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## The Cosmic Conflict Framework

The previous chapters have explored the relationship of love, free will, and evil—particularly in light of God's unfulfilled desires—suggesting that God permits evil for the sake of love. However, by itself, free will of the kind and extent necessary does not appear to account for God's allowance of the kind and amount of evil in this world. Could not God could grant us free will sufficient for love without allowing such horrendous evils? Would not a God of love do at least as much as a good parent would to mitigate or even eliminate horrendous evils?

Whereas many approaches to such questions have been offered, most have neglected the prominent biblical theme of conflict between the true God and false gods or demons. Perhaps the main reason for this relative neglect is the supposed implausibility of such a conflict. Although the vast majority of Christians throughout the ages have believed in a conflict between God and demonic agencies, since the rise of Enlightenment modernism this view has often been dismissed or overlooked. Further, some wonder how any such conflict could be compatible with the omnipotence and sovereignty of God.

In order to address whether and how such a conflict might provide significant insights into the problem of evil, we must first understand the framework and the nature of the cosmic conflict as depicted in Scripture. Accordingly, this chapter offers an introductory survey of the framework of the cosmic conflict, followed in the next chapter by a discussion of the nature of this conflict and its ramifications for the problem of evil.

# Introducing the Cosmic Conflict

## ***An Enemy Has Done This***

If God is sovereign and omnipotent, isn't he ultimately to blame for the evil in this world? If not, who is (see Job 9:24)? Scripture depicts evil as the work of an enemy of God. In Christ's words, "An enemy has done this!" (Matt. 13:28). This understanding appears in Christ's parable of the wheat and the tares, wherein a landowner sows *only* good seeds in his field. However, tares spring up among the wheat, prompting the owner's servants to ask, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?" (v. 27). This parallels the question so many ask today: If God is the sovereign creator of this world, why is there evil in it?<sup>1</sup>

To this the master replies, "An enemy has done this!" The servants then ask, "Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?" (Matt. 13:28). Their question parallels the question many ask today: Why not eradicate evil immediately? "No," the master replies, "for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest" (vv. 29–30; cf. Mark 4:29). Later Christ explains that he is "the one who shows the good seed" (v. 37), that "the field is the world," that "the good seed" are "the sons of the kingdom," that "the tares are the sons of the evil one," and that "the enemy who sowed them is the devil" (vv. 38–39).<sup>2</sup>

Here Christ explicitly depicts a conflict between himself and the devil, who sows evil and sets God up to be blamed for it. Such devil-sown evil is temporarily *allowed* because to prematurely uproot evil (tares) would result in irreversible collateral damage to the good (wheat). As John Nolland comments, the tares "are to be removed with as much urgency as is consistent with the protection of all the wheat."<sup>3</sup>

For some good reason, the enemy must be allowed to work—the wheat and tares must be allowed to temporarily grow

together—in order for evil to *finally* be defeated while minimizing collateral damage. “Though Satan’s interference is an affront to God,” writes Nolland, “he will not act decisively yet to root out the problem” lest the “good seed” be “disturbed.” Eventually “what has been sown by Satan is to be rooted out and destroyed.”<sup>4</sup> In this regard, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. comment that “the parable of the tares addresses the question of theodicy by putting evil in eschatological perspective, by reminding one that the bad endures only for a season” but that “it shall not always be so.”<sup>5</sup>

As we’ve observed, the servants’ two questions raise issues of theodicy that are often voiced today: (1) If God is good, why is there evil in the world? (2) Why does God allow so much evil rather than eradicating it immediately?<sup>6</sup> The minimal responses given by Christ in Matthew 13 resonate throughout Scripture: (1) “An enemy has done this,” and (2) the premature uprooting of evil would also uproot the good.

As Davies and Allison note, this parable evinces “a wider problem, namely, the cosmic struggle between God and Satan.”<sup>7</sup> Grant R. Osborne adds, “In this world the war between good and evil cannot be avoided, and there is no middle ground. One either belongs to the kingdom [of God] or the powers of evil, and the two forces exist side by side in this world.”<sup>8</sup>

The cosmic conflict framework set forth here by Christ raises many questions about its nature, including how there could be any conflict if God is omnipotent and why God would allow so much suffering. These issues are taken up in the following chapters, after we’ve seen the broad contours of the cosmic conflict, wherein, as N. T. Wright comments, “God’s sovereign rule over the world isn’t quite such a straightforward thing as people sometimes imagine.”<sup>9</sup>

## ***The Temptation of Christ***

The cosmic conflict summarized in Matthew 13 is especially prominent throughout the Gospels. At the outset of his ministry, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4:1). After Jesus fasts for forty days, “the tempter” comes and tempts Jesus three times. First, the devil tempts Jesus to assuage his hunger by turning stones into bread (v. 3). Second, he challenges Jesus to throw himself from the “pinnacle of the temple” to test God’s promised protection via angels (vv. 5–6). Third, “the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.” He tempts Jesus, saying, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me” (vv. 8–9; cf. Luke 4:6–7).

This last temptation highlights two prominent themes of the cosmic conflict. First, the devil desires and seeks to usurp worship (cf. Rev. 13:4); second, Satan claims to have the jurisdiction to give Christ “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (Matt. 4:8–9). In Luke’s parallel account, the devil states, “I will give you all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish” (Luke 4:6). Joel B. Green comments, “We discover that the world of humanity is actually ruled by the devil.”<sup>10</sup>

The narrative further indicates that the temptations are set up according to particular parameters known by both sides. Jesus is “led up by the Spirit” in order “to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4:1). Jesus fasts for forty days; the angels refrain from ministering to Jesus until after the conflict is over (v. 11). And after “the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time [*kairos*]” (Luke 4:13; cf. Matt. 8:29; Rev. 12:12). In this striking conflict, Satan is allowed to antagonize Christ at a set time and place and within established parameters. This is one of many instances that evince what I call “rules of engagement” that govern the conflict between the two parties, which are explained further in chapter 4. Here and elsewhere, as R. T. France notes, the devil “is understood

to have real power in the present age," though it is restricted within limits.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

## **The Enemy of God: A Profile of Satan in the New Testament**

The New Testament depicts the devil as the archenemy of God and his people. Revelation describes this creature as "the great dragon," "the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world," and the "accuser of our brethren" (Rev. 12:9–10; cf. 20:2; Gen. 3:1–5). These verses serve to summarize Scripture's depiction of Satan as the original

accuser and slanderer,<sup>[12](#)</sup>  
deceiver and tempter of the whole world from the  
beginning,<sup>[13](#)</sup> and  
usurping ruler of this world.<sup>[14](#)</sup>

Below I treat each of these depictions in order.

