

**‘An Evil Spirit from the Lord’—
Demonic influence or divine instrument?**

1. Introduction

My purpose in this article is to look at how the Old Testament views spiritual beings in general and evil spiritual beings in particular. A further consideration will be whether this reflects only what Israel believed about the spiritual realm or points beyond elements of historical faith to a more objective spiritual reality and whether this accords, also, with the teaching of the New Testament.

It is always necessary to guard against imposing on the Old Testament ideas and structure that are foreign to it — something that has frequently been the case when looking at the realm of the supernatural. The New Testament contains a much more developed demonology and it is tempting to try to read this back into the Old. I would want to argue very strongly in favour of the consistency of divine revelation from one Testament to the other; but I would contend also that the traffic should not be all one way! The New Testament needs to be read against the background of the Old, and the possibility envisaged that even in areas where the Old Testament is less clear, it may still lend helpful, not to say vital, insights to a proper understanding of the Biblical whole. The other, related, danger is to read the Old Testament too selectively. Some more popular treatments of the spirit world draw attention to, for example, Is. 14:12–14 and Ezk. 28:12–17, and maybe make reference to Job and Daniel, but fail to take account of other passages which appear less clear or which do not fit so easily into their proposed scheme. Recognising the pitfalls, what follows will endeavour to look at the overall picture and to do proper justice to what the Old Testament has to say as well as to observe links with the New Testament.

2. Evil Spirits in the Old Testament

Up to this point I have avoided making reference to ‘evil spirits’ because, with the obvious exception of the *Spirit of the LORD* (the *ruach YHWH*), ‘spirits’ are mentioned infrequently in the Old Testament, and came to prominence only in later Judaism. However, as a point of

departure for this study I am going to begin with one Old Testament passage which does include such a reference, the text suggested by the title, i.e. 1 Sa. 16:14, 'Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.'

A key idea in this statement is that the withdrawal of the Spirit of the LORD who had earlier come on Saul in power as a sign of his choice by God as king and led him to prophesy and even to become a new person — caused a spiritual vacuum that was subsequently filled by another *ruach*, described as 'evil' (*ra'ah*), and which was the source of Saul's misery. What prompts further comment is that this evil spirit is described as coming from Yahweh. This raises questions both as to its nature — what is this 'evil spirit'? and also as to its relationship to Yahweh — in what sense is it 'from the LORD'?

Ruach may denote human disposition or feelings.¹ The only other occurrence of the term 'evil spirit', apart from references to the spirit which troubled Saul, is in Jdg. 9:23, 'God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem', and there it may well refer to a hostile mood or impulse rather than to the work of a supernatural being. It has been suggested that Saul's condition was an emotional or mental illness, maybe depression or melancholia. It is sometimes argued that, in the ancient world, such conditions were attributed to affliction by evil spirits,² (something which is also frequently asserted with regard to the New Testament); but this would seem to presuppose a world-view in which evil spirits were commonplace — and, as already noted, that is not the case in the Old Testament! Lindström suggests that there may be an older tradition incorporated into the account in 1 Samuel which focused on Saul's agony and in which *ruach* may have signified the king's mood or feelings. However, he notes that in the final draft the writer intends to point to more than simply a mental condition.³

With regard to its relationship with Yahweh, the 'spirit' is variously described as an 'evil spirit from the LORD' (1 Sa. 16:14; 19:9), an 'evil spirit from God' (1 Sa. 16:15, 16; 18:10), a 'spirit from God', or simply an 'evil spirit' (1 Sa. 16:23). Many commentators note, with the NIV margin, that *ra'ah* does not necessarily have an ethical connotation; it could be translated 'harmful', or 'injurious'. The designation 'evil' may describe, not its character, but its function: to bring harm as an instrument

1 E.g. *grief* (Gn. 26:35), *jealousy* (Nu. 5:14), *discouragement* (Ex. 6:9); cf. also Jos. 2:11; 5:1; 1 Sa. 1:15; 1 Ki. 10:5; Pr. 14:2; Gn. 45:27 cf. Jdg. 15:9. N. H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1953) describes *ruach* as 'controlling power in man' (148); it stands 'for that in a man which so dominates him as to ensure a particular line of action' (147) (cf. Ps. 51:10; Nu. 14:24; Job 32:18–19).

2 E.g. J. Mauchline, *1 & 2 Samuel* (New Century Bible; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971) 130.

3 F. Lindström, *God and the Origin of Evil* (Coniectanea Biblica; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983) 78–84.

of divine judgment. According to Lindström, Saul's anguish is the work of God's spirit; it is a negatively effective charisma which corresponds to the special charisma with which Saul had been anointed but which has now been transferred to David. He approves of the view expressed by Johnson,⁴ that the term *ruach*, represents the power 'by means of which the deity is able to influence man for good or ill'.⁵

The lack of references to 'spirits' in the Old Testament makes it difficult to be certain whether the source of Saul's agony is viewed by the writer as an effect of God's spirit, or the work of another, separate spiritual being. The terminology of 1 Sa. 16:14 might suggest differentiation; other passages are, however, less conclusive.⁶ The reference in 1 Sa. 19:23 to the Spirit of God again coming on Saul, to the evident surprise of the narrator, might also indicate that this was viewed as distinct from the usual visitation by the evil spirit.

Further light may be shed on the nature of this *evil spirit* by 1 Ki. 22:19–23 (2 Ch. 18:18–22), where the divine purpose to bring trouble on a king, this time Ahab, is also accomplished by a *ruach*, referred to as a 'lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets' (v 22). Again, it is not clear from the text that this spirit is to be viewed as 'evil'.⁷ The initial reference is, simply, to 'a spirit' and it is with regard to its assignment rather than to its character that it is subsequently described as a *lying spirit*. Here, even more clearly than in the earlier passage, the spirit is distinguished from God; he presents himself to God, he converses with God and he goes out from God. Nevertheless, Lindström sees this *ruach*, the spirit of prophecy, as an extension of God's personality and psychologically identical to him.⁸ DeVries, similarly, describes the *ruach* as 'the spirit of prophetic inspiration, personified'.⁹ He identifies two independent sources in 1 Ki. 22:1–40, both concerned with prophetic conflict.¹⁰ Verses 19–23 are part of a later account, concerned with the

4 A. R. Johnson, *The One and the many in the Israelite conception of God* (Cardiff, 1942) 19ff.

5 *Op. cit.*, 83.

