

Satan and the Powers

BY SUSAN R. GARRETT

In apocalypses we meet a cast of fallen characters—Satan, demons, and other nefarious beings—that indicate spiritual realities, earthly officeholders, or structures of power. How did we come to inhabit a world controlled by such powers? And where is God in the mix?

The cast of characters in ancient apocalyptic writings typically includes beings that most of us do not encounter on a routine basis. These characters fall into clearly opposed groups. The chief protagonist is God. There are also (good) angels, who function as worshipers, escorts, interpreters, and agents of divine judgment. Depending on the apocalyptic work in question, the Son of Man or the Messiah may also play prominent roles as protagonists. On the other side, the antagonists in ancient apocalyptic writings typically include demons and fallen angels. In some texts, Satan is assumed to be chief of the fallen angels and the force behind other nefarious beings (such as the beast and false prophet in Revelation, and the lawless one in 2 Thessalonians 2). Sometimes, however, Satan goes unmentioned (as, for example, in Romans 5, where Paul refers instead to the governing worldly powers as “Sin” and “Death”).¹

The authors of ancient apocalyptic literature assume that actions of the unseen characters influence events among mortals and vice versa. In Luke’s Gospel, for example, Jesus remarks to those who arrest him, “But this is your hour, and the authority of darkness” (Luke 22:53, my translation). Jesus is implying that the actions of his human adversaries are controlled by none other than the Prince of Darkness. Or, to give another example, when Michael battles the dragon and casts him out of heaven (in Revelation 12), voices proclaim that the victory was achieved by the blood of Jesus and the testimony of the martyrs, and that Satan’s expulsion means still more

suffering for the followers of Jesus (Revelation 12:9-17). Unseen forces influence or even control what happens in the mundane realm, and what happens in the mundane realm reciprocally affects the unseen forces.

New Testament authors referred to these forces using a variety of terms, including “principalities,” “powers,” “authorities,” “rulers,” “kings,” “angels,” “demons,” “spirits,” “thrones,” and “dominions.” Reflecting the bi-directional working of these forces, authors applied the terms sometimes to *heavenly, spiritual realities* and sometimes to *earthly officeholders or structures of power*. Often, both were meant at once. For example, when Paul wrote that the “rulers of this world” had not understood God’s secret wisdom or else they would not have crucified Jesus (1 Corinthians 2:7-8), he was apparently referring *both* to the human “rulers of this world” who killed Jesus *and* to the spiritual forces that drove them.²

THE SYSTEMIC DIMENSION OF THE POWERS

Today, the convention among many evangelical Christians is to stress the invisible, spiritual side of the powers and downplay or ignore their worldly dimension. The powers, rulers, angels, and so on are understood to be spirit-beings, each with unique intelligence and supernatural abilities, and each committed to serving either Satan or God. According to this interpretation, Satan and his servants exercise astonishing, almost unlimited capacity to undermine God’s aims, and much of the world’s evil stems from their ongoing effort to do so.

Other Christians, especially those influenced by Calvinist and Reformed traditions, insist that the powers’ this-worldly dimension must always be kept in view. These interpreters take the New Testament’s language about “powers and principalities” to refer not (or not exclusively) to spirit-beings but (also) to *social entities*, and *norms for behavior*. In this view, the powers are not unequivocally evil; instead, their character and effects are mixed. Most were created with intention for good: think of the medical establishment, the institution of the family, a college honor code, or the Geneva conventions. But worldly powers—even those created for good—are prone to sin. They are intent on self-preservation, they may use questionable means to elicit loyalty, and they sometimes put selfish goals (such as profit or pleasure) ahead of the interests of God or fellow humans.³ Viewed in this way, the principalities and powers are part and parcel of the social and cultural systems and institutions that make human life in community possible. They are essential to human flourishing, even though fallen. This interpretation of the principalities and powers helps to make sense of a passage like Romans 13:1-7, where Paul regards the “authorities” and “rulers” as offices and officeholders divinely ordained for good.