### ***The Diabolical Adversary, Accuser, and Slanderer***

In the NT, "Satan" (*satanas*) basically means adversary,<sup>[15](#)</sup> and "devil" (*diabolos*) basically means "slanderer."<sup>[16](#)</sup> The devil is repeatedly called the "evil one,"<sup>[17](#)</sup> and Christ's work of redemption is repeatedly framed as against this adversary. According to Hebrews 2:14, Christ "partook" of "flesh and blood" so "that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (cf. John 12:31–32; Rev. 12:9–11).<sup>[18](#)</sup> Likewise, 1 John 3:8 explains, "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil."

Satan is not an equal or eternal force against God. Colossians 1:16 rules out any hint of eternal cosmic dualism, declaring that by Christ “all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him” (cf. 1 Chron. 16:25–26).<sup>19</sup> Although the NT does not clearly describe the devil's origin, it explicitly teaches that God is the creator of everything that is not God (e.g., John 1:1–3) such that the devil must be a created being.

The devil opposes Christ by slandering God's character, continually raising accusations against God's people and, consequently, God's moral government. As seen earlier, the devil sowed the bad seeds in Christ's field (Matt. 13:39) yet turns around and accuses and slanders God and his people. Revelation 12:10 depicts him as something like a malignant prosecuting attorney, calling him the “accuser of our brethren” who “accuses them before our God day and night.” In this vein, Jude 9 presents a striking example wherein the devil “disputed” and “argued” with “Michael the archangel” over “the body of Moses” (Jude 9; cf. Job 1–2; Zech. 3:1–2).<sup>20</sup>

Further, 1 Peter 5:8 depicts “the devil” as our “adversary” (*antidikos*)—a term often used of one's opponent in court (Matt. 5:25; Luke 12:58; 18:3)—who “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (cf. Gen. 4:7). Not only does Satan slander and oppose God but he also works through other agencies to do so. For instance, the devil “gave his authority to the beast” and “a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies,” and the beast “opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to blaspheme His name and His tabernacle” (Rev. 13:4–6; cf. 2 Thess. 2:4, 9).

## ***The Deceiver and Tempter***

Not only is Satan the slanderous accuser of God and his people but he also is the one who deceived and tempted

humans into sin in the beginning. Revelation 12:9 directly alludes to the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, identifying Satan as the “serpent of old” who “deceives the whole world” (cf. 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 20:2) and who, just before his final defeat, will “deceive the nations” once more and “gather them together for war” (Rev. 20:8; cf. 20:10). The devil “sinned from the beginning” (1 John 3:8) and is a “murderer from the beginning” who “does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him” and “speaks a lie” from “his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44; cf. Rev. 2:9; 3:9; 1 John 2:22). A master of trickery and the arch-deceiver, “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14; cf. 4:4; 11:3; Gal. 1:8).

Closely related to the devil's work as arch-deceiver is his work as “the tempter” (Matt. 4:3; cf. 1 Thess. 3:5). He tempted Jesus,<sup>21</sup> cast people into prison to be “tested” (Rev. 2:10), and tempts married individuals to commit sexual immorality (1 Cor. 7:5). Here and elsewhere, via repeated deceptions and temptations, the devil works to persuade humans to believe wrongly and choose against God's desires. Not only does the devil's activity suggest that humans possess freedom with regard to belief (epistemic freedom), but the devil's free will is also apparent in that he plots and schemes to oppose God and his people (2 Cor. 2:11).<sup>22</sup> The devil has “desires” (John 8:44) and a will of his own that is opposed to God's; indeed, Satan attempts to hold people “captive . . . to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26).<sup>23</sup> Against such “schemes of the devil,” the believer is counseled to put on the “full armor of God” (Eph. 6:11).

Although the devil snatches God's Word from some hearts so they will not believe,<sup>24</sup> puts betrayal in hearts (John 13:2), fills hearts with lies (Acts 5:3), and traps people in his “snare,” humans might “come to their senses and escape” (2 Tim. 2:26; cf. 1 Tim. 3:7) and need not “give the devil an opportunity” by anger or otherwise (Eph. 4:27). Believers are thus to “be on the



alert" and "resist" the "adversary" (1 Pet. 5:8–9). If resisted by one who submits to God, the devil "will flee" (James 4:7).<sup>25</sup>

## ***The Usurping Dragon Ruler***

Satan has a limited and temporary domain wherein he wields significant power and jurisdiction. The NT depicts him as the "great dragon" who is the "ruler" behind earthly kingdoms that oppose God's rule (e.g., John 12:31; Rev. 12:9; 13:2). This "dragon and his angels" waged "war" against God's kingdom, "Michael and his angels" (Rev. 12:7; cf. Matt. 25:41). However, this is no battle between equals; Satan and his angels "were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down" to "the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (Rev. 12:8–9; cf. Luke 11:22). Thus the "accuser of our brethren has been thrown down" (Rev. 12:10). Similarly, Christ declares that he "was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (Luke 10:18). The devil wages war against God's people, "knowing that he has only a short time" (Rev. 12:12). Here and elsewhere, the devil's domain is limited, and he knows of these limits.

The multiheaded dragon (*drakōn*) of Revelation is reminiscent of the multiheaded sea serpent, Leviathan, an enemy of God in the OT, which is translated by the same term (*drakōn*) in the LXX.<sup>26</sup> This dragon opposes God's kingdom in heaven and on earth; he "swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth" (Rev. 12:4; cf. Dan. 8:10), waited to devour the child of the woman (Rev. 12:4), waged war along with his angels against Michael and his angels (v. 7), "persecuted the woman [God's people] who gave birth to the male child [i.e., Christ]," (v. 13; cf. v. 16) and "was enraged with the woman" and "went off to make war with the rest of her children" (v. 17).



