. 4:4). In both cases references to the 'world' and the 'age' refer to the present world system in rebellion against God, and the titles indicate that it is Satan who inspires and directs fallen humanity in its wickedness. In his first epistle John again refers to his domination of the present evil world in terms which suggest its passive acquiescence in his dark purposes, 'the whole world is under the control of the evil one [lit. 'lies in the evil one', ἐν τῷ πονηρῷ κεῖται]

⁹ Schnackenburg, 1991, p. 273.

(1 Jn. 1:19). Similarly Paul describes Satan's inspiration of those who are dead in sin (Eph 2:2) and who walk *κατα τον αρχοντα της εξουσιας του αερος* (*according to the prince of the power of the air*). In the temptation narratives of Matthew and Luke Satan himself claims to dispose of all the kingdoms of the world (Mt. 4:8-9; Lk. 4:5-7).

BIBLICAL DEMONOLOGY

The Bible in general shows little interest in speculative demonology. Old Testament demonology is particularly meagre compared with the demonologies of surrounding cultures, largely because of the supreme importance given to God's absolute sovereign reign over all that he has created. Indeed in its contemporary context the meagreness of Old Testament demonology should be seen, in part at least, as a polemic against the strong emphasis of Mesopotamian religion on the role of demons in human life.¹⁰ New Testament demonology is fuller, but still functions within the same parameters as that of the Old. This explains its continuing reticence which is particularly obvious when compared with the increasingly extravagant demonologies of post-biblical Judaism. Thus the synoptists showed no speculative or theoretical interest in demons but were rather concerned with what they were doing and how Jesus dealt with them. This is suggested by Twelftree's essentially pragmatic definition of the synoptic concept of demons: 'Evil spirits/demons are the agents of Satan whose chief role is to cause illness through totally dominating or possessing individuals.'¹¹ Indeed the variety of expressions used by the synoptists to refer to demons or evil spirits suggests the absence of any clear conceptualisation of their nature, thereby again indicating a lack of theoretical interest in the question.¹²

Similarly Paul makes no effort to distinguish between the various beings designated as 'principalities and powers' or to construct a systematic demonology. The terms he uses are employed in varying combinations and linked together for rhetorical effect. 'The diverse terms, which all imply a spiritual, superhuman influence, are not intended to give any gradation or specification but to indicate in their profusion the abundance and development of

¹⁰ Cf. J.H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 66; L.F. Hartman, 'Demons (in the Bible)', in W.J. McDonald (ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. IV (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. 752; E. Langton, *Essentials of Demonology* (London: Epworth Press, 1949), chapter 1.

¹¹ G. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Nottingham University, 1981), pp. 9f.

¹² Dunn & Twelftree, 1980, p. 217.

power.¹³ What is important for the synoptists and for Paul is Satan's rule, and the conflict between his unified kingdom and God's:

In the NT there are two kingdoms, the kingdom of the prince of this world and the kingdom of God. Satan fights with all his might against the kingdom of God. There is thus no place for any special interest in the subordinate helpers in this conflict, whether angels on the one side or demons on the other.¹⁴

Throughout the Bible therefore, where the demonological is introduced it is for practical pastoral and theological reasons rather than out of speculative curiosity; for the visible world is seen as a theatre of maleficent activity by supernatural beings, as also by occult practitioners. Very little is in fact said concerning magic, particularly in the New Testament, although where it does come into view there is the same negative attitude towards it as is found in the Old (cf. for example Acts 8:9-24; 13:4-12; 19:13-20; Gal. 5:20; Rev 21:8; 22:15). The absence of a speculative interest in magic means that little indication is given of the source of its power, but there are suggestions that it is essentially satanic (Acts 13:10; 2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 13:13). Nevertheless its potential efficacy is assumed.

Consequently it is not easy to develop a coherent anatomy of the supernatural world(s) of the New Testament writers. Sometimes it is difficult to establish whether reference is being made to obedient or disobedient spirit beings (as in 1 Tim. 3:16), or indeed to spirits at all (Rev. 1:20), and the nature of the relationship existing between entities variously designated as demons, powers or Satan's angels is also unclear. Similarly the New Testament gives little attention to the origin of evil supernatural beings.¹⁵ Such allusions as are made are incidental, as in Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4 (and perhaps 1 Tim. 3:6;

¹³ Schnackenburg, 1991, p. 77.

¹⁴ W. Foerster, 'δαίμων, δαιμονιον', in G. Kittel (ed.), *TDNT*, vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 18.

¹⁵ Some writers such as M.F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology* (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press, 1952), p. 184, & E.M.B. Green, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1981), pp. 39-42, identify a 'fall' of Satan in Isa. 14:12-20 but the text offers little exegetical support for such a view. Cf. P.J. Nel, 'The Conception of Evil and Satan in Jewish Traditions in the Pre-Christian Period', in P.G.R. de Villiers (ed.), *Like a roaring lion ...: Essays on the Bible, the church and demonic powers* (Pretoria: C.B. Powell Bible Centre, University of South Africa), 1987, p. 15, note 14.

