

# SPIRITS: OCCULTISM, PRINCIPALITIES & POWERS

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## Biblical Perspectives on Spirits, Demons, Principalities and Powers

Mary-Sylvia Nwachukwu, DDL

*[The author explores Sacred Scripture for the existence, language and faith issues provoked by the belief in spirits, demons, principalities and powers. She submits that the predominantly polemical content of the biblical evidence not only underscores the threat such a belief poses to faith in God, but also draws attention to the power of God over his kingdom in the world and the forces against it. In view of particular thought currents and religious practices in today's world, Nwachukwu affirms that the faith problems of first century Christianity remain as vital today. She encourages further theologizing that could help today's Christians to re-appreciate and re-confirm belief in Christ as the power of God for salvation and to grow more in spiritual life.]*

### 1. Introduction

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord "my refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust" (Ps 91:1-2)

I begin this paper with this citation from Ps 91, a psalm that gives the assurance of God's protection against visible and invisible forces, and human and superhuman powers,



which menace and threaten the lives of people. This psalm encourages us to choose to live only in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the shadow of the Almighty, so that God would deliver us from the snare of the fowler, from the spirits of deadly pestilence and from terrorizing spirits of the night. This is the very psalm, which the devil quoted to Jesus when he asked him to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple, saying, "He will command his angels concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone".<sup>1</sup> Jesus knew that the devil uses his knowledge of God's plan to disguise his evil intentions. Therefore, Jesus' response to him shows that the confession of faith in God is not derived from the witness that proceeds from the knowledge of the devil. Therefore, Jesus ordered the devil to keep quiet. As the Synoptic Gospels show in their description of the temptation of Jesus, the devil claims to be prince and lord of this world, capable of rewarding with greatness, riches and protection any who would bow and worship him. Jesus resisted this temptation with a confession in only one God to whom worship is due. At this confession, Matthew says, "the devil left him".<sup>2</sup>

This psalm appeals to many who live in a 'demonized' environment like many African societies where people express widespread concern about the power of evil spirits and their agents over their lives. A topic such as this paper discusses is very relevant for the African context because it would help us to gain more understanding of realities that challenge belief in the sovereignty and lordship of God over creation and history. The African Christian should be guided to make this confession in the One, True and Only God to whom we owe obedience and worship and to whom we must look for guidance and protection.

<sup>1</sup> Matt 4:5-6; cf. Ps 91:11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Matt 4:11.

## 2. Relevance of this theme and of its Biblical Perspective

Belief in the existence and activity of demons and evil spirits is held universally by the religions of the ancient world and by the Bible. It is found in Egyptian religion, Greek popular belief, Zoroastrianism, Jewish religion and African religion. Many of these religions developed extensive demonology, which included the remedies to the disease and misfortune caused by malevolent spirits through magical incantations. The development of demonology in most of these religions gave birth to a dualistic view of reality in which the kingdom of darkness, represented by demons, stand against the kingdom of light. The biblical perspective that this paper discusses is developed against this background of widespread concern for the harmful influence of evil spirits on human beings.

This paper on the biblical perspective is of fundamental importance. The biblical perspective is meant to situate the problem within the plan of the economy of salvation. It aims to bring to clearer light the nature and activities of negative spiritual powers at work in our material world and to underscore the necessity of faith in God's omnipotence and supremacy over any power, human or superhuman, spiritual or material that should threaten or menace the lives of human beings in the world. Moreover, Benedict XVI teaches that the word of God must nurture and give orientation to ecclesial life and its pastoral actions (VD 1). This implies that all academic ventures and every pastoral ministry on the topic of spirits, principalities and powers must take their point of departure from what the Bible says on the issue. Finally, the biblical perspective reveals to believers in Christ the powers that are theirs and the attitude



they must adopt before any power that claims to have influence over their lives.

The topic of this symposium, therefore, offers me the privileged opportunity to do a theological reflection that is both contextually grounded and relevant to the Nigerian – African context. The paper unfolds according to the following order. Firstly, it draws out the perspectives of the Old and New Testaments on the question. In each case, it studies the terminology and explains the theological developments of the biblical evidence within the context of the religious, historical and cultural contexts of the people. A study of these contexts is necessary because it offers the background for explaining the faith challenges that led to the development of the religious concepts exposed in canonical literature. Secondly, it presents theological issues raised by the question. Lastly, it argues that the problems of ancient peoples are still the problems of present day Christians. This is a word, not only to the individual Christian, but also to theologians and church leaders, who must feel themselves addressed by the question under discussion.

### 3. The Old Testament (OT) Evidence

In the face of the variety of evidence in the OT, and the reservation of the OT on the issue of evil spirits, an interpreter is faced with serious difficulties on the analysis of the phenomenon. These difficulties are seen in these areas which will be discussed in the following paragraphs: the varied and multiple terminology of the demonic, the context in which demons are discussed, the theological accommodation of the belief because of the demands of monotheism, and the strong influence of beliefs from popular religiosity on deuterio and non-canonical Jewish literatures. In discussing these areas of difficulty, the OT

witness would be evaluated according to its strict monotheistic tenets and against the influences from the religious and cultural conceptions of the peoples of the Ancient Near East.

#### 3.1 Terminology and Personal Names of Demons<sup>3</sup>

With what concerns terminology, there is no single term in the Hebrew Bible, which can be consistently and indisputably translated as 'demon'. The OT uses the generic name of gods ('*ēlohīm*) to refer to anonymous gods or spirits. This meaning is associated with cases of possession and the spirit of the dead. For instance, in 1 Sam 28:13 the witch of Endor conjured up the dead spirit of Samuel, saying "I see a god ('*ēlohīm*) coming up out of the ground (cf. also Is 8:19). We also find the term 'spirit' (*rûah*), with relative qualification. In 1 Sam 10:10, the *rûah 'ēlohīm* (spirit of God) possessed Saul to the effect that he prophesied. And in 1 Sam 16:15-16, the spirit that was sent to torment Saul is an evil spirit (*rûah rā'āh*) from God. This shows that a belief in spirits as divine or spiritual beings was an original aspect of Israel's theology.