This dragon exercises his rule on earth through earthly rulers; “the dragon gave” the beast from the sea (symbolic of earthly rulers or kingdoms) “his power and his throne and great authority” (Rev. 13:2). The earth “worshiped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast” (v. 4) to blaspheme and “make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority over every tribe and tongue and nation was given to him” (v. 7; cf. 13:5–6; 2 Thess. 2:3–4, 9–10).

This depiction of Satan’s desire for worship and his authority to give authority to earthly kingdoms complements Satan’s tempting Jesus to worship him and Satan’s claim, “I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish” (Luke 4:6). Similarly, 1 John 5:19 declares that “the whole world lies in *the* power of the evil one” (cf. 2 Thess. 3:3). Accordingly, the devil is repeatedly called the prince or “ruler [*archōn*] of this world” (John 12:31; 16:11; cf. 14:30; Dan. 10:13).

Further, Jesus identifies Satan as “Beelzebul, the ruler [*archōn*] of the demons,” who possesses a “kingdom” (Matt. 12:24–26)<sup>27</sup> and portrays Satan as a “strong man” who must first be bound in order for Jesus to “plunder his house” (Matt. 12:29).<sup>28</sup> There is, then, a significant “dominion [*exousia*] of Satan,” opposed to God’s dominion (Acts 26:18; cf. Col. 1:13). Within this domain Satan wields his limited but significant power to oppress people. Satan afflicted a woman with “sickness caused by a spirit” (Luke 13:11). Jesus healed this woman, “whom Satan [had] bound for eighteen long years,” and she was “released from this bond” (Luke 13:16). Indeed, Jesus healed many “who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38).

The extent of Satan’s jurisdiction is apparent in that he “demanded permission to sift” Peter “like wheat” (Luke 22:31; cf. 22:3; Matt. 16:23; Mark 8:33), and Peter fell, even though Christ prayed that Peter’s “faith may not fail” (Luke 22:32). Earlier “Satan entered into Judas” (Luke 22:3; cf. John 6:70; 13:27), and John recounts that “the devil . . . put [betrayal] into the heart of Judas” (John 13:2).

Likewise, “Satan filled [Ananias’s] heart to lie to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:3). Paul decides “to deliver [someone] to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved” (1 Cor. 5:5), and he speaks of two he “handed over to Satan so that they will be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim. 1:20; cf. 5:15). Paul even reports, “There was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger [*angelos*] of Satan” (2 Cor. 12:7). Further, Paul wished to visit the Thessalonians, but he writes that “Satan hindered us” (1 Thess. 2:18; cf. 2 Tim. 4:17). Paul even refers to the devil as “the god of this world” who “has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel” (2 Cor. 4:4).<sup>29</sup>

However, the “condemnation” of the devil has already been “incurred” (1 Tim. 3:6). Apparently alluding to the serpent in Eden, Paul states, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20; cf. Gen. 3:15). John adds that “the ruler of this world has been judged” (John 16:11) and “will be cast out” (John 12:31; cf. Luke 10:18; Rev. 12:10). Ultimately, because of the cross “the devil” will be “render[ed] powerless” (Heb. 2:14; cf. 1 John 3:8). But the devil possesses significant authority for a limited time to wreak havoc in this world until he finally meets his end (cf. Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:7–10).

## **Celestial Rulers of this World in the New Testament**

### ***The Domain of Darkness***

As seen above, the NT depicts Satan as the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 16:11; cf. 14:30; 1 John 5:19) who wars against God’s kingdom with his own “angels”<sup>30</sup> and is “Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 12:24; cf. 9:34). Acts 26:18 sets the “dominion of Satan” in direct opposition to God’s dominion (cf. Luke 4:6). Paul similarly depicts conflict

between the “kingdom” of Christ and “the domain of darkness” (Col. 1:13–14) and notes that Christ “gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4).

However, not only does Satan have significant jurisdiction in this world during “this present evil age”; other celestial rulers also possess real power and jurisdiction. Indeed, the NT depicts an entourage of Satan in the conflict against God. Beyond the instances above, the NT uses a host of terms to refer to celestial beings opposed to God’s kingdom, including “demons” (e.g., Matt. 8:31), “unclean spirits,” “evil spirits,” fallen “angels” (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; cf. Matt. 25:41; 1 Cor. 6:3; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 12:7–9), “rulers” (*archōntes*), “principalities” (*archai*), “powers” (*dynameis*), “authorities” (*exousiai*), “thrones” (*thronoi*), “lordships” (*kyriotētes*), and “world rulers” (*kosmokratoras*).<sup>31</sup> While these terms might not all refer to the same kinds of beings, for simplicity’s sake I use “demons” as an umbrella term to refer to celestial beings who oppose God’s kingdom.<sup>32</sup>

## ***Clash of Kingdoms: Light versus Darkness***

While entirely ruling out eternal cosmic dualism, the NT sets forth a titanic clash between kingdoms of light and darkness (e.g., Col. 1:16). The Gospels are replete with instances of conflict between Christ’s kingdom and that of the devil and his demons, often referred to as “evil spirits” (e.g., Luke 8:2) or “unclean spirits.”<sup>33</sup> Christ repeatedly “cast out demons by the Spirit of God,” declaring that “the kingdom of God has come” (Matt. 12:28; cf. Luke 11:20) against Satan’s “kingdom” (Matt. 12:26; Mark 3:23–24; Luke 11:18). As David George Reese puts it, these passages “clearly depict the power of Jesus over demons as the evidence that God’s kingdom had broken into the present world order”; God’s “kingdom was confronting

more than a loose confederation of hostile forces. It faced an opposing kingdom of evil spirits ruled by Beelzebul."<sup>34</sup>

Accordingly, Christ gave *select* followers some jurisdiction over the enemy's domain, including "authority to cast out the demons" (Mark 3:15; cf. Matt. 10:1) and "authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy" (Luke 10:19; cf. Gen. 3:15; Ps. 91:13). Indeed, Luke writes, "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name'" (Luke 10:17), to which Jesus responds, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (v. 18).<sup>35</sup>