6 The spirit is designated *ruach* YHWH (1 Sa. 19:9) or *ruach elohim* (1 Sa. 16:15, 16, 23; 18:10). This terminology generally applied to the Spirit of God, though it is distinguished by the addition of *ra'ah* (evil).

7 See, e.g. M. J. Selman, *2 Chronicles* (TOTC; Leicester: IVP, 1994) 412–413; Lindström, *ibid.*, 84–91. However, J. B. Payne, '2 Chronicles' in F. E. Gaebelin (ed) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary 4* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 499, suggests that the Hebrew term, *haruah* points to a well-known spirit (i.e. Satan).

8 *God and the Origin of Evil*, 88–89. See also G. Cooke, 'The Sons of (the) god(s)', *ZAW* 76 (1964) 41–42.

9 S. J. DeVries, *1 Kings* (Word Biblical Commentary 12; Waco: Word Books, 1985) 268. See also S. J. DeVries, *Prophet against Prophet. The Role of the Micaiah Narrative (1 Kings 22) in the Development of Early Prophetic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

10 The earlier source (1 Ki. 1–9, 15–18, 26–37), dated around 800 BC, is concerned with the conflict between prophets of woe and weal; the later source (1 Ki. 10–14, 19–25), dated around 700 BC, deals with the conflict between rival revelations; see DeVries, *1 Kings*, 263–272.

source of contradictory revelation, and intended to show that even false oracles which lure people to divine judgment are inspired by Yahweh.¹¹

The idea that God can be responsible for sending an *evil spirit*, and his apparently deliberate intent to deceive through a *lying spirit*, raises a difficult moral question. Eichrodt draws attention to other cases where God appears to be responsible for evil:

He causes Absalom to reject the good counsel of Ahitopel, in order to bring evil upon him; he inspires Rehoboam to reject the petitions of the people; he stirs up David to begin the disastrous census. He seems to goad Saul into his unappeasable hostility towards David; he hardens the heart of Pharaoh, of Sihon, and also of the Canaanites as a whole. Indeed he even sends out his prophets with the explicit command: 'Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed'.¹²

He goes on to point out that frequently divine causality implies little more than that God causes the evil, which is already present, to increase, and so to become ripe for judgment. He concludes that, in such cases, 'God's power operates . . . within the evil which has been begun by the perversion of the creature's will'.¹³

This interpretation might be applied to the case of the *lying spirit* sent to entice Ahab. The king had already demonstrated his trust in false gods, rather than Yahweh. The message inspired by the *ruach* did nothing more than tell Ahab what he wanted to hear and confirm him on the path that he had already determined.¹⁴ This is evidenced by the fact that even when the king was made aware both of the deception and of the true word from Yahweh, he continued on his disobedient course.

The *evil spirit* which afflicted Saul is probably to be understood differently. Rather than to confirm the king on an evil path already chosen, God's intention appears to be to punish. However, the depiction of Saul's miserable condition as the corollary of the departure of the *Spirit of the LORD* — which was, in turn, the direct consequence of disobedience — indicates that this is more than retribution. Saul set himself on a course which rejected the *Spirit of the LORD*; and by so doing, he opened himself up to another, this time harmful, spiritual

11 See also, e.g. Je. 20:7; Ezk. 14:9.

12 W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament II* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1967) 178

13 *Ibid.*, 179.

14 W. C. Kaiser suggests that God ordered Ahab's downfall 'by the very instrument Ahab had sought to prostitute for his own purposes, namely, prophecy' (*Hard Sayings of the OT* (Illinois: IVP; 1988) 120).

influence. Ultimately, though, because God is sovereign, this spirit too must be from him and, in some way, serves the divine purpose.¹⁵

Eichrodt notes also that, in an attempt to assign all events both good and evil to God, the divine nature might, at times, appear to take on something of a demonic character. P. Volz goes further; he uses the phrase 'the demonic in Yahweh',¹⁶ by which Lindström understands him to mean, 'the result of an assumed process of integration, by means of which the actions of a demonic being originally foreign to YHWH's nature came to be ascribed to the God of Israel'.¹⁷

Passages sometimes quoted in support of the view that pre-Yahwistic demonism has been assimilated into Israelite faith include Gn. 32:23–33 (Jacob's struggle at Jabbok — where some say the opponent was originally a river demon seeking to kill the patriarch); Ex. 4:24–26 (the attack on Moses — allegedly by a desert demon, whose departure is facilitated by the shedding of the son's blood); and Ex. 12:21–23 (the killing of the first-born — by a destroying demon who, some claim, was warded off by the measures contained within the pre-Mosaic Passover regulations). There is, however, no clear evidence that a 'demonic' tradition lies behind these events.¹⁸

Returning to 1 Ki. 22:19–23, the fact that a *ruach* may be personified as something distinct from Yahweh, although dependent on him, and the indication in the passage that this spirit is one of several such beings, leaves open the possibility that the Old Testament writers did acknowledge a plurality of lesser divine beings who were viewed not merely as extensions of the divine personality, but as having their own existence — and among which might be included the *ruach* which troubled Saul. To consider this further, it is necessary to look in broader terms at what the Old Testament has to say about the spiritual realm.

3. Demons

Possibly under the influence, at least in part, of Babylonian and Persian religion, the supernatural spirit world took on a much greater significance within Judaism during and after the exile.¹⁹ By contrast, the Old

15 The idea that God sends trouble is found also in, e.g., Job 2:10; Is. 45:6–7. Joyce Baldwin comments: 'as a philosophical problem, the origin of suffering continues to be baffling, but the people of God are encouraged in Scripture to take adversity of all kinds direct from the Lord's hand (cf. Jn. 9:3; 11:4; 2 Cor. 12:7–10), and through such acceptance God is glorified' (*1 and 2 Samuel* [TOTC; Leicester: IVP, 1988] 123). See also, e.g., Eichrodt *II*, 55.