The term *Satan* appears in the OT both as a noun (substantive or personal name) and a verb. It is found in five lament psalms where the psalmist expresses grief over those who 'accuse', 'slander' or 'are an adversary'.<sup>4</sup> It is also used in Zech 3:1 for the celestial antagonist figure who accuses Joshua the high priest before an angel of Yahweh. Therefore, the word could be applied to human beings who threaten the well-being of others,<sup>5</sup> or to celestial beings. The

<sup>3</sup> The content of this paragraph is a summary of the article by Kuemmerlin-McLean, J. K., "Demons", *ABD*, II: 138-140.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ps 38:21; 71:13; 109:4,20,29.

<sup>5</sup> cf. 1 Sam 29:4; 2 Sam 19:23; 1 Kings 5:4; Ps 109:6.



use of the term to denote celestial beings is found in Job 1, Zech 3:1 and I Chron 21:1, where a heavenly figure called Satan, is an accuser and seducer of Israel's royal leader.

Certain names are found in the OT whose translation is either problematic or conditioned by philological and theological evidence. The names mentioned here reflect a generally accepted understanding of demons as evil spirits. Two general classes of demons are identified, which are *Šēdīm* (demons) and *Šē'irīm* (hairy demons, satyrs) and whose references appear in two OT contexts.<sup>6</sup> We also find other personal names like *Lîlîth*, 'āzā'zēl, *deber*, *qeteb*, *rešep*, *pakhad lāylāh*, 'ālûqāh, *Šērāpîm*, and many others.

What we find in all these terms are words associated with worship of false gods, unclean animals and sinister forces in nature which were feared and therefore, considered as propelled or caused by evil spirits. The word Satan can be applied to any creature, terrestrial or celestial who threaten the wellbeing of others.

### 3.2 Context of Discussion

The second difficulty involved in assessing the OT evidence concerns the context in which demons and evil spirits are discussed. This is the context of witchcraft, magic and other associated devices, which the magicians employed to ward off or placate evil spirits. There are scattered evidences that in OT times, people practiced magic, divination, witchcraft, sorcery, soothsaying and augur and consulted the spirit of the dead. All these are interpreted as forms of idolatry, which Israel was mandated not to practice (cf. Deut 18:10). It must be admitted that the references to witchcraft and magic is an indirect confession of actual involvement in the cult of demons, since magic,

<sup>6</sup> cf. Kuemmerlin-McLean, "Demons", p139.

witchcraft and the rest are means of achieving real contact with spirits and of establishing protection from the menace of demonic spirits.<sup>7</sup> One is forced to conclude that a general belief in demons as independent evil spirits was always a part of Israel's theology, especially on the popular level.

### 3.3 Actual Stories of Satan and of a Demon

The story of Job presents a heavenly figure and agent, supposed to be one among the sons of God (the divine council). This heavenly agent is designated as Satan (*haśśaṭān*)—not a proper name but a substantive. He is not a malignant leader of forces in opposition to divine intentions. Instead, the Satan does the religious function of ensuring sincere and unselfish fidelity of people to God. This story provides the only OT instance in the OT where God and Satan converse with each other (Job 1:7; 2:2). In the conversation, Satan doubts if a beneficiary of God's excessive patronage could worship God with a sincere and unselfish motive: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" For this duty of testing the faith of God's people, God grants the Satan destructive powers, which he uses, not independently, but only at God's orders.<sup>8</sup>

A sinister force opposed to God and dangerous to human beings is found in Asmodeus. The name of this demon already signals the influence of pagan conceptions on Diaspora Judaism.<sup>9</sup> In all the OT books, Tobith alone makes reference to a wicked demon, which torment and destroy human beings. The intent of this book is to show the power of faith in God and prayer over demonic possession. The third chapter tells the story of Sarah, the daughter of

<sup>7</sup> Kuemmerlin-McLean, "Demons", p139.

<sup>8</sup> Job 1:12; 2:6.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kuemmerlin-McLean, "Demons", pp139-140.



Raguel, of her marriage to seven husbands. The wicked and envious demon, Asmodeus, had killed each of them before they had been with her.<sup>10</sup> Instructed by the angel that accompanied Tobias to marry Sarah, this wicked demon was made to flee, not through magic, but through the prayer that Tobias addressed to God for mercy, accompanied with a ritual that warded off the demon.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.4 Theological Reworking of the Demon Ideas

The theological development in the OT's language about demons is a response to the challenges that the widespread belief in the existence and power of evil spirits posed to Israelite religion. It deals with this difficult challenge in two analogous ways. Firstly, we have noted that the OT's use of generic name *'ēlohīm* to designate superhuman spirits implies belief in the existence of spiritual beings at God's service. This idea comes close to the idea in Greek philosophy, which also uses *daimōn* (generic name for god) to denote several classes of intermediaries, who serve as messengers between gods and human beings, and who are understood as rulers of human destiny, specifically connected with misfortune and distress. Different from Greek philosophy, however, the OT characteristically created a linguistic and material basis for ascribing every extra-ordinary event and action to the rule of God. Superhuman and spiritual powers are given the name *mal'āk* (angel or messenger) or *rū'h* (spirit). The workings of destructive powers are subjected to the rule of God. For instance, God sends the 'angel of pestilence' or the 'spirit of evil' to bring famine and pestilence on the

<sup>10</sup> Tob 3:8; 6:14-15.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Tob 6:8, 17-18.

land.<sup>12</sup> This OT evidence implies that no power to which human beings might turn to for protection is outside the rule of the one God of Israel.<sup>13</sup>

A second theological development involves the historicization of the demonic. We can understand this within the Ancient Near Eastern conception of the origin of evil. A good study of ancient religions has revealed that any discussion of malevolent, sinister forces against the world and against human beings is an indirect treatment of the problem of evil in the world. Ancient Near Eastern religions dedicated so much attention to such problems and offered explanation to its causes and remedies, and this led to the creation of creation myths, theogonies and demonology. These ancient religions explained the problem of evil in the world by pushing its causes to a primordial sea monster, whose defeat by a benevolent god led to the establishment of order and well-being in the world.