According to 2 Peter 2:4 at least some evil spirits are fallen "angels" who "sinned" and whom "God did not spare" but instead "committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment." Likewise, Jude 6 refers to "angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode," whom God "has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day." There are a variety of theories about the nature of the sin of these angels, but for our purposes it suffices to note they somehow sinned by overreaching their "domain" and thus fell.<sup>36</sup>

Although Scripture has little to say about the origin of demons, such references, along with others—such as the depiction in Revelation 12 of Satan and "his angels" being "thrown down" out of heaven "to the earth" (vv. 8–9; cf. Luke 10:18)<sup>37</sup>—have led many to conclude that Satan and his demons are fallen angels (cf. Ezek. 28:12–19; Isa. 14:12–15; Rev. 12:4). Indeed, Christians have traditionally viewed Isaiah 14:12–15 and Ezekiel 28:12–19 as depicting Satan's fall from perfection. While this interpretation has fallen out of favor, particularly since the rise of modernistic antisupernaturalism, I believe a close canonical reading supports the traditional interpretation.<sup>38</sup> However, the cosmic conflict approach of this present book does not hinge on this interpretation of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28.

Whatever the precise origin of demons and evil angels, Paul explicitly states that the constituents of the “domain of darkness” are created beings, as are all things other than God “in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (Col. 1:13, 16).<sup>39</sup> Insofar as one accepts the premise that “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5) such that God cannot even look on evil (Hab. 1:13), “cannot be tempted by evil,” and “does not tempt anyone” by it (James 1:13), it follows that the constituents of the “domain of darkness” were created entirely good by God but fell into evil of their own accord.

Echoing Deuteronomy 32:17, Paul explains that in sacrificing to idols, the gentiles “sacrifice to demons and not to God” (1 Cor. 10:19–20; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14–15; Rev. 9:20).<sup>40</sup> Whereas 1 Corinthians 10:19 makes it clear that idols are nothing, Paul indicates that behind the idols are real demons (v. 20; cf. 1 Cor. 8:4–6; see also Acts 17:18).<sup>41</sup> Like their ruler, Satan, these demons usurp worship (cf. Col. 2:18; Rev. 9:20). Accordingly, Paul warns against those who will pay “attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1; cf. Rev. 6:13–14).

Evincing the genuine ruling authority of evil celestial beings, Ephesians 2:2 refers to “the prince [*archonta*] of the power [*exousia*] of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.”<sup>42</sup> Ephesians 3:10 references “the rulers [*archais*] and the authorities [*exousiais*] in the heavenly places” (cf. 1 Cor. 4:9; 1 Pet. 1:12). Further, Ephesians 6:11–12 exhorts: “Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers [*archas*], against the powers [*exousias*], against the world forces [*kosmokratoras*] of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness [*pneumatika tēs ponērias*] in the heavenly places.”<sup>43</sup> Notice, this language of “rulers,” “powers,” “world forces of this darkness,” and “spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places,” which are not “flesh and blood” (Eph.

6:12). It is difficult to imagine how a cosmic conflict wherein celestial rulers have real power and authority could be stated more forthrightly.

Nevertheless, the activity of angels and demons is often unrecognized. As Hebrews 13:2 puts it, “Some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Angelic or demonic activity might be at work behind the scenes, even where such activity is not explicitly recognized (cf. 2 Kings 6:16–17). With this in mind, we turn to OT depictions of celestial rulers.

## **Celestial Rulers of this World in the Old Testament**

### ***Daniel 10***

Although evidence of demonic agencies is more explicit in the NT, the OT offers considerable evidence of these celestial rulers. Daniel 10 presents a particularly striking instance, in the context of a message of “great conflict” (v. 1). For weeks, Daniel fervently prayed for understanding, and although God heard Daniel’s words “from the first day,” the “prince of the kingdom of Persia” withstood God’s angel for “twenty-one days.” Thereafter, Michael “came to help” the angel who “had been left there with the kings of Persia” (vv. 2, 12–13; cf. vv. 20–21). This prince of Persia is widely understood as a celestial ruler who is behind the human ruler.<sup>44</sup> W. Sibley Towner comments, “The panoply of heavenly beings which is involved [in Dan. 10–12] bespeaks a cosmic struggle taking place in its own plane on a course parallel to the drama of human history.”<sup>45</sup> Tremper Longman III adds that here “we have a clear case of spiritual conflict. On the one side stands God’s powerful angelic army and on the other ‘the prince of the Persian kingdom.’”<sup>46</sup> He writes further that Daniel 10 exposes “the spiritual realities behind the wars of Yahweh up to this



point. In the description of the historical battles throughout most of the Old Testament, the concentration is on the earthly. Certainly the heavenly forces that have supported Israel have been revealed, but not [in most cases] the spiritual powers on the other side."[47](#)

On this reading, Daniel 10 depicts a cosmic conflict involving celestial beings wherein an angel of God is delayed for three weeks because the prince of Persia, apparently a celestial ruler behind and connected with the earthly ruler of Persia, withstood him. Here, writes Gleason Archer, we see that the "powers of evil apparently have the capacity to bring about hindrances and delays, even of the delivery of the answers to believers whose requests God is minded to answer" (cf. 1 Thess. 2:18).[48](#)

The nature of this conflict is addressed in chapter 4. For now, it is sufficient to note that Daniel 10 presents a *real* conflict between celestial rulers behind earthly nations and God's kingdom. As John E. Goldingay puts it, "Like other ancient Near Eastern writings, the OT assumes that the results of battles on earth reflect the involvement of heaven."[49](#) Longman adds that there is a "cosmic war that lies behind this human conflict," and such "spiritual warfare" is an "incredibly pervasive and significant biblical theme."[50](#)