16 P. Volz, *Das Dämonische in Jaweh*, (Tübingen, 1924).

17 Lindström, *God and the Origin of Evil*, 17.

18 See, e.g., Lindström, *ibid.*; Eichrodt *II*, 52.

19 See, e.g., A. S. Rappoport, *Ancient Israel: myths and legends, I* (London: Senate, 1995) 70–87.

Testament itself has little to say about demons, and it is argued that belief in demons was not a part of true Old Testament faith. Eichrodt, for example, suggests that demons came into Israelite religion as either 'an undeveloped inheritance from the heathen past or of a variety of superstitions intruded at a late date'.²⁰

In Dt. 32:17, *demons* (Hebrew: *shedim*) are linked with Canaanite gods: 'they sacrificed to demons which are not God — gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear' (see also Ps. 106:37). Another term, *s'irim* (Lv. 17:7; 2 Ch. 11:15; Is. 13:21; 34:14), refers to idols in the form of goats which, in popular mythology, came to be regarded as demons or satyrs and who are depicted occupying deserted ruins.²¹ Some think that *Lilith* (Is. 34:14) may be an oblique reference to the night-demon of Rabbinic folklore, who joined herself to Adam as his first wife, but later left him and became associated with the abduction and destruction of new-born infants. Another possible demonic being is *Aza'zel*, to whom the scapegoat, bearing the sin of the people, was sent on the Day of Atonement (Lv. 16:8–10, 26). *Aza'zel* is frequently identified with *Azael*, a fallen angel who, according to 1 Enoch 6–11 (composed probably around the third-century BC), occupied the desert region.²²

There is, however, little evidence in the Old Testament of these 'demons' having any real power to exert influence over people's lives. In later Judaism they were held responsible for much of the evil in the world, and though the Jews may not have felt as threatened by demons as some of the peoples round about them, amulets and incantations were deemed necessary to ward off possible harm. But in the Old Testament that is not the case. It is suggested that some of Israel's food laws and cultic and purification practices may have originated as rites to keep demons at bay;²³ but even if that is true, the fact that these things became so wholly incorporated into the worship of Yahweh, with no reference to their original setting, serves to illustrate further what little significance was attached to demonic beings. Only *Aza'zel* appears

20 Eichrodt, *Theology II*, 223.

21 So BDB, 972.

22 See further, e.g., Eichrodt, *Theology II*, 223–228; E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958) 68–72; H. Bietenhard, s.v. 'demon' in C. Brown (ed) *Dictionary of New Testament Theology I* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 450–452; G. Wenham, *Leviticus* (NICOT; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979) 233–234; P. D. Hanson, 'Rebellion in Heaven, Azazel and Euhemeristic Heroes in 1 Enoch 6–11', *JBL* 96 (1977) 195–233; G. W. E. Nickelsburg, 'Apocalyptic and Myth in 1 Enoch 6–11', *JBL* 96 (1977) 383–405.

23 Suggested examples include the cultic use of bells (Ex. 28:33–35), which were thought to have an apotropaic effect on demons, and the regulations following childbirth (Lv. 12), when a woman was thought to be especially prone to demonic attack. See further, e.g., Eichrodt, *Theology II*, 226.

to have been accorded any status within the cult — if indeed that term does refer to a demon — and then only in a very passive role. Passages such as Dt. 32:17; Pss. 96:5 (LXX);²⁴ 106:37, which link idolatry with the worship of demons, do so principally to emphasize the inferiority of what the people are accepting as a substitute for the worship of Yahweh rather than to alert them to spiritual danger. Old Testament monotheism insists that false gods are, in fact, no gods at all (Dt. 32:21; Ps. 96:5; Je. 2:11); they are worthless, manufactured idols which cannot be compared with the true God (Is. 40:18–20; 41:21–24; 44:6–20). This is not necessarily to deny that behind false gods lie spiritual powers;²⁵ but that is not what is primarily in view when the Old Testament occasionally and disparagingly refers to these gods as 'demons'.

It is evident from the need to condemn magic, necromancy and other such practices that, probably through the combined influence of baggage from a pre-Yahwistic past and the current practice of her neighbours, superstitious beliefs were common within Israel throughout the Old Testament period. The 'official' as opposed to the 'popular' view was that these things should be avoided. Though the existence of demons is not denied by the Old Testament, their sphere of activity, principally limited to the desert, is portrayed as being outside the normal experience of God's people; if left alone, their impact would be minimal.

Demons and evil spirits

The much greater prominence given to demons in *apocryphal* and *pseudepigraphical* literature and in later Rabbinic writings, including both descriptions of their general characteristics and the names and functions of particular demonic beings, gave substance to popular superstition. As a result, the term 'demon' took on a greater significance — as an evil spiritual being whose activity was generally directed towards the ruin of mankind. Whilst not endorsing all of the mythology, the New Testament reflects this later usage, and generally equates demons with evil spirits.

Nevertheless, whilst demons are relatively insignificant in the Old Testament, there is little doubt that it accepts the existence of other

24 LXX translates: *the gods of the nations are demons*.

25 This is the basis of Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 10:18–21; alluding to passages such as Dt. 32:17; Pss. 96:5 (LXX); 106:37, he expresses concern about food offered to idols because behind the idols, which are in themselves nothing more than blocks of wood or stone (cf. Acts 19:26; 1 Cor. 8:4), lies an unseen world of demons who are the actual recipients of worship and sacrifice. Whilst not incompatible with the general OT understanding, this reflects the view prevalent in later Judaism which gave much greater prominence to evil spirits.

supernatural beings alongside Yahweh and attributes to them significant power and influence, though usually at Yahweh's instigation.²⁶

4. Angels

Significant among these heavenly servants are *angels*, described by the Psalmist as: '*mighty ones who do [Yahweh's] bidding, who obey his word*' (Ps. 108:20; see also 103:20). They perform various functions, including guarding and guiding God's people (e.g. Gn. 24:7; 48:16; Ex. 23:20; Ps. 91:11–12; Dn. 3:25). They are also instruments of divine judgment. Ex. 12:23 refers to *the destroyer* (Hebrew: *mashit*); an angel causes plague in Israel (2 Sa. 24:15–16; 1 Ch. 21:14–16); and '*a band of destroying angels*' (*mal'ke ra'im*) is responsible for disaster befalling Egypt (Ps. 78:49). Singled out within this general category of angelic beings are the *cherubim* (e.g. Gn. 3:24; Ex. 25:18–22; Is. 37:16; Ezk. 9:3) and the *seraphim* (Is. 6:2, 6).²⁷ Archangels such as Gabriel and Michael are named for the first time in the book of Daniel; later writings identify other archangels.²⁸

The *angel of the LORD* is probably to be understood in a different way, as the personal representative of God — who speaks for Yahweh and is, in many cases, identified with him (e.g. Gn. 16:7–13; 22:15–18; 31:11–13; Ex. 3:2–6; Jdg. 6:11–16; Zc. 3:1–2).