Since biblical monotheism does not admit the existence of a primordial cause of evil who opposes the power of God, this myth did not receive a systematic development in the Bible. According to Kaufman,<sup>14</sup> biblical religion was unable to reconcile itself with the idea that there was a power in the universe that defied the authority of God, a power which could serve as an antigod, the symbol and source of evil. Therefore, the OT transferred the cause of evil from the metaphysical realm to the historical and moral realm, that is, to the realm of sin and violence in the world. This is shown, first of all, in the fact that the OT attributes evil, not to evil spirits, but directly to human disobedience

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Judg 9:23; 1 Sam 16:14f; 18:10; 19:9; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Kings 22:21f.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Foerster, W, "daimōn" in G. Kittel, *TDOT:II* (1964)1-20.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Y. Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel*, Trans. M. Greenberg, New York, 1960, p65.



(cf. Exod 3), and indirectly to political powers (Pharaoh of Egypt, Babylon, etc).

In order, therefore, to show that the impact of human domestic, societal and political violence is analogous to the effect of demonic activities on human beings, the OT uses names of mythical sea creatures like Rahab, Leviathan, Behemoth, the twisting serpent, the dragon, (cf. Ps 104:26; Job 40:24) to describe hostile political and human entities who are historical enemies over whom God has achieved victory. It is applied to Egypt (Rahab),<sup>15</sup> to Assyria (mighty waters),<sup>16</sup> to Babylon,<sup>17</sup> and to hostile nations as a whole (Ps 46).

This part of the survey has revealed that the intent of the OT ascription of every extra-ordinary event and action to the rule of God, and its explicit prohibition against witchcraft, magic and necromancy would be to train the people of Israel to focus their attention entirely on Yahweh. This picture changes in the apocalyptic and pseudepigraphical literatures of the Jews.

### 3.5 *The demonizing of the Cosmos in non-Canonical Literatures*

In the face of the OT response to the conceptions that characterize the religions of neighboring peoples and in the face of a different conception of demonic activities found in deuterocanonical and non-canonical Jewish literatures, which came through influences from other religions, one is constrained to distinguish between orthodox religious literature and popular belief or between the canonical and the popular strata of religion. In Greek, Iranian and

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Is 30:7; 51:9-10; Ps 87:4.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Is 8:5-8; 17:12-14.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hab 3; Jer 51:34,44.

Babylonian conceptions, demons are endowed with superhuman powers, capricious and incalculable, and at work in terrifying events in nature and in human life, but placated and held off by magical means.<sup>18</sup> Due to influences from these religions, a noteworthy and multiple names of demons and evil spirits began to appear in non-canonical, Tannaitic and Pseudepigraphic Jewish literatures. They speak of demons as sinister and independent powerful spirits, of fallen angels, evil spirits, unclean spirits, Satan's angels, spirits of Beliar, spirits of Mastema, and many others, which are considered as powers opposed to God and his plans for the world.<sup>19</sup>

This shift of emphasis introduced a dualistic view of reality, which appears very significantly in the book of Jubilees and in Qumran literature.<sup>20</sup> In the book of Jubilees, the name of the devil is primarily Mastema (cf. Hos 9:7-8), who is the chief of evil spirits and who after the flood received permission from God to send a tenth of his spirits to advance his will on humanity. In Rabbinic sources, Qumran literature and in some other pseudepigraphical writings, the leader of the forces of darkness was Belial or Beliar (the worthless one). He is the spirit of darkness, who exercises control over the world.<sup>21</sup> He controls evil people, but he will ultimately be chained by God's Holy Spirit and cast into a consuming fire (*T. Jud.* 25:3). The spirit world was sharply divided into angels and demons. In terms of their menace, the main function of demons is to do harm to life and limb, and sickness and seduction to do evil are attributed to them. Protection against demons is found in God, His angels and the study of the Torah. However, Jews

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Foerster, "daimōn", pp4-8.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Foerster, "daimōn", p14

<sup>20</sup> V. P. Hamilton, "Satan" in D. N. Freedman, ABD V:987-988.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. 1QS 1:18,24; 2:5,19; 1QM 14:9.



also resorted to various external precautions against demons, and this signified an obvious weakening of faith in God.

It is possible that the Diaspora Jews were influenced at this time by their exposure to Persian (Iranian) religion and its Zoroastrian-based dualism. This influence provided some of the stimulus for the more pervasive demonology in these Jewish texts. Rather than viewing the world as the context in which the one God of Israel sketched his unique will for his world, the world was now viewed as a battleground fought over by both benevolent and malevolent deities. According to Hamilton, although such ideas are inimical to orthodox monotheism, their adoption is adduced to human attempt to come to terms with a world so grim and hostile that not every phenomenon could be placed under the umbrella of divine sovereignty.<sup>22</sup>

Another new development and shift of emphasis occurred in the way the Septuagint translated the Hebrew terms for spirits and demonic elements.<sup>23</sup> The Septuagint (LXX) avoids the word *daimōn* which in Greek is associated with positive religious elements. Rather, it consistently uses *daimonion*, narrowing down its meaning to become a contemptuous term for heathen gods. With this translation, it expresses the fact that those spirits, which are so dreadful and destructive to human beings, are the gods of the pagans and the hostile spirits of popular belief.

### 3.6 The Final Victory of God over Evil

The last stage of the development of the concept is found in Pseudepigraphical and apocalyptic literatures where the doctrine of demons was linked with that of the two ages. According to this doctrine, the present world

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, p988.