## ***Celestial Rulers and the Heavenly Council or "Assembly of the Gods"***

Beyond Daniel 10, many other passages evince the reality of celestial agencies that exercise some ruling authority in this world, sometimes referred to as "gods of the nations." Beth Tanner notes that for ancient Israel "not only did other gods exist, but those gods were active in the world."[51](#) This does not, however, amount to polytheism. The OT term for "gods" (*elohim*) may signify merely celestial beings rather than the Supreme Being typically denoted in English by "God."[52](#) John



Goldingay explains that in the OT, while idols are nothing, behind them are “so-called deities [that] do indeed exist, but they do not count as God, and they are subject to God’s judgment”; yet these “supernatural centers of power” can “deliberately oppose Yhwh’s purpose.”<sup>53</sup>

According to Deuteronomy 32:8,

When the Most High apportioned the nations,  
when he divided humankind,  
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples  
according to the number of the gods (NRSV)<sup>54</sup>

Many scholars see this passage as setting forth a worldview wherein celestial beings (“gods”) were allotted territory to rule on earth. Peter C. Craigie suggests that “the reference seems to be to the divine [or heavenly] council of the Lord,” and “the poetry indicates that the number of nations is related to the number of these Sons of God.”<sup>55</sup> Marvin E. Tate sees here “the assignment of the gods to each nation as patron deities” while God retained “ultimate hegemony over all the nations.”<sup>56</sup>

Whether or not one adopts this reading of Deuteronomy 32:8, a host of other texts support the concept of celestial rulers with real authority behind earthly rulers.<sup>57</sup> Further, Deuteronomy 32 indicates that the “gods” or celestial rulers of the other nations were actually demons: “They sacrificed to demons who were not God, / To gods whom they have not known” (v. 17).<sup>58</sup> The gods of the nations, whom Israel is so frequently described as playing the harlot with throughout the OT, are described here explicitly as demons. In Derek Kidner’s view, such “‘gods’ are ‘principalities and powers,’ ‘the world rulers of this present darkness’ (cf. Eph. 6:12).”<sup>59</sup>

Many OT texts depict a heavenly council consisting of “gods” or celestial beings who are often described as possessing ruling authority relative to events on earth.<sup>60</sup> As E. T. Mullen Jr. explains, “The concept of an assembly of divine beings is found throughout the OT as an expression of Yahweh’s power and authority. Yahweh is frequently depicted

as enthroned over an assembly of divine beings who serve to dispense his decrees and messages," providing the background for the later "development of the angelic hierarchy."<sup>61</sup> While many of these beings are faithful servants of Yahweh, some (even within the heavenly council), are depicted as evil agencies who oppose God's kingdom (see, e.g., Ps. 82; cf. 1 Kings 22:19–23).<sup>62</sup>

Psalms includes numerous instances of this heavenly council. For instance, Psalm 29:1–2 proclaims, "Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings [*bene 'elim*], / ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. / Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; / worship the LORD in holy splendor" (NRSV, cf. 97:7; 138:1). Further, Psalm 89 speaks of the praise of Yahweh's faithfulness "in the assembly of the holy ones" and maintains that no one "among the heavenly beings [*bibne 'elim*]" is "like the LORD, / a God feared in the council of the holy ones, / great and awesome above all that are around him" (Ps. 89:5–7 NRSV). This psalm not only emphatically differentiates Yahweh from such inferior "heavenly beings" but also includes one of many OT depictions of God as a divine warrior in conflict with pagan "gods" and cosmic forces such as the chaos sea monster Rahab (Ps. 89:9–10) and the great, multiheaded sea serpent or dragon Leviathan.<sup>63</sup>

In a most striking heavenly council scene, God is depicted as judging "gods" (*'elohim*) from "his place in the divine [heavenly] council [*ba'adat-'el*]" (Ps. 82:1 NRSV; cf. 58:1; 89:5–8).<sup>64</sup> According to Tanner, this "psalm gives us a window on the assembly of the gods, a place where the gods are gathered to make decisions about the world."<sup>65</sup> Tate agrees that this "scene is pictured as that of a divine assembly" and adds that the "conceptual horizon" of the psalm "is that of the assignment of the gods to each nation as patron deities, who would be responsible for the welfare of each nation," as in Deuteronomy 32:8–9.<sup>66</sup> In this council, God chastises these "gods" for "judg[ing] unjustly" (Ps. 82:2 NRSV) and declares: "You are gods, / children of the Most High, all of you; /

nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, / and fall like any prince" (vv. 6–7 NRSV; cf. Jer. 50:2; 51:44). Here, Tate believes "the great king [of the divine assembly] pronounces sentence on some of the gods who have failed in their duties."<sup>67</sup> Kraus adds, "Injustice on earth is attributed to those forces which carry on their activity between Yahweh and the world as lords and tutelary spirits of groups, peoples, and states."<sup>68</sup> As such, the temporary injustice is the result not of God's perfect rule (cf. Deut. 32:4) but of the unjust rule of the "gods," evincing their significant ruling authority. Thus God is called on: "Arise, O God, judge the earth! / For it is You who possesses all the nations" (Ps. 82:8; cf. Deut. 32:8).<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, Isaiah forecasts a day when "the LORD will punish the host of heaven on high, / And the kings of the earth on earth" (Isa. 24:21; cf. 2 Pet. 2:4). Whereas many other texts reference a loyal heavenly host, this passage refers to an explicitly rebellious "host," punished for their evil (cf. Job 4:18; 15:15). Punishment of this "host of heaven" makes sense only if they are morally responsible for evil and thus can neither refer to inanimate astronomical bodies or mere idols but rather to celestial beings behind the "kings of the earth on earth."<sup>70</sup> As Longman notes, "We must be careful not to speculate on the hints the Bible gives us, but that there are spiritual powers, good and bad, behind the various human institutions is a truth taught in the Old [and New] Testament."<sup>71</sup>

Although there is a tendency among post-Enlightenment readers to dismiss such references to "gods" as purely mythological, the OT and NT maintain that demons were behind the "gods" of the nations, usurping worship. There is much more to be said about these agencies and the heavenly council, with significant implications for events on earth and the problem of evil, discussed in chapter 4. For now, we turn to two more major instances, which feature the *satan* and shed further light on the heavenly council.