The transition of a group of these heavenly beings from obedient servants to God's enemies is explained by the idea of a *rebellion in heaven*.

Rebellion in heaven

Later Jewish writings make several references to this rebellion against the rule and authority of God which resulted in the fall of its instigator, identified in different legends as *Semihazah*, *Azael* (Azazel) or *Satan*, and the other angels who took his side.²⁹

26 E.g. the plural in Gn. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7 has been traditionally interpreted by Jewish commentators, and an increasing number of Christian writers, as a reference to heavenly beings. See, e.g., Cooke, 'The Sons of (the) god(s)', 22–23; G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Word Bible Commentary; Milton Keynes: Word (UK), 1991) 27–28, 85.

27 See further, e.g., Eichrodt, *Theology II*, 194–209; Jacob, 68–69; H. Bietenhard, s.v. 'angel' in C. Brown (ed) *Dictionary of NT Theology I*, 101–102; L. Koehler, *Old Testament Theology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1953) 157–160. See also Rappoport, *Ancient Israel I*, 28–54.

28 E.g. Raphael, Uriel, Metatron, Sandalphon and Rediyao.

29 See Hanson, 'Rebellion in Heaven', 195–233; Nickelsburg, 'Apocalyptic and Myth', 383–405. N. Forsyth, *The Old Enemy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) 124–191. Cf. Rev. 12:7–12.

Though not explicit in the Old Testament, there is a possible allusion to the banishment of a heavenly being (Lucifer) from heaven in Is. 14:12–15, which is widely believed to contain ideas drawn from pagan mythology.³⁰ In the immediate context, the passage relates to the pride of the king of Babylon, whose desire to exalt himself against God results in him being cast down; but it may have a wider reference to Satan as the epitome and the inspiration of all such evil ambition.³¹

Ezk. 28:1–10, similarly, points to the downfall of the ruler [prince] of Tyre because of his boasts. A central element in this passage is that though this proud ruler says '*I am a god*' (v 2), he will discover that he is in fact only human. In the immediately following lament for the *king of Tyre* (Ezk. 28:11–19) the language takes on a different tone and makes much greater use of mythological imagery. It is frequently thought that the passage draws on Paradise myths about primal man, and his loss of perfect fellowship with God which is now paralleled in the downfall of the king of Tyre.³² However, once again it may be possible to see here a reference to the fall of a once exalted heavenly being (note, for example, his description in v 14 as a *guardian cherub*).

This 'rebellion in heaven' theme is evident in myths throughout the ANE,³³ where it is frequently associated with primal history, and seeks to account for the presence of evil in the world. Hanson notes that the mythological idea, which may have been incorporated early into Yahwistic theology, is historicised in passages such as Is. 14:5–21; Ezk. 28:1–10, 11–19, but is later re-mythologised and given an apocalyptic eschatological application — pointing to God's ultimate victory over every power that would rise up against him. This *Urzeit wird Endzeit* pattern, which includes the idea that the primordial battle which resulted in Creation and the defeat of rebellious or chaotic elements will be repeated to bring about the eschatological overthrow of evil and a new creation is familiar in apocalyptic writings. It is evident in 1 Enoch 6–11; and there may also be earlier indications of it in Is. 24:21–23.

The stage in the primeval history at which such a fall may have taken place has given rise to much speculation. The only indication from the Bible is that it occurred after the creation and before the events of

30 See, e.g., Eichrodt, *Theology II*, 208; R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980) 142–143; J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1993) 144; J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, 1–39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 320–321). Cf. 2 Pet. 2:4–5; Jude 6; Hanson, 'Rebellion in heaven', 202–212; Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 124–146.

31 See also, e.g., Lk. 10:18. Gn. 6:1–4 may also refer to fallen angels cf. 2 Pet. 2:4–5; Jude 6.

32 E.g. W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (OTL; London: SCM, 1970) 392–395; J. B. Taylor, *Ezekiel* (TOTC; Leicester: IVP, 1969) 196–197; J. W. Wevers, *Ezekiel* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott) 156–158.

33 Hanson, 'Rebellion in Heaven', 4–6; see also, e.g., Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 67–89, 124–133.

Gn. 3; though the very attempt to set these elements within a temporal framework begs some very important, and for many as yet unresolved, questions about the nature and purpose of the early chapters of Genesis. Some writers identify a gap between Gn. 1:1 and 1:2, and suggest that following the creation described in Gn. 1:1 a catastrophic event, such as Satan's rebellion, occurred, with the result that the 'original' earth became *formless and empty* (Gn. 1:2), necessitating its recreation. However, though popularized by the Scofield Bible, such a view has little to commend it.³⁴

A further complication is the use of the *Urzeit wird Endzeit* motif. The difficulty is evident in the description of the war in heaven in Rev. 12. The defeat and expulsion from heaven of the dragon and his angels is suggestive of Satan's original fall (*Urzeit*); however, it points also to the final overthrow of evil (*Endzeit*). Finally, it is possible to discern a parallel between Michael's victory in heaven and the death of Christ on the Cross — through which his saints may share that victory in the present.

5. Sons of (the) god(s) and the Divine Assembly

Among the several terms which occur in the Old Testament to denote supernatural beings³⁵ is the designation *bene elohim*, translated 'sons of God' or 'sons of the gods'.³⁶

Various attempts have been made to identify the *sons of God* in Gn. 6:1–4.³⁷ While it is difficult to be certain there is wide support for the view that these are angelic beings. The *Book of Enoch* identifies them as fallen angels in rebellion against God, and attributes the origin of demons to their illicit sexual union with human women.

In Job 1:6; 2:1, and also in the similar expressions in Ps. 82:1, 6, the *bene elohim* appear to be members of a heavenly assembly.³⁸ The idea

34 See, e.g., Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 1–17 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 115–117. Rappoport notes a myth that demons were the original inhabitants of earth, before their wickedness led to their defeat — and to the creation of mankind (*Ancient Israel I*, 75).

35 Other terms may include: 'gods' (Ps. 82:1); 'mighty ones' (Pss. 29:1; 108:20); 'holy ones' (Dt. 33:2–3; Ps 89:5–7; Is. 13:3; Dn. 4:17); the heavenly 'host' (1 Ki. 22:19; Pss. 103:21; 148:2; Dn. 8:10), 'watchers' (Dn. 4:13,23); 'princes' (Dn. 10:13,20–21; 12:1); & c.