5:21). In John 8:44 the phrase *καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ οὐκ ἔστηκεν* (*not holding to the truth*) may perhaps be an implicit reference to Satan's 'fall',¹⁶ while Revelation 12:4 possibly alludes to his inspiration of an angelic 'fall': 'His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them down to the earth.'¹⁷ There are references to a primeval fall of Satan in Luke 10:18 and Revelation 12:7-8, but in each case the incident is used as a metaphor for the effect on Satan either of the disciples' exorcisms or of the coming and victory of Christ. The implication is that the New Testament writers did not consider the development of a systematic demonology to be of prime importance. What concerned them was the reality of the power of 'ὁ τοῦ κόσμου ἀρχὼν τούτου' [*the prince of this world*] (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and its significance for the church, and of course the impact of Christ's work on him.

HUMAN SIN, DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND SATAN

Two fundamental perspectives shape the biblical writers' developing understanding of the nature of Satan's power, particularly with reference to humanity. First, it is closely related to human sin. The power he wields over mankind is not based on any supposed 'legal' right, although this has sometimes been suggested. Luke 4:6, in which Satan claimed that all the authority and splendour of the kingdoms of the world had 'been given' to him, implying that God was the giver and that he had therefore a legitimate right to dispose of them as he wished, is sometimes quoted to support this view. However the Bible does not affirm all that it contains, and the one whose words are here recorded is elsewhere described by Christ as 'a liar and the father of lies' (Jn. 8:44); the temptation narratives themselves illustrate his devious manipulation of the biblical text to achieve his evil purposes. The very fact that he is finally 'driven out' (Jn. 12:31) and that his forces are disarmed and defeated (Col. 2:15) suggests that he is an illegitimate usurper to be judged and dispossessed rather than one possessing valid rights and claims which would have to be legally settled.

It is human sin that constitutes the basis and opportunity for the tyranny Satan exercises over men and women. The Bible indicates that he is related to such sin in several ways. In the first place, it constantly portrays him as a tempter who seeks to seduce to sin. In Matthew 4:3 and 1 Thessalonians 3:5

¹⁶ J.R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1964), p. 137 says, 'This seems to indicate a fall from the truth in which he once "stood" (RV)'.
¹⁷ W. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1962 [1940]), p. 136.

he is actually called 'ο πειραζων (*the tempter*). His purpose in the persecution of Job was not so much to afflict him physically and materially as to induce him to curse God (Job 1:11; 2:5); in 1 Chronicles 21:1 he tempts David to take a census of the people of Israel; and most important of all, as the serpent in Genesis 3 he lures Eve to eat the forbidden fruit and so precipitates the original human rebellion against the Creator. In the New Testament he makes his first appearance as the tempter of the Lord Jesus Christ himself; he tempts Peter (Lk. 22:31-32), Judas (Lk. 22:3-4; Jn. 13:2) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:3); and the epistles contain numerous warnings against his temptations and the ruses he employs to make them effective (1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 4:27; 6:10-20; 1 Tim. 5:15). Moreover his temptations embrace not only moral seduction but also the inciting of defection from the truth, the corruption of thinking as well as of morals (2 Cor. 11:14-15; 2 Tim. 2:25-26).¹⁸ However it is vital to notice that nowhere in the Bible is Satan's activity as tempter held to lessen human responsibility and consequent guilt. The temptation of David, Judas and Ananias by Satan did not mitigate their culpability and consequent punishment. They are not identified as victims but as responsible agents who freely sinned.

Besides seducing to sin he also accuses those who succumb. In Zechariah 3:1 he stands accusing Joshua, and accusation is at the heart of his attack on Job to whom he attributes motives of self-interest and insincerity for his apparent fear of God (Job 1:9-11; 2:4-5). In Revelation 12:10 it is as 'the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night' that Satan is expelled from heaven, and it is at least likely that the question of Romans 8:33, 'Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?' has Satan in mind as the potential accuser.

Finally he is a murderer who holds the power of death (Jn. 8:44; Heb. 2:14). Death is the judicial penalty for sin which is imposed by God himself, as the Bible makes abundantly clear (cf. Gen. 2:16-17; Rom. 6:23). If Satan inflicts death, as well as lesser physical afflictions,¹⁹ it must be that he somehow exploits the penalty which properly attaches to sin.

He is thus tempter to sin, accuser of sin and exploiter of sin's penalty. And it is by inspiring sin that he enslaves rebellious men and women to his own authority. It is human sin that empowers him and gives him such control over humanity as he possesses, which becomes particularly evident in passages

¹⁸ Cf. C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A. & C. Black, 1973), p. 274.