# The Satan: An Old Testament Profile

## *The Heavenly Council Scene of Job 1–2*

The book of Job includes one of the most illuminating instances of the heavenly council, which also sheds significant light on the cosmic conflict. After explaining that Job was a righteous man and describing his piety and prosperity (Job 1:1–5), the author of Job shifts from earth to a heavenly council scene: “The sons of God [*bene ha’elohim*] came to present themselves before the LORD, and [the *satan*] also came among them” (1:6; cf. 38:7). Scholars widely agree that the phrase “sons of God” here refers to “celestial beings” in the “council of the heavenly host,” some of whom may come as “courtiers to give an accounting of their activities to God.”<sup>72</sup> However, there is considerable disagreement among scholars about whether the character referred to as “the *satan*” (*hasatan*) corresponds to the Satan of the NT. This issue will be revisited after we’ve seen how Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3 depict “the *satan*.”

Before the heavenly council, God asks the *satan*, “From where do you come?”<sup>73</sup> The *satan* answers, “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it” (Job 1:7). This identical question and answer appears in Job 2, suggesting they are procedural, perhaps indicating the *satan* attends the heavenly council as a representative or ruler of earth.<sup>74</sup> The focus then abruptly turns to an apparently prior and ongoing dispute between God and the *satan*. God asks, “Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil” (Job 1:8). Pope asks, “Why all the concern about Job’s integrity?” He thinks “there is something of taunt and provocation in Yahweh’s query. . . . Perhaps there is more involved than is made explicit.”<sup>75</sup> Carol A. Newsom believes that “this is not a request for information. Narratively, Yahweh’s

challenging question suggests an ongoing rivalry with the *satan*."<sup>76</sup>

The *satan*'s response further suggests a broader point of contention between them. He alleges that Job does not "fear God for nothing" but does so only because God has blessed him and "made a hedge about him" and his belongings and would bitterly curse God if met with calamity (Job 1:9–11; cf. 2:5).<sup>77</sup> This not only attacks the sincerity of Job's loyalty but also amounts to an accusation against God, who previously declared that Job is "blameless" and "upright," both "fearing God and turning away from evil" (Job 1:8). The *satan* thus directly contradicts God's judgment of Job. Lindsay Wilson notes that this "is a questioning not just of Job's motives but also of God's rule. The accuser is saying to God that Job does not deserve all his blessings, and thus God is not ruling the world with justice."<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Frances Andersen comments, "God's character and Job's are both slighted."<sup>79</sup> Hamilton adds that this response is "patently slanderous."<sup>80</sup>

God responds by allowing the *satan* to test his theory but only within limits, first granting the *satan* power over "all that [Job] has" but prohibiting personal harm (Job 1:12). Then in the second scene, God allows the *satan* to afflict Job personally (but the *satan* must spare Job's life) after the *satan* sadistically claims that although Job did not curse God after losing his children (2:3), Job would do so if physically afflicted himself (vv. 4–6). Whereas some consider God culpable for what happens to Job here (as discussed in chap. 4), Andersen believes God has "good reason" for what he allows here—"namely to disprove the Satan's slander" of God's character.<sup>81</sup> Although Satan brought numerous calamities against Job's household—including loss of wealth, the death of servants, and the death of his children (1:13–19)—and, later, afflicts intense suffering on Job personally (2:7), Job consistently refuses to curse God (1:20–22; 2:9), falsifying Satan's charges in this behind-the-scenes glimpse of the cosmic dispute between God and Satan.<sup>82</sup>

## ***The Heavenly Council Scene of Zechariah 3***

Besides Job 1–2, the heavenly council scene of Zechariah 3 provides the only other instances of “the *satan*” (*hasatan*). This passage depicts “Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and [the *satan*] standing at his right hand to accuse him” (Zech. 3:1; cf. Ps. 109:6–7).<sup>83</sup> Then, “the LORD said to [the *satan*], ‘The LORD rebuke you, [the *satan*]! Indeed, the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?’” (Zech. 3:2; cf. Jude 9). Here, the *satan* stands as an adversary against God, bringing an accusation against the high priest, which indirectly amounts to an accusation against God, who has chosen Jerusalem.

Yahweh, however, rejects the *satan*’s accusation, reiterating his election of Jerusalem. According to Carol Meyers and Eric Meyers, the term translated “rebuke” (*g’r*, “to scream, cry out”) “denotes divine invective against those who stand in the way of Yahweh’s plan.”<sup>84</sup> Following this striking rebuke of the *satan*, Yahweh commands “those who were standing before him”—which likely refers to “the other members of the Divine Council or the other divine or angelic beings present in Yahweh’s court”<sup>85</sup> (cf. Zech. 3:7)—to remove Joshua’s “filthy garments” (v. 4). Thus Yahweh declares that Joshua’s “iniquity” is removed (v. 4). Much more could be said about this scene. For now, notice the adversarial and accusatorial role of the *satan* against God within the heavenly council. Having surveyed the only two OT passages that include “the *satan*,” we can now revisit the questions regarding the *satan*’s identity.

### ***Profiling the Slandering Accuser***

As mentioned, scholars do not agree regarding whether “the *satan*” (*hasatan*) of the OT corresponds to the enemy of God named “Satan” in the NT. Since the article (*ha*) is not



typically used before proper names in Hebrew, many scholars believe that *hasatan* in Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3 does not depict the name of the agent but instead describes a person playing a divinely sanctioned prosecutorial role in God's heavenly court, rendering *hasatan* as “the adversary” or “the accuser.” For example, Newsom believes that by the time Job was written, which she thinks is early postexilic period, “the expression ‘the satan’ had come to designate a particular divine being in the heavenly court, one whose specialized function was to seek out and accuse persons disloyal to God,” citing Zechariah 3:1 as “the chief evidence for this.”<sup>86</sup> On this view, *hasatan* is not adversarial to God but is God's servant in the heavenly council and thus cannot be the “archenemy” of God that appears in the NT. Accordingly, Newsom writes that “the hostile image of Satan” as the “opponent of God [that is] presumed by the New Testament (see, e.g., Mark 3:22–30; Luke 22:31; John 13:27; Rev. 20:1–10)” was a “later development.”<sup>87</sup>