36 Gn. 6:2,4; Dt. 32:8 (NIV note); Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7 (see also Pss. 29:1; 82:1,6; 89:6).

37 See, e.g., Wenham, *Genesis*, 139–140; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 261–272; D. J. A. Clines, 'The significance of the "Sons of God" episode (Genesis 6:1–4) in the context of the "Primal History" (Genesis 1–11)', *JSOT* 13 (1979) 34–46; L. Eslinger, 'A Contextual Identification of the *bene ha'elohim* and *benoth ha'adam* in Genesis 6:1–4' *JSOT* 13 (1979) 65–73; Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 147–159.

38 See, e.g., G. E. Wright, *The OT against its environment*, (SBT 2; London, 1950), 30ff; Cooke, 'The Sons of (the) god(s)', 22–47; F. M. Cross, 'The Council of Yahweh in 2nd Isaiah', *JNES* 12 (1953) 274–277; H. W. Robinson, 'The Council of Yahweh', *JThS* 45 (1944) 151–157.

of a divine court presided over by the chief god of the pantheon was not uncommon in the polytheistic religions of the ANE,³⁹ and reflects the ancient view that there are parallels between the earthly order with its kings and court officials and the heavenly realm. There are some points of contact between these 'assemblies' and the divine council depicted in the Old Testament. There are, too, however, significant differences. In the Old Testament portrayal, Yahweh's authority is undisputed and other members of the council submit to his control. Though there may be an interchange, as between Yahweh and (the) Satan in the Prologue of Job and between Yahweh and the (lying) spirit in 1 Ki. 22:19–22, this is not a forum for divine debate, but a means by which Yahweh makes known his will to his subjects. Thus there is here no hint of polytheism; Frances Andersen comments:

'The incomparable Lord has no colleagues; his attendants are shadows, scarcely persons . . . so minor is their role, so completely dominated by the incontestable sovereignty of the Lord, that no ideas of polytheism are present, even when they are called '(children of) god(s)'.⁴⁰

However, though Yahweh's authority remains undisputed, Clines notes the significance of this '*pluriformity of the divine*'; he suggests that

human experience of authoritative persons taking counsel and devolving functions requires a parallel arrangement in the heavenly sphere if God is to be viewed as knowledgeable and wise and as deciding rather than merely executing.⁴¹

Ps. 82 further depicts God taking his place at the head of this divine assembly and arraigning the *elohim* for their failure to maintain justice on earth. There are different suggestions as to who are these *elohim*. A traditional Rabbinic view is that they are the elders or judges of Israel, or to the people as a whole after they had received the Law.⁴² However,

39 See, e.g., Cooke, *ibid.*, 26–27.

40 *Job* (TOTC; Leicester: IVP, 1976) 82.

41 D. J. A. Clines, *Job* (Word Biblical Commentary, 17; Dallas: Word Books, 1989) 21.

42 This view is taken by F. Delitzsch, *Psalms* (Berlin, 1914). He compares Ps. 82 with a similar passage in Is. 3:13–15 where the leaders of Israel are called to account, and in line with the Rabbinic view (based on, e.g., Ex. 21:6) argues that those in authority 'are God's delegates and bearers of his image, and therefore as His representatives are also themselves called *elohim*' (402). Another view, expressed by Duhm and Briggs, but without much support, is that the Psalm is addressed to the wicked rulers of other nations. However, though foreign kings may have claimed divine status, the OT nowhere else affirms that claim. That the reference is to men rather than to heavenly beings is also the view of most NT commentators on Jn. 10:34, where Jesus quotes Ps. 82:6 in answer to the charge that, '*you, a mere man, claim to be god*' (Jn. 10:33). It is widely held that Jesus' answer is intended to demonstrate that since under certain circumstances mere men could be addressed as *elohim*, how much more was the Son of God justified in claiming the title for himself. See also, e.g.,

it is unlikely that the affirmation in v. 6, 'I say you are gods', would be addressed to mortals; and the threat in v. 7: 'you will die like mere men' has little meaning, and certainly carries no punitive weight, if it is in fact *mere men* who are being addressed. The more probable, and also the more natural understanding of Ps. 82 is that the *elohim* are heavenly beings; those who make up the Divine Council, and who are held responsible, under Yahweh, for the administration of justice and righteousness on earth.⁴³

A link between the members of the Divine Council and the nations of the world may also be found in Dt. 32:8. Following the LXX, which is supported by fragments of text from Qumran,⁴⁴ the NIV gives the alternative reading: 'when the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.' If, as seems likely, this reading is correct, then it points to a correspondence between the nations and the members of the heavenly assembly, and suggests the idea, which is more fully developed in the Book of Daniel (e.g. Dn. 10:13, 20–21 cf. 4:13, 17, 23; Zc. 1:10–11; 6:5) of supervising heavenly beings set over the nations and responsible for them. The passage emphasizes God's concern for all nations: they are not outside his jurisdiction and he has appointed divine guardians over them; however, the special position of Israel is also made clear as the portion and *allotted inheritance* of Yahweh himself (Dt. 32:9).⁴⁵

The idea of divine beings responsible for the nations may also be reflected in the use of the term 'watcher' (Aramaic: 'ir) in Dn. 4:13,

C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (London: SPCK, 1955) 319–320; however, see A. Hanson, 'John's citation of Ps. 82', *NTS* 11 (1964–65) 158–162; 'John's citation of Ps. 82 reconsidered', *NTS* 13 (1966–67), 363–367; J. A. Emerton, 'The interpretation of Psa. 82 in John 10', *JThS* ns 17 (1966) 329–332; 'Melchizedek and the gods', *JThS* ns 17 (1966) 399–401; cf. M. de Jonge, A. S. van der Woude, '11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament', *NTS* 12 (1965–66) 301–326. It is possible to reconcile the view that Ps. 82:6 refers to heavenly rather than human beings with Jn. 10:34 by assuming an *ad homines* argument. Jesus is appealing, not to the original meaning or intention of the Psalm, but to the way his hearers had come to understand it. He is not commenting on the accuracy or inaccuracy of their understanding, but rather on the inconsistency of their application.

43 See, e.g., A. A. Anderson, *Psalms II* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1976); D. Kidner, *Psalms II* (TOTC; London: IVP, 1975); M. E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Word Biblical Commentary, 20; Dallas: Word Books, 1990).