Because we live our lives in the social and cultural matrices constituted by the principalities and powers, we readily absorb and reflect their values and expectations, including their sinful and corrupting tendencies. If I

discriminate against someone, it may be because my family, peers, and culture have blinded me to my own privilege and convinced me that certain classes of people deserve lesser treatment. Or, a “suicide bomber” may have been persuaded by the members of a militant group to see acts of violence as expressing loyalty to God and one’s people. Thus we see that humans sin because larger forces blind them, deceive them, subjugate them. We are accountable before God both as individuals, and as members of sinful communities whose biases and perversions we learn, act on, and pass on to others.

This systemic dimension of the powers, as well as their genuinely positive functions, are ignored in some recent popular portrayals, which interpret the principalities and powers exclusively as wicked spirit-beings. Consider, for example, the *Left Behind* novels, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. This set of twelve novels, which have sold over sixty-five million copies, depict events expected by many (but not all) Christians: the rapture of the saints, seven years of tribulation, and the Battle of Armageddon.⁴ Evil powers, in the world of *Left Behind*, come from outside humans, indeed from outside the world: the powers are supernatural forces that blind people as if by magic and indwell them by possession. The same could be said concerning the portrayal of the powers in the bestselling novels of Frank Peretti about the takeover of a small town by the forces of Satan, or concerning many other recent offerings on the topic of “spiritual warfare.”⁵ In these accounts, the powers are evil, and they are always something *outside*, something *other*. Even if they indwell us, they are in some fundamental way separate from us (and separate also from the social networks, ideologies, and institutions in which we participate).

Such a view promotes the dangerous assumption that, once we are saved, all is right with us. We can safely pass the buck because the evil has been expelled from *our* individual souls. We need not worry about evil

deriving from the social systems we support. Because LaHaye, Jenkins, Peretti, and others view evil powers as separable from people and institutions, they fail to see that the powers are embodied in *all* our institutions, including the church, and that humans are complicit in them. They fail to see how even churches are still prone to believe Sin’s twisted promises of well-being and to heed its words of flattery and enticement.

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THE SIN AND REDEMPTION OF THE WORLD

How did we come to inhabit a world controlled by the powers? And where is God in the mix? The Apostle Paul traced our “present evil age” (Galatians 1:4) back to the time of Adam. When Adam sinned, a cosmic shift occurred: powers called “Sin” and “Death” entered into the world. God relinquished a measure of control over the world to these and to *all* the powers, which now determine the outcome of many earthly events. The powers, fallen as they are, exercise control because God lets them do so. But always God looks ahead to the Day of Resurrection, when the dead will be raised and Christ’s lordship over the powers—initiated at his resurrection—will be complete. Thus Christians’ “resurrection hope” is not simply that we as individuals will live again, but that *all of creation* “will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). On that day, the fallen powers will be fully subjugated, and God will truly “be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

This Pauline perspective on the powers has implications for how we view the problem of evil, suggesting that *God does not directly will each bad thing that happens*. At the creation God gave the powers genuine authority, and they determine the shape of many events, including many instances of evil. Sometimes the powers work against God, just as we as individuals sometimes work against God. God does not directly will those things to happen, though in divine sovereignty God does *allow* them to happen.

On the other hand, Paul writes, “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). This does not mean, as is often assumed, that “everything happens for a reason.” Rather, Paul is saying that God regularly turns even bad things to good ends. Thus, for example, in divine providence God permitted Joseph’s brothers to take him captive, but though they meant it for evil “God intended it for good” (Genesis 50:20). To give another example, Paul was imprisoned by powers who meant to obstruct the purposes of God, but as a consequence of that imprisonment, brothers and sisters dared “to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear” (Philippians 1:14). Or, to offer the most important example of all, the rulers of this age orchestrated the crucifixion of Christ for evil purposes, not anticipating its salvific outcome (1 Corinthians 2:8).