Before addressing these issues regarding the identity of *hasatan*, it will be helpful to briefly consider the root of *satan* in the OT. In Hebrew, *satan* generally refers to an accuser, often an adversary, enemy, or slanderer (noun), or one who opposes or accuses (verb), as in a legal context.<sup>88</sup> Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3 are the only two OT passages where *hasatan* (*satan* with the article) appears. However, the root of *satan* appears thirty-three times in twenty-eight OT verses (in noun and verb forms). Apart from the passages containing *hasatan*, however, only one other instance of the noun *satan* is frequently taken as a reference to a celestial adversary of God, 1 Chronicles 21:1: “Then Satan [*satan* without the article] stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.”<sup>89</sup>

The identity of *satan* in 1 Chronicles 21 is disputed, but many scholars believe it depicts a personal name. For instance, HALOT interprets this “as a personal name,” one that “clearly [identifies] a celestial figure who incited David to make a census.”<sup>90</sup> Moisés Silva also believes that here *satan* “functions almost certainly as a proper name.”<sup>91</sup> Meyers and Meyers



believe this is “one of three cases in the Hebrew Bible in which this term occurs in reference to a figure in Yahweh’s court,” along with Zechariah 3 and Job 1–2.<sup>92</sup> They write that “the figure in this context is surely hostile to Yahweh’s chosen one; and from a linguistic viewpoint, the lack of the definite article does not weaken the distinct image in Chronicles of a *śāṭān* figure.”<sup>93</sup> Silva adds, “In all three books”—Job, Zechariah, and 1 Chronicles—the *satan* “appears as an enemy of God’s people, whether enticing David to undertake the census of the people, or seeking to bring Job’s spiritual downfall, or accusing the high priest Joshua. Moreover, at least in Job and Zechariah, Satan is clearly presented as some kind of heavenly being.”<sup>94</sup> Whatever one concludes regarding 1 Chronicles 21, the instances of *hasatan* in Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3 portray a figure who strikingly resembles the one whom the NT calls Satan. Notably, the LXX consistently translates *hasatan* as *diabolos* with the article, which *always* refers to the devil in the NT.<sup>95</sup>

The identity of *hasatan* does not hinge on whether *hasatan* is taken to be a personal name or a description of an office or function in the heavenly council or something else. It could be that a description of this agent came to later be used as the name of that agent (perhaps by the time 1 Chron. 21 was written).<sup>96</sup> The use of the article, then, does not by itself indicate whether *hasatan* should be identified with the person called Satan in the NT; it might only indicate that at the time of writing, *satan* was not a proper name.

Further, even if one takes *hasatan* to be playing a prosecutorial role in the heavenly council, we need not conclude that *hasatan* is doing so as a loyal servant of Yahweh. We’ve already seen that some of the “gods” (celestial rulers) are themselves “judged” by Yahweh in the heavenly council for their evil (Ps. 82). Likewise, we’ve seen Isaiah’s reference to a rebellious “host” in heaven whom God punishes (Isa. 24:21; cf. Job 4:18; 15:15; 2 Pet. 2:4), and in 1 Kings 22:19–23 a “deceiving spirit” goes forth from the

heavenly council, probably one of the evil celestial rulers who first gets permission from the heavenly council not unlike *hasatan* does in Job 1–2.<sup>97</sup> One should not assume, then, that the presence of a figure in the heavenly council entails that that figure is loyal to Yahweh (cf. Rev. 12:7–9).<sup>98</sup>

The text itself indicates the disposition of the *satan* as an opponent of Yahweh. In Job 1–2 the *satan* acts as a slanderous accuser of Job, contradicting Yahweh's claims about Job's righteousness and loyalty, which are later vindicated. The *satan* thereby indirectly alleges that God's judgment is unjust, revealing an antagonistic disposition toward Yahweh. As John E. Hartley comments, the *satan*'s "role in this scene deviates from" the explanation that he is a benign "prosecuting attorney of the heavenly council." Here "he acts as a troublemaker, a disturber of the kingdom" who displays a "contemptuous attitude."<sup>99</sup> Mark J. Boda likewise affirms that the *satan* "is not a benign opponent."<sup>100</sup> Andersen adds that the *satan* "is not God's minister of prosecution." Even "if he is still only the provoker of men, and not the opponent of God, we should not follow the commentators who see him here as simply another of God's loyal servants. His insolence shows a mind already twisted away from God" with "hostility" such that "there is evil here, but not dualism."<sup>101</sup> Whatever else is said, according to Wilson, the *satan*'s "insidious nature" may "be discerned by listening to the tone of his comments."<sup>102</sup>

Zechariah 3 also depicts the *satan* as opposing Yahweh's judgment in favor of Joshua the high priest, "standing at his right hand to accuse him" (v. 1). George L. Klein comments that the *satan* "opposes God in a malicious way, as verse 2 clearly indicates."<sup>103</sup> Not only is the *satan* depicted as adversarial to Yahweh's judgment, however, but Yahweh's stern rebuke of the *satan* also indicates an adversarial relationship between the parties (cf. Jude 9). Newsom adds, "Yahweh rejects the accuser's indictment of the high priest and rebukes the accuser instead."<sup>104</sup>

According to Boda, both Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3 depict the *satan* “in an adversarial relationship, not only with the human they evaluate critically, but also with Yahweh.”<sup>105</sup> While seeing a role of court accuser here “may be appropriate,” Boda believes that “the tone of Yahweh’s response to these two figures . . . suggests that this figure is not a normative character in its OT context.”<sup>106</sup> Both cases, then, mirror the function of the devil in the NT as arch-slanderer. Indeed, adopting the view that the *satan* plays the role of a prosecutor (normative or not) fits precisely with the NT profile of Satan, the “accuser of our brethren” who “accuses them before our God day and night” (Rev. 12:10; cf. *antidikos* in 1 Pet. 5:8) and who “deceives the whole world” (Rev. 12:9) as “the father of lies” (John 8:44) and who even “disputed” (*diakrinō*) and “argued” with Michael over the body of Moses (Jude 9). In the NT, Satan plays a strikingly similar prosecutorial and adversarial role (e.g., as accuser) as the *satan* in Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3.