44 See, e.g., P. W. Skehan, 'A fragment of the Song of Moses from Qumran', *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12–15; 'Qumran and the present state of OT studies', *JBL* 78 (1959) 21–2). Possible reasons for the change are given by, e.g., P. W. Skehan, 'The structure of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy', *CBQ* 12 (1951); P. Winter, 'Nochmals zu Deuteronomium 32:8', *ZAW* 75 (1963) 218–233).

45 Cf. Dn. 12:1 where Michael appears to be designated as the guardian angel in charge of Israel. This does not imply a contradiction. Michael represents Yahweh's authority and battles for him on behalf of his people.

23. Just as the earthly monarch had those who watched over his realm, so the heavenly king has appointed those who act on his behalf to ensure that the divine will is carried out. The *Book of Jubilees*, written in the last quarter of the second-century BC, indicates that the role of these 'Watchers' included the protection and instruction of mankind. However, 1 Enoch 6:1–6 identifies them with the angels who, with their leader Semihazah, fell after their rebellion against God. It is probable that the positive role reflected in Jubilees and in Daniel is the older of the two ideas. Though impossible to set within a temporal frame-work, this two-fold tradition supports what may be deduced from the biblical accounts: that a class of heavenly beings appointed by God to supervise the nations and to administer justice subsequently fell and came under his judgment (e.g. Ps. 82; Is. 14:12–15; Ezk. 28:12–19). It may indicate, too, the presence of two groups; those who rebelled and those who remained loyal to God.

It has been suggested that passages such as Ps. 82 have their roots in mythology which was essentially polytheistic, and that the (*bene*) *elohim* who make up the Divine Council are the dethroned gods of the nations.⁴⁶ However, in view of the uncompromising stance taken by the Old Testament in rejecting heathen religions and their gods, it would be incongruous for the affirmation 'I say you are gods' (Ps. 82:6) to be addressed to false gods — even those under sentence of death — and thus to accord them the divine status which they are elsewhere denied. It seems highly improbable, too, that the responsibilities described in vv. 3–4 and the role in world affairs that this implies would ever have been attributed to false gods, or that the principal reason for their condemnation should lie in their failure to fulfil those responsibilities. However, while they may not refer to false gods, *per se*, it may be possible to identify a link between these supernatural beings and the spiritual powers which lie behind national deities, although that remains in the area of speculation.

A significant aspect of the Divine Assembly in the Old Testament is its role with regard to prophecy. Jeremiah notes that a decisive factor which marks him out as a true prophet is that he has been admitted to *the council of the LORD* (Je. 23:18, 22), and it is from there that he receives his message. The idea of the true prophet being granted access to the heavenly court is also found in 1 Ki. 22:19–23 (2 Ch. 18:18–22), where Micaiah describes his vision of Yahweh 'sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing round' (v 19). Sometimes included as members of the heavenly host are the sun and moon and stars (e.g. Job 38:7; Ps. 148:2–3; Dn. 8:10 cf. Is. 14:13). In the description of the

46 E.g. A. Weiser, *Psalms* (OTL; London: SCM, 1962) 557; Wright, *The OT against its Environment*, 39; Wheeler Robinson, 'The Council of Yahweh', 152. Cooke, 'The Sons of (the) God(s)', 32.

heavenly realm, angels are frequently likened to stars. However, unlike some other Near Eastern religions which worshipped astral deities,⁴⁷ in the Old Testament the correspondence is metaphorical; celestial bodies are not the proper objects of worship and nor are they presented as personal beings in the same way as angels.⁴⁸

Another being with access to the Divine Assembly is (the) Satan (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6).

Satan

The title, 'the Satan' (with the definite article) is probably related to the Hebrew word meaning 'adversary'. When, in Job, the sons of God presented themselves to Yahweh, the Satan came *with them* (Job 1:6; 2:1, NIV) — a phrase which has been taken to imply that he, too, was a regular member of the divine council. He appears as the Public Prosecutor,⁴⁹ whose task, like that of the roving secret police of the Persian empire, was to spy on the disaffected and report disloyalty to the king.⁵⁰ Such a role, it is argued, does not pre-suppose an evil character;⁵¹ when he calls into question the piety of Job (1:9–11; 2:4–5) or accuses the High Priest, Joshua (Zc. 3:1), he is only doing his duty. It has also been suggested that the 'watchers' (Dn. 4:13, 23) assisted (the) Satan in this role of keeping an eye on human affairs.

47 Cf. Dt. 4:19; 2 Ch. 33:5; Je. 8:2; Zp. 1:5.

48 Thus in Gen. 1, the sun, moon and stars are described simply as 'lights'; in Ps. 19:4–6, though the sun is described in terms reminiscent of the mythological idea of the Sun-god, the pagan idea is discounted. The sun has been created by God, as a testimony to his glory, and its function is a purely physical one - to provide heat. There is a body of scholarly opinion which suggests that the sun may have been worshipped in ancient Israel as a symbol of the presence and activity of Yahweh (see, e.g., J. G. Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel*, (JSOTSup 118; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); S. A. Wiggins, 'Yahweh: the God of the Sun?', *JSOT* 71 (1996) 89–106; J. G. Taylor, 'A response to Steve A. Wiggins', *JSOT* 71 (1996) 107–119. The evidence is disputed, but even if this view is accepted it points only to the worship of the sun as representative of Yahweh rather than to the worship of heavenly bodies *per se*.

49 E.g. Eichrodt, *Theology II*, 205–209; Jacob, *Theology*, 70–72; H. Bietenhard, *s.v.* 'Satan' in C. Brown (ed) *Dictionary of New Testament Theology III* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 468–472.

50 So N. H. Tur Sinai, *The Book of Job: a new commentary* (Jerusalem: Kiryath-Sepher, 1957).

51 Clines challenges the popular, negative, interpretation of Satan's character; he maintains that: 'The Satan is not "bad", "evil", "malevolent", "cynical" (Peake, Gordis). We cannot say that "Satan takes his duty too seriously, until he poisons his own nature" (Rowley), or "that he has lost all faith in human goodness" (Peake). Nor is he, whatever the origins of such a figure may have been, the author of all misfortune and especially illness (Holscher, 3) . . . he is "rigidly subordinated to heaven, and in all he does subserves its interests" (Davidson).' (*Job*, 20–21).