<sup>23</sup> Foerster, "daimōn", pp11-14.

order is governed by spirits associated with evil. This doctrine would grow into full-blown apocalypse, which speaks of the age to come, a time when God will bring an end to evil and inaugurate the Kingdom of good. Here, images of the conflict myth are used ultimately to describe Yahweh's final victory over forces that are opposed to his sovereign rule. We find this in the apocalypse of Isaiah (Is 27:1): "In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the twisting serpent, Leviathan the crooked serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea". In Dan 7, a distinction is made between the supreme God and one who is exalted over the sea.<sup>24</sup>

We may conclude this OT survey by saying that the OT admits the presence of forces (spiritual, superhuman and human) in this world, which are opposed to God's rule, and who create disorder and suffering. Due to the character of the OT as confession of faith in the lordship of God over the world, it systematically minimized the development of demonology in canonical biblical literature and subjugated all sinister, supernatural realities under the dominion and omnipotence of the one God of Israel. Conceptions of a dualized world in which the prince and the kingdom of evil is opposed to the kingdom of God entered non-canonical literatures through contact with Greek and Iranian conceptions. This dualistic view of life will receive a laudable reverberation in the theologies of John and Paul. Against this background of widespread belief and concern in the activities of evil spirits, the New Testament evidence becomes more comprehensible.

<sup>24</sup> Foerster, "daimōn", pp14-15.



#### 4. The New Testament Evidence

The New Testament evidence is similar to the OT in being a confession of the power of God over the forces of evil. It also adopts all the various shades of meaning and developments that characterize the OT witness. However, it differs from the Old Testament in other respects. It does not share the OT reserve on the evil activities of demons. What is rather underscored is the presentation of reality as under the great and powerful influence of the prince of demons, from which human beings needed the power of God to deliver them. The NT therefore includes a theological presentation of how God accomplished this task in Jesus Christ and through the power of his Holy Spirit. This survey begins with a presentation of pertinent nomenclature.

##### 4.1 Terminology of Demons and spirits in the New Testament

The NT makes frequent references to two terminologies: Satan (35x) and Diabolos (32x). It follows the OT (the LXX) in avoiding the use of *daimōn* (used only once in Matt 8:31) and in using more frequently the term *daimonion*, with its negative connotation, to speak about demonic possessions. The term *daimonion* is originally the neuter of the adjective *daimonios*, which denotes that which lies outside human capacity and which is attributed to the intervention of higher powers, whether good or evil. Therefore, it describes anything which happens of which the human being is not in control, such as, destiny, death, and good or bad fortune.<sup>25</sup> Other terminologies are also found, such as, unclean spirit, evil spirit (Matt 12:45), crippling spirit (Luke 13:11), spirit of divination (Acts

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Foerster, "daimōn", pp1-2, 8.

16:16), deaf and dumb spirit (Mark 9:17,25), spirit of an unclean demon (Luke 4:33), angels of Satan (cf. Matt 25:41; 2 Cor 12:7; Rev 12:7) and in a few instances, the word *pneuma* (spirit), when used without a modifier, also refers to demons.<sup>26</sup> The use of these terminologies in the NT is typically either OT or Jewish.<sup>27</sup> Besides the use of the collective name demons, whose number could be uncountable,<sup>28</sup> we meet personalized names like Satan, the Devil or Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.

Besides these terms, we find in John and Paul a modified form of the dualism found in non-canonical Jewish literatures, which is close to the picture of a titanic struggle between good and evil and between light and darkness. The preferred Johannine title for Satan is the "prince of this world",<sup>29</sup> and in 1 John n 5:19, the author says that the entire world is in the power of the evil one. In fact, the author of 1 John affirms that all sins committed since the beginning of the world was possible through the instigation of the devil, and he adds that the final reason for the Incarnation is "so that he [Jesus] might undo what the devil had done".<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Paul uses such phrases as "the god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4), "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph 2:2) and "rulers of the darkness of this age" (Eph 6:12). For John and Paul, the death of Jesus on the cross constitutes a victory over Satan, yet the implementation of this victory awaits a climactic conclusion.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Matt 8:16; Luke 9:39; 10:20.

<sup>27</sup> cf. Foerster, "daimōn", p16; Reese, D. G., "Demons", *ABD*, II: 140.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the legion of demons of the demoniac of Gerasene – Mark 5:4.

<sup>29</sup> John 12:31; 14:30; 16:2,11 // Matt 9:34 "prince of devils".

<sup>30</sup> 1 John 3:8; Cf. N. Corte, *Who is the Devil*, New York: Hawthorn Books Publishers, 1958, p 35.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Hamilton, "Satan", p988.



The fact that evil spirits and demons are mentioned with relative frequency in the NT is an unambiguous judgment on their existence and their pervasive activity. The stories of demonic possessions in the NT confirms the popular sense of something horrible and sinister in such spirits, and they bring out the demonic nature of their activity on the physical and spiritual life of the human being. Generally, the NT adopts the view in OT Pseudepigraphical literature that the prince of this world is Satan, and that he and his agents rule the present age. However, it also bears a stronger witness to the victory of Jesus Christ over evil spirits – a victory which is efficacious for the community of believers and which will preserve it through the temptations of the last time.<sup>32</sup> A good evaluation of the stories of exorcism in the Gospel is necessary at this point.