Full and final redemption from the fallen powers will not come until the Last Day. The good news of the gospel is that at his resurrection Jesus Christ became “first fruits” of the coming redemption and Lord over the powers (1 Corinthians 15:23; Ephesians 1:20-21; 1 Peter 3:22). Moreover, he promised that Christians already share in this authority when they call upon Jesus’ name: “See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you” (Luke 10:19; cf. Ephesians 6:10-17; Philippians 2:10). But what does this “authority

to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy” look like in practice?

Though Luke tells us that Jesus said “nothing will hurt you,” we know that the evangelist understood Jesus’ promise in a non-literal way, since in the rest of Luke and in Acts Christians are shown as suffering greatly for Jesus. Jesus’ lordship over the powers, and *our* authority as his disciples, is manifested not in supernatural protection of the saints as much as in the divine strength we are given to persevere in the midst of this fallen world. This is the same strength that enabled Jesus to endure (not escape) the crucifixion and so to undermine the powers as they sought to obstruct God’s reign. Jesus promises us real power — “power at work within us” by which God “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

As Jesus contended against the principalities and powers in his ministry and in his passion, he showed himself as perfected, elevated, deified. Empowered by God, he accomplished far more than he ever could have done through human power alone. The good news for us is that, as Jesus’ disciples, we are united to Christ through the Spirit, who works in us to perfect and elevate us also. We, too, are enabled to accomplish far more than we ever could through human power alone. As Paul wrote, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

The Spirit of Christ enables us to grapple with the sinful and sorrowful conditions of human existence. Jesus strengthens us to resist the lure of the fallen powers, including the powers of sin and death, in ways that we never could alone.

Jesus heals our blindness.

He gives us eyes to see when the power of sin seduces us with its wily and deceptive promises. Sometimes such sight comes gradually. Sometimes it comes in an instant, with knee-buckling force, as understanding of our own elaborate duplicity and self-delusion overtakes us.

Sometimes, the healing affects only individuals; sometimes, whole peoples have the scales lifted from their eyes.

Jesus undergirds us when death buffets us and torments us. Throughout the ages, saints have faced down the powers that deal in death. They were, and are, able to conquer fear by trusting in the God who raises the dead. Few of us today have known martyrs, but most have seen Christians who

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witnessed to their faith by persevering in hope even in the midst of terrible affliction.

When we fail morally, Jesus forgives us. By accepting us, even running to meet and embrace us when we are dragged down with shame, he enables us to triumph over the forces that tempt us to despair. And *Jesus empowers us to love and serve ones whom we have wronged or hated*, to forgive ones who

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have wronged us, and to call those wrongs to mind no more.

In all these ways, Christ frees us from the dominion of the powers and *shows that he is their Lord*. Though each could be elaborated, I will focus on the fourth sort of empowerment: Jesus' gift to us of divine strength to return good for evil and to

let love accede to the place where hatred once reigned.

One of the Satan-figure's many aliases in ancient Jewish and Christian writings is *Mastema*.⁶ The name means "enmity" or "hatred" – one of Satan's favorite tools. By means of hatred, Satan fosters blind obedience and even idolatrous worship – especially of those who claim the power to vanquish our enemies. Mastema delights in rousing our unrighteous anger. Anger can goad us to destroy the things, the people, the relationships that are most precious to us; anger can destroy even us. *But Jesus is stronger than Mastema*, for his power is that of love:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Matthew 5:43-48

How dare Jesus command us, and how dare we aspire, to "be perfect?" He dared, and we do, because the power to love our enemies does not issue from our own hearts – divided as they so often are, to protect our own interests and to justify our nurturing of grievances. The power to love our enemies comes from God, whose enemy we ourselves once were. Divine "perfection" is manifested in God's unconditional love for all. God freely

gives the sun and the rain—the very means of life—to the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Jesus, too, loves with such reckless abandon, and he commands us to do likewise, trusting that the power to do so comes from above (cf. James 1:17). When we harbor hate, we walk in darkness. *When we love, we have overcome the Evil One* (1 John 2:9-14).