¹⁹ Cf. 2 Cor. 12:7; Mk. 3:22ff., par.; Lk. 13:10ff; Acts 10:38; Rev. 9:10f..

which consider the effect of Christ's death on him.²⁰ Those who sin are his 'children' who fall blindly under his dominion and behave as he does, walking 'according to the prince of the power of the air' even though they may deny his very existence (1 Jn. 3:10; 5:19; Eph. 2:2). He endeavours to perpetuate their blindness so that they should not recognise the grim reality of their situation nor the truth of the gospel by which they might be delivered from his grip (2 Cor. 4:4). Barrett makes the point clearly and succinctly:

Man upset the balance of God's creation by reaching for that which was above him, for which he had not been made and was not fitted. Out of this imbalance arise both the anthropological and cosmic malaise of the universe: man attempts to live independently of his Creator, treating himself as his own god, and thereby not only ceases to be truly himself but also loses control of what should have been under his dominion *and falls under the control of demonic powers* [my italics].²¹

His eventual purpose however, as we have noted above, is not simply to enslave captives but to exterminate them, thus destroying the creative work of God himself, and so he accuses of sin and seeks to insist on the imposition of its penalty. He is a murderer and destroyer, and it is by the inspiration and exploitation of sin that he murders and destroys. Satan and all his forces are parasitic on sin; they have no legitimate power over men and women but exploit their rebellion to bring about this final purpose of destruction. It was because of Jesus' own sinlessness that he was free of Satan's control, and that Satan made such efforts to corrupt him. In John 14:30f. Jesus refers to the coming of 'the prince of this world' against him, to take his life. However he continues, 'He has no hold on me, but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.' Whereas other men fall under Satan's murderous tyranny because of their sin, Christ was free from Satan's power precisely because of his sinlessness. Consequently his death was not the necessary penalty of his sins, upon which Satan might try to insist, but an act of loving, filial obedience to the Father.

Second, Satan's power is always exercised subject to divine sovereignty, thus repudiating all notions of a metaphysical dualism in which Satan and God would be equal powers. This is most clearly indicated by the numerous New Testament references to the defeat, judgement and dispossession of Satan and the powers as a result of the redemptive work of

²⁰ This will be considered in a second article.

²¹ C.K. Barrett, *From First Adam to Last: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: A. & C. Black, 1962), pp. 92-3.

Christ (Jn. 12:31; 16:11; Heb. 2:14; 1 Jn. 2:13f.; 3:8; Rev. 12:1ff.; cf. Eph. 1:20f.; 3:10; Phil. 2:10-11; Col. 2:15),²² and by the anticipation of his ultimate judgement (Matt. 25:41; Rom. 16:20; Rev. 20:7-10; and cf. 1 Cor. 15:24). Also very significant are the frequent suggestions of the way in which, in his very malignancy, he operates within the constraints of divine permission and limitation.

This is particularly evident in the prologue to Job, where initially Satan can only touch Job's family and possessions by God's consent and is forbidden, and consequently unable, to touch his person. Subsequently, in Job 2, he is allowed to afflict Job's body but not to kill him; as a result although Job suffers appallingly he does not die. Similarly in Luke 22:31 Jesus informs Peter that Satan has 'asked' to sift him. The temptation of the apostle can take place only by divine consent. And while the author of Revelation lays considerable emphasis on the activity of Satan and his forces in the world, frequent references indicate the overruling of God in all that they do (Rev. 9:1,5; 11:6-7; 13:5ff.). The use of the 'divine passive' (*passivum divinum*) in Revelation 13:5-7 suggests that the Satanic beast's power to blaspheme and to attack and defeat the people of God came ultimately from God himself. Moreover it is not only that God controls and limits what Satan does but that he uses it to accomplish his own purposes, including purposes of judgement. In a striking passage Caird draws attention to this repeated feature as it finds expression in Revelation:

Throughout his book John is constantly trying to show how God's hand may be detected in the affairs of the world; but he is equally insistent that Satan can do nothing except by the permission of God, who uses Satan's grimmest machinations to further his own bright designs.²³

Similarly the impact of the dual account of David's numbering of Israel (2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Chr. 21:1) is to suggest that the same event may be viewed from the twin perspectives of Satan's malice and of divine purpose. However even the chronicler, who attributed the temptation to Satan, 'still looked on Satan as one who, as in Job, was strictly limited by God's overriding sovereignty, and .. could indeed be an instrument of the ultimate divine will.'²⁴ In Matthew 4:1 it was

²² Paul's epistles focus on the impact of Christ's work on the powers rather than Satan, but in Ephesians he is the powers' ruler so their defeat is his. 1 Pet. 3:18-22 also relates Christ's work to the powers' defeat rather than Satan's.