#### 4.2 Demonic Possession and Exorcism

The concern of the NT in this regard is not on the origin of evil spirits or a description of their appearances. There are five things to note in the stories of demonic possessions in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

a. Jesus' response to the accusation that he worked miracles thanks to his league with Beelzebul, shows that the exorcisms represent a warfare between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.<sup>33</sup> "Kingdom" is realm for the exercise of power and authority. Before the event of Jesus, the devil has exercised power in this world and stood against the kingdom of God. Therefore, the exorcisms are a powerful assault on the dominion of Satan, the strong

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Foerster, "daimōn", p19.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Matt 12:25-29; cf. Luke 11:21-22.

man.<sup>34</sup> Thy do not represent the compassion of Jesus on the possessed, but were direct confrontations with the enemy kingdom and a demonstration of God's omnipotence over evil forces.<sup>35</sup>

b. Matthew's Gospel, especially, counters a conception that was gradually gaining ground in canonical literature, that is, that the devil is the prince of this world. It does this by showing how Jesus commands the devil as the master, and in this way he tells us not to fear the devil's so-called 'omnipotence'. The devil, therefore, recognizes the sovereignty and omnipotence of God over the world; it fears the name of Jesus, and is threatened by any command uttered in the name of Jesus (Matt 8:29). Therefore, its claim as the prince and lord of this world is an empty claim (Matt 4:8-10). From the beginning, the entire creation is under the authority of God.

c. There is a close connection between the proclamation of the kingdom of God, which Jesus inaugurated, and the casting out of demons. The commissioning accounts in the Synoptic Gospels connect the casting of demons with the ministry Jesus authorized his disciples to continue.<sup>36</sup> In fact, in all the summary accounts of Jesus' ministry and the mission of the disciples in the NT, the casting out of demons is a constant and recurring factor, implying that it is one of the most verifiable indicators of the presence of the kingdom. Significant in this context is the association of this activity of casting out demons with the proclamation of the kingdom (cf. Acts 8:4-8). In other words, it is attributed to the power of God and

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21-22; C. E. Arnold, "Power, NT Concept of", *ABD*, V: 445.

<sup>35</sup> Jonge de, M., "Christ", *ABD*, I: 915.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Matt 10:7-8; Mark 3:13-19; 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-2. Cf. Reese, "Demons", p141.



not to any power inherent in the preacher. In order to dissociate it from the magical approach of other exorcists, there is lack of reference in the NT to any formula or procedure passed along from Jesus to his followers for conjuring demons. The disciples were simply endowed with the *exousia* (authority) of Jesus, to be expressed through a word of command (cf. Matt 8:28-34).

d. Certain sicknesses, not all, are attributed to the devil and to demons, such as, mental insanity (Matt 8:28), dumbness (Matt 9:32), blindness (Matt 12:22), epilepsy (Luke 9:39) and tendencies of self-destruction (Matt 17:15; Mark 5:5; 9:22). Luke 13:11 reports the case of a woman who had had the spirit of infirmity for eighteen years, bent over and could not fully straighten herself. The foregoing evidence is sustained by the belief that existence of sickness in this world belongs to the character of this age of which Satan is the prince. However, due to the variety of evidences, it is difficult to establish a relationship in the Gospels between sickness and demonization. Only a few passages suggest it, for instance, Acts 10:38.<sup>37</sup>

e. Despite Jesus' authority and power over Satan and his demons, Matthew's Gospel depicts a continuing conflict between the forces of the evil one and the sons of the kingdom of God in the present age (Matt 13:36-43). It seems that some kind of permission is given to the evil one to operate in this world against human beings. This idea is present in Rev 12:13-17. Before Jesus, demons do not represent a difficult inimical force to combat. He casts them out and does not destroy them. In some instances, he dialogues with the demons and agrees with their demand to send them away to continue their operations in a different environment (cf. Matt 8:31-31). Matt 12:43-45 presents them as wandering hostile spirits whose abode is this

<sup>37</sup> In the summary statements found in Matt 4:24; Mark 1:32; Luke 7:21, for instance, demonic possess belongs to a category different from physical illness.

world.<sup>38</sup> This questions the language of the 'binding' and 'destruction' of the devil in popular religiosity today.

In summary, we have seen that the New Testament world seem to have been infested by demons and all kinds of evil spirits who torment the people through sickness and who distort the plan of God for salvation. In his ministry, Jesus stood against such powers through curing of the sick, liberating those in bondage and through exorcisms. He also gave his disciples the power to do so, inviting them to a faith that would enable them to work against the forces and the machinations of the evil one. This evidences from the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles could better be understood against the background of the Old Testament, that of Hellenistic Philosophy and Popular animistic beliefs.<sup>39</sup> Before we look at the rest of the NT evidence, Pauline evidence in particular, a short presentation of the religious and cultural background of the NT is necessary.

#### 4.3 The Religious and Cultural Background of the NT

The early Christians were people whose lives and attitudes were shaped by the concerns and vision of life of their times. It is my conviction that a better understanding of the anxieties and hopes that shaped the lives of first century Christianity enriches the value of the entire NT conception on the question under discussion. Therefore, while drawing heavily from non-biblical sources and pseudepigraphical and apocalyptic literatures in order to paint the picture of this context, the necessary connection with the gospel of the Kingdom of God will be made. This

<sup>38</sup> This idea is found in Pseudepigraphical literatures, such as, *Jubilees* (10:5-9) and *I Enoch* (15:11-16:1).

<sup>39</sup> Foerster, , "daimōn", p1.



procedure will serve the purpose of situating the NT within its broader cultural and religious horizons. It is also a suitable backdrop for the religious search that underlies the quest for security and wholeness within a world of change, violence, evil, oppression, aggression and fear.