A development in the way (the) Satan is viewed may be indicated by the difference between 2 Sa. 24:1, where David is incited by God to number the people, and the (later) parallel passage, 1 Ch. 21:1, where the incitement comes from Satan (by now a proper name, without the article). As indicated above, it is widely thought that early Israelite theology saw God as the author of both good and evil;⁵² thus in 2 Sa. 24:1 David's temptation to sin is associated with the activity of Yahweh. By the fourth-century BC (when many believe Chronicles was compiled) there had arisen the idea of a definite supernatural being acting independently of God, with whom could be associated the temptation to sin, and who could be seen as a focus of evil and of opposition to God.⁵³ Something similar is seen in the *Book of Jubilees*. In the midrash on Ex. 14:8 (Jub. 48:12–18) the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, originally described as the work of Yahweh, is attributed to the demonic figure, *Mastema* (sometimes also called *Belial*), who in this later work had replaced Semihazah and Azael as leader of those who rebelled against Yahweh and who appears also to be identified with Satan (Jub. 10:11). *Jubilees* also makes *Mastema* responsible for the demand for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gn. 22 cf. Jub. 7:15–18:12) and the attack on Moses (Ex. 4:24 cf. Jub. 48:1–3). In the more developed ideas of later Judaism, the evil character of Satan and his enmity against God are even more pronounced. He remains the accuser of men, but becomes linked with the serpent which tempted Eve (Wisdom of Solomon 2:24) and whose aim is to disrupt the relationship between God and Israel and to separate the rest of mankind from God.⁵⁴

It is true that in the Old Testament the concept of Satan is nowhere as developed as it became in later Judaism, in the Qumran writings and indeed in the New Testament. It is evident, too, that even within the Old Testament the understanding of Satan undergoes change. However, the extent of that development is not as great as has often been suggested.

In the Prologue to Job, while the Satan may not yet be viewed as an opponent of God, in view of his insolence it is difficult to regard him,

52 However, see Lindström, *God and the Origin of Evil*, 116–241.

53 Eichrodt comments: 'The faith of the earlier period felt compelled to think of God's activity in as comprehensive terms as possible, and therefore ascribed evil to him as well. Now this part of the divine operations is to a certain extent detached from God, and made into an independent hypostasis'. (*Theology II*, 207). The date of Job, which is also relevant to the discussion of the development of the Satan figure, is difficult to ascertain. Suggestions range from a pre-Mosaic date to around 500 BC. The book may have been written at the same time as Zc. 1–8 (i.e. 520 BC), and this could account for the similarity in their portrayal of Satan.

54 Baba Bathra 16a briefly describes the activity of Satan: 'Satan comes down and deceives, goes up and accuses, seizes power and souls'.

either, as one of God's loyal servants. At best he appears as the enemy of God's people, resorting to insinuation to accuse Job and pursuing enthusiastically his task of persecution. With regard to his presence within the divine council, Andersen notes that the preposition 'among' (Job 1:6; 2:1) may be used to refer to an intruder, and goes on to maintain that 'it is because the Satan has no right to be there that he alone is asked his business'.⁵⁵ Again, in Zc. 3:2, God's words to Satan are hardly those of one addressing a faithful servant who is only doing his duty! Even at this stage, something of Satan's hostility to God is recognized; the later understanding does not introduce the idea, but rather enlarges on a characteristic already present. E. Jacob, for example, suggests that

'the identification of the serpent with Satan which is stated for the first time in the Wisdom of Solomon (2:24) and which passed into the New Testament (Rom. 16:20; Rev. 12:9 and 20:2) only draws the final consequences of what the story-teller in Genesis had already glimpsed'.⁵⁶

'Evil' beings in the divine assembly

Whether or not he was a regular member of Yahweh's court, Satan is granted admission, and this would seem to indicate that not all of the heavenly beings who have access to the divine council are necessarily Yahweh's loyal servants.

Another group of beings who are granted access, but whose character must be called into question, are the national guardian angels. Assigned by Yahweh (Dt. 32:8) and accountable to him (Ps. 82), these angelic powers may also be found opposing him and his servants (Dn. 10:13, 20 cf. Is. 14:12-15; Ezk. 28:12-17). D. S. Russell notes that the spiritual conflict described by Daniel 'reflects the widespread belief that wars fought out among the nations on earth had their parallels in wars fought out among the guardian angels in heaven'.⁵⁷

The designation of the fallen angelic beings of Gn. 6:1-4 as *bene elohim* indicates that they also might be included in the divine assembly (if, indeed, this is a different group), and it is possible that other evil spirits were admitted too (cf. 1 Ki. 22:19-22).

⁵⁵ Job, 82; however, cf. Clines, *Job*, 19.

⁵⁶ *Theology*, 282

⁵⁷ D. S. Russell, *Daniel* (The Daily Study Bible; Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1981) 199. Heavenly involvement in earthly battles is seen, too, in, e.g., Ex. 14:19-20; 23:20; Jos. 5:14-15, usually in terms of God fighting for Israel. The correspondence between heavenly and earthly activity is further emphasized in Ps. 82 (cf. Is. 24:21). J. Goldingay raises the interesting possibility that the conflict may be a legal one, recalling the scene of the heavenly assembly in Zc. 3; Job 1-2 [*Daniel* (Word Biblical Commentary 30; Milton Keynes: Word (UK) Ltd, 1991) 292].

If this analysis is correct, it suggests that the divine assembly in the Old Testament is much more comprehensive in its scope than is sometimes envisaged, and may include all supernatural beings, evil as well as good. This would emphasize that all such beings are under Yahweh's control and are answerable to him; there is no suggestion of a realm of evil beings outside of Yahweh's dominion. Even Satan himself can only act within the clearly defined limits which God has set and may be used by God to accomplish his purpose. Thus, though Job's misfortunes came at the instigation and through the action of Satan, God takes responsibility: it is he who has ruined Job (Job 2:3 cf. 1:11; 2:5). The idea of Satan's instrumentality in the divine purpose is evident, too, in the parallel accounts in 2 Sa. 24:1 and 1 Ch. 21:1. When Satan incites David to take a census he is acting out of hostility to God and his people and seeking to achieve his own ends. Nevertheless in so doing he is God's (albeit unknowing and presumably unwilling) agent, and so his action in one account may also properly be described as God's action in another. In the same way, the spirit which oppressed Saul could be viewed as an 'evil spirit', pressed unwittingly into Yahweh's service. It has to be admitted, however, that there are difficulties here which remain unresolved.