²³ G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: A. & C. Black, 1966), p. 36.

²⁴ H.G.M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (London: Marshall, Morgan &

the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil, for it was God's purpose that his Son be tested (cf. Mk. 1:12; Lk. 4:1). In 1 Cor. 5:5 Satan's destructive hostility is exploited in the disciplining of a church member (cf. 1 Tim. 1:20); and in 2 Cor. 12:7 the malevolence of an angel of Satan, probably a demon, serves the divine purpose in keeping Paul from becoming conceited and so ensuring his continuing usefulness as a servant of Christ. What Calvin says of Satan accurately reflects the entire biblical witness:

Because with the bridle of his power God holds him bound and restrained, he carries out only those things which have been divinely permitted to him; and so he obeys his creator, whether he will or not, because he is impelled to yield him service wherever God impels him.²⁵

These two perspectives explain the *relative* unimportance of demonology in the New Testament. The fact and extent of Satan's domination of the present age, and the reality, severity and variety of his maleficent activities are not to be denied. What *is* important however are the human sins upon which Satan's power is founded, and the sovereign creator against whom those sins are committed and within whose sovereign jurisdiction Satan operates.

CONCLUSION

The two perspectives just discussed have significant implications for the understanding of the gospel and of the power of Satan in the African context. First they mean that men and women are not primarily victims of hostile supernatural forces but sinners responsible for their own condition; Satan is parasitic upon human sin and would have no power over humanity were it not for such sin. Such an understanding greatly diminishes the responsibility of evil powers for the human condition. It does not deny the reality of the power and animosity of Satan and his hosts, but puts them in a proper biblical perspective. Any proclamation of the good news must indeed address the menace that evil powers present to mankind, but that menace must also be seen in its true proportions. The great problem of humanity does not lie outside of itself in the hostility of Satan and his kingdom, but within in rebellion and sin.

Furthermore, and related to what has just been said, the menace that Satan presents is not primarily that of physical affliction, although he is indeed a murderer and destroyer, but that of moral and spiritual destruction. He inspires the wickedness of mankind and blinds the eyes of unbelievers to prevent their

Scott, 1982), pp. 143-4.

²⁵ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.14.17.

responding to the gospel; and he tempts believers to sin and doctrinal falsehood in order to undermine their testimony and cause havoc within the church. The purpose of his affliction of Job was not primarily to hurt him physically but to destroy him spiritually by so undermining his faith that he would curse God. Similarly when Peter warned his readers about Satan the roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8) his great concern was not the physical persecution Satan was at that time inspiring against them, but the danger that such affliction might bring about their spiritual defection. The true nature of the danger posed to humanity and particularly to the people of God by the kingdom of darkness must be correctly appreciated if it is to be appropriately and effectively resisted.

Finally, Satan is and always has been subject to the sovereign rule of God. In this respect the work of Christ could not alter his status for it did not, and could not, add to divine sovereignty. It is not the doctrine of redemption but that of creation which affirms God's absolute rule and Satan's complete subordination. It is the awareness of this subordination that inhibits demonological speculation throughout the Bible. Consequently the spirit and occult world that emerges in the Bible receives much less attention than does that of African traditional religion or of any other traditional religion, which is particularly significant given the preoccupation with the demonic in the cultures surrounding that in which the biblical writings took shape. The dynamic monotheism of the biblical writers means that lesser spirits and occult activity are deliberately demoted, becoming issues of *relatively* peripheral concern. They understood the invisible world as a monarchy in which God exercises omnipotent rule over spirits and men both good and evil.

The fixation of African traditional religion with spirits, witchcraft and sorcery, stands in sharp contrast with this biblical reticence; while in the Bible the spirit and occult world is effectively eclipsed by God, in African traditional religion the situation tends rather to be reversed. In the living experience of its adherents it is the world of lesser spirits and of witches and sorcerers which is of dominant spiritual and existential concern; there is 'a dependence upon lesser spiritual causalities because there is no adequate recognition that the great power of the one God could really be concerned with this or that side of one's own small life.'²⁶

Consequently African traditional religion gives the impression of an anarchy of spirits and of occult forces, over which God may in principle be supreme, but in which he rarely if ever intervenes. This in turn explains the fear

²⁶ A. Hastings, *African Christianity* (London and Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), p. 74.

and uncertainty often experienced in traditional Africa, for the individual feels that he is at the mercy of a variety of unpredictable spiritual forces whose activities are in practice largely unrestrained. It is the Old Testament vision of the sovereign, mighty God and of his providential rule over the whole of creation that provides the Christian with his initial assurance in the face of such concerns, an assurance which is reinforced with the realisation that in his death and resurrection Christ has triumphed over every dark and threatening power. Nothing, not even angels, demons and powers, can separate him 'from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:37-39).