The pages of the NT are marked by traces of beliefs coming from the blending of the beliefs in Greek religion and Eastern astrology. There was the belief that every natural force—the wind, the thunder, the lightning, the rain—had its demonic superintendent. Every material thing and every event had its spirit. In one sense, these spirits were intermediaries to God, and in another sense, they were barriers to him because the vast majority of spirits were hostile to human beings. The ancient world lived in a demon-haunted universe. According to this belief, the human being is under constant threat from malevolent spirits who can attack them, causing them all kinds of bodily and physical harm. This is a general feature of the religious picture of the Hellenistic times, and it came from Babylonian, Persian, Greek influences.<sup>40</sup>

The conceptions exposed above represent the general picture of the religious spirit of the time. The peoples of the Greco-Roman world, including the early Christians, shared these conceptions. In Ephesus, for instance, many people, including Jews, practiced magic and possessed books containing various spells and techniques (Acts 19:13-19). The Acts of the Apostles also contains references to the existence of many magicians (for instance, Acts 13:6-10). On the one hand, people believed that human beings were under constant threats from malevolent spirits who cause

<sup>40</sup> Cf. W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*. The Daily Study Bible, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1975, p96; S. Freyne, *The World of the New Testament*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980, p24-26.

them all kinds of bodily and physical harm. On the other hand, there was also belief in an impersonal, incomprehensible, fatalistic and unwieldy force that utterly determines human situation. In the face of these religious and philosophical currents, the Gospel of Jesus Christ seemed very appealing to people of the Graeco-Roman world. Christianity was one among many religions of the time, which offered remedies to the problem of bondage to fate, with its accompanying insecurity and fear. In the Christian view, one was no longer subject to the spirit of bondage but to the spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15-17). The foregoing ideas introduce us to the Pauline witness.

#### 4.4 The Pauline Witness

Paul and his religious world exposed above offer the background, meaning and relevance of the sayings about the principalities and powers in the NT. There are varieties of terms uniquely found in the letters of Paul, which refer to forces opposed to Jesus Christ and his kingdom in the world. These terms are used as means for making explicit confession in the power of Jesus over evil. How Paul responded to that world gave a particular shape to the Gospel that he preached.

**Archai** (Principalities or Rulers): this terminology is found only in Pauline texts: Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:10,15. Syntactically, the prefix *arch* is frequently used for Greek words denoting positions of human power. In their contexts, the word stands for entities that has the power to separate the Christian from the love of Christ, but over which the Christian has become a conqueror through the death of Christ. It is one of the four enemy powers (ruler, authority, power and death) that are subjected to Christ and which Christ destroyed in order to



hand over the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor 15:24). These rulers and authorities are spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, against which the Christian must fight; they are forces through which the devil operates (Eph 3:10; 6:11). They seem to operate on the earth through philosophies, human traditions and elemental spirits of the universe (Col 2:10).

**Archontes** (Rulers) is found in Rom 13:3 and 1 Cor 2:6,8 where it refers either to human rulers or spiritual or cosmic powers, but the spiritual connotation seems to be more plausible. Therefore, "rulers of this age" of 1 Cor 2:6,8 are spiritual powers, who did not comprehend the secret wisdom of God and so crucified the Lord of glory (Reid, 748).<sup>41</sup> Considering that this term is used in its singular form in Mark 3:22 for Beelzebul, one could conclude that *archontes* as it is used here belongs to the motif of Satanic opposition to Jesus that is also recorded in the Gospel tradition (cf. Luke 22:3,53). It could also be explained in terms of the widespread early Christian understanding of the spiritual conflict that stood behind the human opposition that led Jesus to the cross.

**Exousiai** (Powers or Authorities) is found in 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:10,15), used most frequently in the NT for the right or authorization to use power bestowed by an office as is most clearly stated in Rom 13:1-3.<sup>42</sup> The word refers to spiritual beings which occupy the highest heaven and are privileged along with the *thronoi* (thrones) to be in the presence of God.<sup>43</sup> In this case, they are not hostile forces but servants of God (cf. Reid, 748).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Cf. D. G. Reid, "Principalities and Powers" in G. F. Hawthorne et al., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1993, p748.

<sup>42</sup> Wink, W., *Naming the Powers*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, p15.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Testament of Levi* 3:8; 1 *Enoch* 61:10; 2 *Enoch* 20:1.

<sup>44</sup> Reid, "Principalities and Powers", p748.

**Dynameis** (Powers) is found in Rom 8:38; Eph 1:21 where it refers to powers which are opposed to God. In Jewish texts, the word frequently refers to military forces (e.g. Ps 102:21), and to powers of heaven.<sup>45</sup> They are military forces against God's plan in the world.

**Kyriotētes** (Dominions, Lordships) is found in Col 1:16 and Eph 1:21 and represents spheres of spiritual influence formerly understood to be ruled by the gods of the nations. It is the equivalent of the Hebrew term *memšelet*, used of the dominion of Belial in 1QS 1:18; 2:19.

**Thronoi** (Thrones) is found in Col 1:16. The word appears in Daniel 7:9 (LXX) where it refers to the thrones set in place in the heavenly tribunal of the Ancient of Days, clearly indicating positions of transcendent authority. In 2 *Enoch* 20:1 they are called the many-eyed thrones who with the cherubim, seraphim and the heavenly forces occupy the seventh heaven. In *Testament of Levi* 3:8 they occupy the highest heaven and are privileged with the *exousiai* to be in the very presence of God.<sup>46</sup>

**Stoicheia**: There is a statement in Col 2:8 that the Colossian Christians ought to have been dead to the rudiments (*stoicheia*) of this world. Going from the basic meaning of *stoicheia* as meaning 'a row of things' or 'elements of any subject', scholars have interpreted the word to mean 'the elemental spirits which control the world' or 'elementary worldly notions' – cosmic powers of some kind. This heresy contains an astrological element and may refer to the spirits of the stars and planets, which the ancient world believed had influence on the destiny of humans and the affairs of this world.<sup>47</sup> The personification

<sup>45</sup> cf. *Jubilees* 1:29; 1 *Enoch* 61:10.

<sup>46</sup> Reid, "Principalities and Powers" p749.

<sup>47</sup> cf. Barclay, *Letter to the Philippians*, p96; Rogers, P. V., *Colossians*, New Testament Message 15, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1980, p33.



of the cosmic elements poses a serious threat to the unique mediation of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of the world.

**Kosmokratores tou skotous toutou** (Cosmic rulers of this darkness) is found in Eph 6:12 where the evil nature of these powers is emphasized by the phrase "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies".

