

The Kingdom and the Cosmic Battle

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Mention the subject of "spiritual powers", and modern man is immediately in confusion. On the one hand, he hears modern scientific secularism ridiculing the whole idea as medieval superstition and old wives' tales, and he finds his rational secular mind nodding sagely in enlightened rejection of such a "myth". On the other hand he hears of, and often experiences, powers outside of the scientific realm: seances, the occult, astrology, the gurus.

What does the Bible teach about the spiritual powers? This article discusses the meaning of the cosmic battle, the nature of Christ's victory according to Col. 2:15 and other parts of the N. T. and its application for us today.

The protagonists and the battle

According to Col. 1:16, in Christ "all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether Thrones or Dominions or Principalities or Authorities". The Thrones and Dominions are listed in the Jewish apocalyptic work *Testament of Levi*, as orders of angels in the fourth heaven "in which they always praise God". According to 2 Enoch. 20:1, "dominions, orders and governments" and "thrones" are found in the seventh heaven, along with the archangels, the Cherubim and Seraphim, and other angels.¹

The Bible clearly distinguishes between the angels of God, and Satan with his angels. In the N. T. Principalities and Authorities are among the evil spiritual powers mentioned in Eph. 6:12, although the character of Thrones and Dominions is not necessarily evil.² Jesus finds himself in conflict with Satan's angels, which are also called demons, unclean spirits and evil spirits (Lk. 7:21, 8:27,29). God's angels include archangels (1 Thess. 4:16, Jude 9) and the Cherubim and Seraphim near the throne of God (Ezek. 10:1, cf. Rev. 4:6,

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Is. 6:2). All the angels are represented in the Bible as independent, rational, spiritual beings.

There is a kingdom of God and there is a kingdom of Satan (Mt. 12:26, cf. Jn. 8:44). The kingdom of Satan is highly organised and far-reaching (cf. Eph. 6:12).³ Hence Satan is called "the ruler of this world" (Jn. 12:31), for "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 Jn. 5:19). By cosmic battle is meant the conflict resulting from the revolt of Satan and his angels against God's kingdom.

Mankind is a fundamental focus of the battle. Although there is some mention of warfare in the angelic realm (e.g. Dan. 10:13, Rev. 12:7), most Biblical references are concerned with man's part in it. Satan's strategy is to keep men from God, so that they are ultimately destroyed. His tactics include temptation and deception, as well as sickness and death. Mankind is itself divided, sometimes ambiguously (Lk. 9:50, 11:23).

The victory of Christ

1. **In his life** : throughout his earthly life, Christ defeated Satan by living a perfect life and by casting out demons. He successfully resisted all the devil's temptations and remained perfectly obedient to the Father. He showed his power over the evil spirits when he drove them out of people by a word of command.

2. **On the cross** : Christ defeated Satan's strategy against mankind, by making atonement for sin on the cross. God has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). This is a place of power, and is possible because of the forgiveness of sins (1:11,14).

In Col. 2, Paul outlines *what* Christ defeated. He deals with the errors of some of the Colossian Christians : they had fallen for false philosophy and "hollow and delusive speculations" based on human traditions and the "elements" (*stoicheia*) of the universe (2:8). In 2:20-22, the "elements of the universe" (or "elementary spirits of the universe") refer to other religions with their rules and regulations of human origin. (cf. Gal. 3:23—4:11,21, where "elements of the universe" refer both to pagan religion and the Jewish law). Whatever the "elements of the universe" were thought to be in themselves, their function was the same as that of some of the angelic powers.⁴

The key verse is Col. 2:15, which comes at the end of a long sentence beginning at verse 8. On the basis of this verse, it is often stated that Christ has conquered the cosmic powers of evil.⁵ On the other hand, some deny that this verse has such a comprehensive meaning and restrict it to the triumph of grace over law.⁶ In the early church, however, the atonement was

regularly thought of as a victory over the powers of evil,⁷ and we may therefore expect to find this in the scriptures. The verse may be translated in more than one way, and states three things in connection with the atonement: (1) he publicly *or* boldly made a spectacle of the Principalities and Authorities. (2) he disarmed them *or* discarded them like a garment *or* stripped himself of his body. (3) he triumphed over them *or* led them as captives in his triumphal procession. Whatever translation be adopted, the verse definitely states that God in Christ triumphed over the angelic powers.