The power that Jesus grants us to vanquish hate is not a consolation prize, given in the absence of the vaporizing, annihilating sort of power depicted in *Left Behind*. Anyone who has ever been possessed by the demon of hate—what Miroslav Volf defines as “revulsion for the other that feeds on the sense of harm or wrong suffered”⁷—knows how completely and ruthlessly it exercises its rule. Hatred takes control of our deeds, our words, our very minds until we lose all recognition that something is awry. Moreover, hatred has the power to control us not only as individuals but as whole populations. Hatred is so potent because it is the power of death itself (Matthew 5:21-22; 1 John 3:15). But Jesus rebukes hatred, saying, “Come out, you unclean spirit!” (cf. Mark 5:8). Jesus’ power to expel hatred and engender love is the most extraordinary power there is, for it is the power to overcome death with life.

CONCLUSION

Ancient apocalyptic writers used language about Satan and the powers to make sense of the relationship between events on earth and events in the heavenly or spiritual sphere. Christians today often interpret biblical language about the “principalities and powers” by understanding them either as entities wholly separable from humans (and, indeed, from this world) or incarnated in the earthly officeholders and structures of power that govern our day-to-day existence. In the latter view, many of the principalities and powers were created to serve good purposes, but all are prone to making sinful demands, especially the demand—exemplified by Satan in his tempting of Jesus in the wilderness—that humans regard them as ultimate and give homage to them instead of to God.

United to Christ through the Spirit, we are now freed from bondage to the powers, and enabled to resist their corrupting influence. Jesus heals our blindness, enabling us to see the powers for the created and fallen entities that they are. Yet, because the powers are coextensive with the social and cultural institutions that structure our daily lives, most of the world remains in thrall to them, and even we who are saved are constantly faced with temptations to submit to them again (Galatians 5:1; cf. Romans 6:12-16). That is why our resurrection hope is hope not only for individual life beyond death, but for divine deliverance of creation from the ruling idolatrous powers. Then, truly, God will be all in all.

NOTES

1 Satan is absent as well from important early Jewish apocalypses, including Daniel, 4 Ezra, and most portions of 1 Enoch. On the emergence of Satan as a character in apocalyptic literature, and for fuller elaboration of all the ideas presented in this article,

see Susan R. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 103-138. Portions of this article are adapted by the author from *No Ordinary Angel* and from Susan R. Garrett, "What Presbyterians Believe: The Problem of Evil," *Presbyterians Today* 95:2 (March 2005): 22-25. Passages from the latter are reprinted with permission from *Presbyterians Today*, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

2 Here I am dependent in part on the study of the New Testament's power-terms offered in Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984). Wink has been a prolific and important writer on the topic of the powers. Most noteworthy is his insistence that the powers always have both an exterior aspect (such as the structure and material assets of a corporation, or the machinery of government) and an interior aspect (such as the personality of a corporation or the ethos of an institution or epoch). For a critique of his approach, see Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel*, 129-130.

3 The insistence that most of the powers, though fallen, were created for good does not exclude recognition that some powers and principalities seek *only* to enhance their own position, consistently rejecting rules and standards meant to protect the rights of others, and devotedly serving a lesser god. One thinks, for example, of a cartel of drug traffickers, a gang that expects its members to act violently, the child pornography industry (where the "god" is money), or the Ku Klux Klan.

4 The twelve *Left Behind* novels, three prequels and a sequel for adults, and a kid's series, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, are published by Tyndale House.

5 Frank Peretti's most influential novels are *This Present Darkness* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1986) and *Piercing the Darkness* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989). For more on the spiritual warfare movement, see Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel*, 110-112. Thomas H. McAlpine, *Facing the Powers: What Are the Options?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003 [1991]) presents a useful survey of different interpretations of the powers.

6 "Mastema" is used in the pseudepigraphic book *Jubilees*.

7 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 77.



SUSAN R. GARRETT

is Professor of New Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.