**Angeloi** (Angels or Messengers) is found in Rom 8:38 and 1 Cor 6:3 where Paul uses the term in a negative sense of evil powers who might attempt to thwart the purposes of God. In Col 2:18 the phrase "worship of angels" could be understood in an objective sense of angels as objects of misplaced devotion, or subjectively to mean that their worship of God is an object of human religious aspiration. Besides the demons, people believed in angelic intermediaries between God and human beings, and this was expressed as a form of worship of angels (Eph 2:18).

#### 4.5 Summary and Evaluation of Findings

The numerous terminologies presented above, which point to the same reality, depict the magnitude and seriousness of the problem and challenges which belief in superhuman, spiritual and demonic powers present to faith. In the different contexts in which they occur, all, but the term *exousia*, are negative, spiritual, heavenly and cosmic forces which operate in the world to militate against Christian life and faith in Jesus Christ, and against which the Christian must fight.

A good evaluation of these concepts is possible within the context of the religious and cultural context of Paul's churches. It was discovered that Christians of the Hellenistic environment, especially, the Colossians and Ephesians, were pressurized to combine their worship of Christ with a reverential abasement towards other intermediaries of divinity, which Paul identifies with

different names: the elemental spirits of the universe, principalities and powers, angels, dominions, authorities and powers. These spirits could be demonic or angelic, with human and/or spiritual characteristics. The warning against philosophy and empty deceit in Col 2:8 suggests that some people were teaching another brand of wisdom to the faithful, which opposes the wisdom of the Gospel message (cf. 1 Cor 2:6) and which was a threat to their faith in Jesus Christ. Where did these syncretistic tendencies arise? Surely, it arose neither from biblical Judaism nor from the Gentile tenets from which the Christians of these communities were converted. While some scholars argue in favor of their Gnostic or Essene origin, there is some consensus that its origin would be a mixture of some strange mythology from surrounding pagan notions with the traditional Old Testament faith.<sup>48</sup> Many of the people of the time thought of the heavenly bodies as having a controlling effect on the fate of human beings. Therefore, in order to reject the idea that these elemental spirits had anything to offer as a supplement to the Christian Gospel, Paul insisted on the uniqueness and universal significance of Christ. His appeal to them was to "remain rooted and built up in Christ, just as you were taught" (Col 2:7).

In some passages, Paul employs inclusive phrases to show that all these powers have been subjected to the rule of Jesus Christ. He says in Rom 8:38-39:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Rogers, *Colossians*, p xv.



The strength of this Pauline assertion is found in the belief that "all things in heaven and on earth, things seen and unseen" (Col 1:16) are created by, in and through Christ. Jesus Christ became Lord through his death on the cross and in doing so; he disarmed every imaginable power in the heavens and made a public disgrace of them (Col 2:15). Therefore, "every knee ...in heaven and on earth and under the earth should bow" at the mention of the name of Jesus (Phil 2:10).

### 5. Theological Issues

I cannot conclude this paper without discussing some heavy theological issues that this topic evokes. Most prominent among others are the theological questions of the sufficiency of God, Jesus as the definitive means of God's self-communication, and the question of Jesus as the universal Lord and true source of salvation. There is also the question of the meaning of salvation. Of these issues, the one that is mostly attacked is the question of the relevance of Jesus as universal Lord and source of salvation.

#### 5.1 *Jesus as Universal Sovereign and Lord and Source of Salvation*

An understanding of demonic powers and their influence on human beings is absolutely essential to a proper interpretation of the meaning of Jesus for salvation. In the context of the demon-haunted universe in which people believed themselves to be living, there was the conception that something more than the power of God manifested in Jesus was needed to defeat the power of the demons. In the Gospels, the challenge was the meaning of

Jesus' miracles and exorcisms, and there, we saw the close connection between the power of the kingdom of God and the defusing of the power of evil. The Gospel traditions stand in conformity with the OT emphasis on the subjection of all powers under the Lordship of the God of Israel. In the Pauline churches, the issue was recourse to the powers of demonic spirits, which Paul calls 'principalities and powers' (Eph 1:16; 2:10,15). A certain recurring emphasis appears in all the responses that Paul gave to the problems of all the churches founded by him, that is, that belief in Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation. It would appear that some heretical teachers taught the people that the Gospel was so simple that one needed some more sophisticated and esoteric knowledge to reach a higher level of spirituality, rigid asceticism and intellectual religious aristocracy. The heresy attacked the total adequacy and unique supremacy of Jesus Christ. Paul confronted this problem, not with deserved excommunication; rather, he approached it with argument and vibrant exhortation. He appealed to religious experience and faith rather than to formal authority. No other NT text had such a lofty view of Christ or such insistence on his completeness and finality as we see in the Letters of Paul (cf. Col 1:15,19; 2:2,9).

Although the person of Christ constitutes the fullness of God's self-communication and the unifying centre of the entire history of salvation, he is further described in such exalted and profound terms as the Son and Image of God, first-born of all creation, head of the Church, one in whom dwells the fullness of God and through whom all things are reconciled with the Father. He is the mystery of God, the treasury of all wisdom and knowledge and the very hope of glory.<sup>49</sup> The seriousness of the error in the belief and resort

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Col 1:15-19; 2:2,9.



to esoteric powers, worship of demons and involvement in occult practices lay in drawing people away from Christ, the true source of light and salvation, and into the shadow of darkness. In the Letters of Paul, Jesus is addressed as 'Lord' in order to contrast between serving him as Lord and serving other lords.<sup>50</sup>