6. Conclusion

In his discussion of the Divine Council in the Old Testament, Cooke notes that such a concept was widespread in the ANE, and questions whether what we find in the Old Testament is not merely an assimilation of pagan mythological ideas rather than an important item of belief; he asks: 'is it purely a literary form which was taken over by Israel, or is it an element of the living pattern of Israelite faith?'.⁵⁸ He concludes in favour of the latter. When the Old Testament writers refer to the heavenly court and to the presence there of lesser heavenly beings which exist alongside Yahweh (including the spirit which deceived the prophets of Ahab, and probably also the spirit which tormented Saul), it is not poetic imagery, a theological device or a literary fiction, but something that, to them, was real! Wheeler Robinson notes that 'the council of Yahweh was felt to be just as much a reality as Yahweh Himself'.⁵⁹

The further question, with which we began, relates not only to whether these supernatural beings were believed to exist, but whether they did or do exist and whether there is agreement between the ideas expressed in the Old Testament and the more developed concept of

⁵⁸ *Op. cit.*, 45; see also, e.g. Clines, *Job*, 21-22.

⁵⁹ 'The Council of Yahweh', 152.

demons and evil spirits found in the New Testament. Agreement does not necessarily imply the objective reality of supernatural beings or their continuing significance; lack of agreement, however, lends substantial weight to the argument that both testaments reflect a primitive, pre-scientific world-view which was important for those who believed it at the time but which, if it is to be relevant to the modern age, needs to be demythologised.

We have noted that, whilst there is some development in the understanding of Satan, it is not necessary to see an incompatibility between his role and character in the Old Testament, and the way he is viewed in the New Testament as the epitome of evil and the centre of opposition to God. His description as the *ancient serpent* (Rev. 12:9; 20:2) is reminiscent of Gn. 3, and although the identification is not made explicitly, there is in the Old Testament the clear idea of (the) Satan as one who seeks to destroy the relationship between God and mankind.

His role as accuser is also evident in both Testaments (Job 1:9–11; 2:4–5; Zc. 3:1; Rev. 12:10) and, though again not explicitly stated, the Old Testament contains possible allusions to his rebellion against God and subsequent fall, and also to his future overthrow.

We have seen, too, that though there are few specific references to demons and evil spirits, the Old Testament acknowledges the existence of an order of evil spiritual beings among the 'sons of god'. Though they are usually depicted fulfilling Yahweh's purposes, it is not necessary to see them as his willing instruments, and it may well be possible to equate these beings and their functions with the evil spirits and demons of the New Testament.

There are clear differences between the Testaments. One of the theological emphases of the synoptic gospels is of a conflict between the kingdom of God, which has broken into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, and the power of Satan under whose command the demons are (e.g. Lk. 10:17–20; 11:14–22). Here we note that, in contrast to the portrayal in the Old Testament, the activity of demons and their sphere of influence is significantly increased. We have noted that in the Old Testament period, contact with supernatural forces other than Yahweh was to be avoided, and in general, except as a consequence of disobedience or of Yahweh's direct intervention, the people were safe-guarded from demonic activity. The new situation presented in the Gospels, does not indicate inconsistency with the Old Testament, but a new emphasis as a result of coming of Christ. His authority over demons, which is depicted as the corollary of the victory in heaven (Lk. 10:18), opens the way for a greater level of confrontation which results in the exposure of demons as well as in their expulsion, and includes, too, the involvement of Christ's disciples, who

share his authority. Whilst the demonic needs still to be treated with serious caution, there is a change in emphasis, so far as God's people are concerned, from defence and the avoidance of contact with demons, to attack and a more direct involvement in spiritual warfare. This marks a new phase, but may be seen as building upon, rather than contradicting, earlier ideas.

Linked with this difference in emphasis is the Old Testament view that all spiritual activity, good or evil, is ultimately attributable to God. This does not necessarily mean that God is the initiator of evil and some may prefer to talk in terms of God's permissive will. It does, however, seek to do justice to the idea that God is sovereign and, in particular, it guards against any idea of dualism. Satan and his demons may be opposed to God, but in the end even they cannot prevail, and they cannot prevent the divine purpose from being fulfilled; indeed, even their wilful opposition results only in the furtherance of that purpose.

The portrayal of all supernatural beings, good and bad, as part of a heavenly host may also be in keeping with Paul's reference to 'the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12 cf. 3:20) where Christ also is (Eph. 1:20; 2:6). It is further possible that 'the rulers . . . the authorities . . . the powers of this dark world' (Eph. 6:11) include the supernatural beings appointed as guardians over the nations. The idea, reflected in Eph. 3:10 and 6:12, that human beings may be caught up in this heavenly conflict seems to be indicated, too, in Dn. 10.

If it is possible to draw these kinds of parallels, it might even be possible to talk about Saul being 'possessed' or 'demonized' in the New Testament sense, although references to the spirit coming on and leaving Saul suggest that it is more a case of demonic 'oppression'.

There are questions, here, which still need to be answered. The use of mythological imagery in the New Testament and the occasional reference to Rabbinic folklore (e.g. 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6, 9) means that it is not always clear what is to be taken figuratively and what is literal. However, taking the Bible as a whole, we conclude that there is at worst no fundamental incompatibility between the Old and New Testament understanding of supernatural, spiritual beings, and there is, in general, a significant measure of correspondence. In the light of this we may conclude, further, that though the Old Testament may not contain a developed theology of the supernatural realm and the activity of spiritual beings, what information it does contain has relevance not only for the faith of Israel, but also for the church. This includes the important idea, exemplified in 1 Sa. 16:14, of God's sovereignty and his ultimate control over all spiritual powers, even evil spirits, whom he may use to fulfil his purposes.

Abstract

This article considers two important questions raised by 1 Sa. 16:14, namely what does the OT understand by the term 'evil spirit', and, what is the relationship between such spirits and Yahweh? Although demons come to prominence in later Rabbinic writings, the OT accepts the existence of supernatural beings, good and evil and of a heavenly assembly, presided over by Yahweh, to which all such beings may have access. This suggestion, that the scope of the divine assembly is much more comprehensive than is sometimes envisaged, points to Yahweh's control over evil spiritual beings and their instrumentality in the fulfilment of the divine purpose. The moral question this raises is given some consideration, and the consistency between Old and New Testaments is noted.