Note the inverted parallelism in the whole sentence: (a) fullness of life is in Christ, who is the head of all Principality and Authority (8-10). (b) the circumcision of Christ brings holiness (11). (c) buried with Christ in baptism (12). (c) raised with Christ (12). (b) the uncircumcision of sin dealt with on the cross (13,14). (a) Christ triumphed over the Principalities and Authorities (15).⁸ This suggests that the main reference of Col. 2:15 is to the particular errors of the Colossians referred to in verse 8 (and again in verses 16-23). It is sufficiently general to apply to all errors of this type.

In other words, Col. 2:15 expresses Christ's triumph over the spiritual forces behind all false systems of thought and practice, including religious ones. It is therefore perfectly proper to apply this verse also to astrology, palmistry and other occult practices.

3. by his death: Christ defeated Satan's ultimate weapon, death, by dying and being raised from the dead. By his death, says Heb. 2:14f, Christ rendered the devil powerless and removed the fear of death. "Render powerless" is Weymouth's translation of the verb *katargeo*, "render inoperative, abolish". Heb. 2:14 also says that the devil's power was the power of death. Without the salvation available in Christ, the devil's power brings people to eternal death. Jesus died, but he was raised to life; he has abolished (*katargeo*) death and revealed eternal life. (2 Tim. 1:10).

The effects of Christ's victory

The decisive battle in the cosmic war has been won.⁹ The kingdom of Satan will eventually be destroyed. At the end, Christ will have abolished (*katargeo*) every Principality, Authority and Power and also death and every other enemy (1 Cor. 15:24-26). Eternal fire is the destination of the devil and his followers (Mt. 25:41, Rev. 20:10,15).

The most comprehensive statement of the application of Christ's victory is Col. 1:13: "God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son". The result of this for believers is elaborated in

Ephesians. The key is union with Christ : every spiritual blessing is available to the believer, who is said to be with God the Father in the heavenly places—the place of spiritual conflict. The power available to believers is that same divine power which raised Christ from the dead (Eph. 1:19f). Christ is now in the position of authority at the right hand of God (1:20). He is the head of the church and he is above all Principality, Authority, Power, Dominion and every other name (1:21f, cf. Phil. 2:9) 1 Pet. 3:22 also says that Christ is in heaven “at the right hand of God, with angels, Authorities and Powers subject to him.”

Yet the battle continues. It is a spiritual battle, against the devices of the devil, “against the Principalities, against the Authorities, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the evil spiritual beings in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:11f.). We are all involved in the spiritual battle. It is a three-cornered fight between God, man and Satan. The way of victory is not found in anything new or strange, but in something which is old and well-known. Paul expounds the component parts in Eph. 6:13-18, as truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God and prayer.

In particular, *truth* is essential to combat the devil's deceptions, whether they take the form of false philosophies, false religions, or false ideas within the Christian church. Deception comes from men as well as from Satan. So in the same breath Paul can mention “human traditions” and “the elements of the universe” (Col. 2:8, cf. 20,22). Similarly, the “falsehoods of men” are “doctrines inspired by devils” (1 Tim 4:1f, N.E.B.). That is, these traditions and doctrines were made up by men under the influence of the elements of the universe. This is the same as saying that deceptive human ideas are under the rule of the angelic Principalities and Authorities. But the mind of the believer is enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and his fundamental perspectives are found in scripture, the word of God.

NOTES

1. for such books see R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Vol. II (Oxford, 1913).
2. Eph. 1:21, Col. 1:16, are the only N.T. references to these angels.
3. M. F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology* (Scripture Press, Wheaton, 6th Ed., 1965) p. 72.
4. T. Ling, *The Significance of Satan* (SPCK London, 1961) p. 71.
5. e.g. K.E. Koch, *Between Christ and Satan* (1968) p. 187.
6. e.g. T. Ling, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
7. G. Aulen, *Christus Victor* (SPCK London, 1931).
8. if statement (2) which comes first in 2:15 means “stripped himself of his body”, it might be connected with theme (b).
9. O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (SCM London, 3rd Ed., 1962) p. 84. cf Jn. 12:31.