### 5.2 *Meaning of Salvation as Liberation from Fear*

Still reflecting on the absurdity of reliance upon the mediation of cosmic powers, Paul begins to speak of the triumph of Christ through the cross and how Christians must understand the meaning of the cross for salvation. It was through the apparent helplessness of the crucifixion that Jesus disarmed those malignant forces hostile to human welfare. He stripped off their power to hold human beings under their bondage with the effect that his cross of shame became a sign of victory, leading captivity captive (cf. Eph 4:8). Paul insists on the public and final nature of this victory. Christians ought to realize that they are henceforth spared from any fear regarding the influence of evil powers, or of any need to placate them.<sup>51</sup>

### 5.3 *The Christian and the Power of God over Evil*

If Jesus is presented in the NT as the plenipotentiary of God's power and rule over the world, the followers of Jesus should share in that rule and glory. The life of Jesus is a model for the Church and for the Christian in many respects. The ministry of Jesus presents a number of challenges to the Christian. The first challenge is the need to know and be conscious of who we are through the merits

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Rom 16:18; 6:23; 8:39; 1 Cor 15:31; Phil 3:8.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. H. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Beginning of the World*, p192.

of Jesus Christ. Secondly, the success of Jesus' ministry is due chiefly to his total dependence upon the power of God through the Holy Spirit. Jesus indicates that his followers could also expect to depend on that power for their mission and for gaining victory over the forces of evil. Therefore, he promised that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Without this knowledge of the power we possess, we will live in constant fear of the unknown. Thirdly, Christians have achieved fullness of life in Christ (Col 2:10) or as Paul would say in Rom 8:32, the Father gives us all things through him', and this corresponds to the completeness of divinity within Christ. With this emphasis, Paul rules out the claim raised by some at Colossae that an extra degree of spiritual maturity was available through other religious rites and beliefs. If Christ is the head of all rule and authority, no other fulfillment is available apart from him.<sup>52</sup>

### 6. Conclusion: Present-Day Challenges

I conclude my survey of the biblical perspective by articulating how the problems of previous centuries are still the problems of today's Church and the challenges they present to the Church today. Thanks to the conceptions of the sovereignty of God in the canonical texts, which are documented as responses to the problems of ancient people and those of first century Christianity, the Church would not have had a basis for confronting today's similar problems.

Despite obvious differences separating the first century from today, there are some unmistakable parallels with today's situation. The prevailing religious atmosphere then was marked by a spirit of insecurity, quest for higher

<sup>52</sup> Rogers, *Colossians*, p34.



knowledge, asceticism and pluralism. Throughout the Roman Empire, people were at work trying to create new religions out of different combinations of the old. Moreover, the Roman world showed great respect for Greek philosophy whose terms and concepts were being assimilated to a greater or lesser extent by all religious systems. Religion was regarded primarily as a protection against the forces of evil and of death. Therefore, people were apt to adopt a whole range of superstitious remedies from the most incompatible sources.<sup>53</sup> The superstitious belief in the elemental spirits of the world still thrives today when millions consult their horoscopes, half-believing that their lives are governed by the movement of the stars. It thrives today when millions of Africans live in fear of a continent, demonized by real, unreal and unrelated natural causes.

As we saw from the perspectives exposed in this paper, such beliefs led to the break up or weakening of orthodox religion. Its effect on the tenets of Christian faith today is remarkable. We also notice the distinction that occurred between popular belief represented in non-canonical texts and the reservation of canonical literature. All this occurred due to the fact that human fear knows no religious boundaries. In a context in which different religious currents offer different solutions to the problem of the threat in which human life and the world is constantly exposed, it is not surprising to see a mingling of religious loyalties. For instance, Acts 19:13 reports that some Jewish exorcists invoked the name of Jesus as part of their magical rite. A similar incident also happened in the time of Jesus (cf. Mark 9:38-40). This shows that it was possible for magicians to call on all possible divine names irrespective of one's own religious tradition.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Rogers, *Colossians*, pp41-42.

Like the ancient world, we also live in a demon-haunted environment. It would not be wrong to say that the religious atmosphere of first century Christianity is not different from the religious world of present-day Africa. We are still being subject to the atmosphere of universal anxiety and fear of malevolent forces and impersonal forces that claim to control human lives. In the present time, the problem recurs in different kinds of belief and practices. This belief in the existence of various superpowers and spiritual forces, which are able to control human fate and determine human condition, is both a challenge to faith in one God and to the confession of Christ as the fullest manifestation of God's self-revelation and power. Our present time is marked by active search for ways of coping religiously with life and by switch of religious loyalties. In our present time, this has led to practices and beliefs that are described as syncretistic, superstitious and bizarre. In such circumstances, religion could easily become debased into a set of superstition and there are plenty of chances today for fraud and the exploitation of the unwary.

The problems exposed above concern us both as private individuals and as members of Christian communities. They draw attention to a problem that is as vital today as in the Church of the first century, namely, the need to combat heretical teachings and practices that seem to suggest the insufficiency of Jesus for salvation. There are many supposed Christian churches whose brand of the gospel opposes the wisdom of the Gospel message, and this is a big threat to faith in Jesus Christ. While the roots of these conceptions lie outside the Church, they are preached by Christian ministers and eagerly assimilated by modern day Christians, who prize them as new dimensions to the faith. Paul's vigorous words can help us to regain our balance regarding Christology, firm moral principles and



true spiritual growth. His particular pastoral strategy of detailed catechesis, argumentation and vibrant exhortation to the faithful on any problem should be adopted as relevant for today's pastoral activity. In this regard, theologians and leaders of Christian communities have the greater responsibility.

In Israelite religion, it was the work of the prophet to defend Jewish monotheism from the syncretistic practices of the nations among whom Israel lived. Belief in other powers other than Yahweh, who were believed to control human life and destiny and against whom people sought protection, was one of the major threats to faith that confronted the prophet. Like their Old Testament counterparts, the theologian has the duty to instruct on the implications of belief in one God for lived life, on the meaning of the supremacy of Jesus, and on the self-concept of the Christian as one who in Jesus Christ is victorious over death and over possible powers that compete for human allegiance and worship.

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