Further, as in NT depictions of Satan, the *satan* of Job possesses power to bring about calamity within specified (but dynamic) limits and demands permission to test or antagonize a servant of God. This function comports well with the NT depiction of Satan as the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. 2 Cor. 4:4), who “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8) and who “demanded permission to sift [Peter] like wheat” (Luke 22:31). In this regard, some scholars recognize that, as Day puts it, the *satan* “challenges God at a very profound level,” but they do not identify him with the Satan of the NT because “he is nonetheless subject to God’s power” and “is certainly not an independent, inimical force.”<sup>107</sup> However, this view assumes that Satan in the NT is not “subject to God’s power” and is an “independent” force, both of which are false. As Hartley explains, “While the Satan’s role in this test [of Job] is much simpler than his ominous role as head of all evil powers that the later Judeo-Christian tradition ascribes to him, he reveals

numerous characteristics which suggest that he is contiguous with the later Satan, God's primary antagonist."<sup>108</sup>

Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3 together depict the *satan* as (1) an accuser and slanderer of God's people and, consequently, an adversary against God; (2) one who sadistically tests Job (cf. 1 Chron. 21:1) and makes false claims about Job's loyalty; and (3) one who possesses power to bring about calamity in this world. This list strikingly corresponds to the previously discussed profile of Satan in the NT as (1) adversarial accuser and slanderer, (2) deceiver and tempter, and (3) usurping ruler of this world. The evidence together points toward the conclusion that the *satan* in Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3:1–2 corresponds to the creature later called Satan in the NT. As Boda puts it, "If these figures do not relate to the Satan figure of the New Testament, they function in a way that will be associated with that later figure and may provide insight into the original function of the one known later as Satan within Yahweh's divine court."<sup>109</sup>

Undoubtedly, there is significant development of the depiction of Satan in Scripture.<sup>110</sup> However, in my view, this development is not a late, evolving conception that contradicts an earlier one but is an instance of unfolding (progressive) revelation, analogous to the progressive revelation of the Trinity.<sup>111</sup> I thus agree with Wilson that it is likely that "we see here [in Job] the role of one who was later to become Satan as we know him."<sup>112</sup> The word *hasatan* might refer to a role (e.g., prosecutor) in the heavenly council, but it does not contradict the depiction of Satan in the NT, who plays a similar antagonistic role—permitted but not approved of by God within the context of an ongoing cosmic conflict. To be sure, this summary raises questions about why God would permit the enemy to function in this and other malevolent ways (addressed in chap. 4 of the present volume).

The view that the *satan* in Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3:1–2 corresponds to the creature later called Satan in the NT is significantly bolstered by a canonical approach. Recall that

Revelation explicitly identifies the “serpent of old” of Genesis 3 as Satan himself (Rev. 12:9; 20:2), exposing the slanderous activity of this adversary from the very beginning of the canon to the end. Further, Revelation’s depiction of Satan as the celestial dragon ruler behind earthly rulers and kingdoms who opposed God and his covenant people throughout the OT (Rev. 13) indicates that Satan was relentlessly active as God’s enemy behind the scenes throughout the OT narratives. If this view is correct, although the NT develops a more detailed understanding of Satan and his minions, the main facets of a cosmic conflict are explicit in the OT. Even if one thinks the *satan* of the OT is not the same person as Satan in the NT, the OT data nevertheless exhibit a conflict between Yahweh and rebellious celestial beings in the heavenly council who oppose and accuse Yahweh of unjust judgment, thus shedding significant light on the nature of the conflict.

## **Retrieving the Supernatural Worldview of Christian Theism**

The cosmic conflict framework faces two problems of plausibility: (1) the anti-supernaturalism of post-Enlightenment (modernist) thinking that has affected most in the West (though far less so others in the world) and (2) the theological conundrum of how to make sense of a conflict between the omnipotent creator God and mere creatures. The second of these problems is addressed in chapter 4. Here we briefly take up the first problem.

Particularly since the rise of modernism via the Enlightenment, the reality of supernatural agencies such as angels and demons has been widely questioned and often dismissed. As Rudolf Bultmann wrote in 1941, “Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in spirits whether good or evil.”<sup>[113](#)</sup> Prior to

modernism, however, the reality of a cosmic conflict was widely held by Christians through the ages. As Noll states, "Since Schleiermacher's time, angels have been seen as liturgical and aesthetic embellishments. In classical times, they were given a place in the dogmatic syllabus."<sup>114</sup>

Nearly all early Christians believed in supernatural agencies and took for granted that such agencies affect what occurs on earth. As Paul Gavriluk frames it, "The common core of patristic theodicy" included, among other things, the view that "God is not the author of evil" but that the "misuse of angelic and human free will is the cause of evil."<sup>115</sup> As Jeffrey Burton Russell explains in his excellent survey of early Christian views of Satan, "The devil has always been a central Christian doctrine, an integral element in Christian tradition."<sup>116</sup> Indeed, although "diabology" was "eclipsed in" the fourth and fifth centuries by the "debates on the Trinity and Christ," in both the "Greek East and Latin West," the core of early Christian diabology remained in place even through the tumult of the Reformation.<sup>117</sup> The "great change" came "with the Enlightenment."<sup>118</sup>

In Russell's view, "Theologians who exclude Satan in the interests of their own personal views run the risk of holding an incoherent view of Christianity."<sup>119</sup> He adds that "Scripture and tradition" both "clearly affirm the existence of the Devil" viewed as "a mighty person with intelligence and will whose energies are bent on the destruction of the cosmos and the misery of its creatures."<sup>120</sup> Thus "to deny the existence and central importance of the Devil in Christianity is to run counter to apostolic teaching and to the historical development of Christian doctrine."<sup>121</sup> Russell claims that "it makes little sense to call oneself a Christian while affirming a view contrary to scripture and tradition."<sup>122</sup> Russell is not alone in this assessment. Garrett DeWeese comments that rejecting the reality of "spiritual beings" entails that one "dismiss totally the worldview of both the Old and the New Testaments, and indeed of Jesus himself."<sup>123</sup> As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it,



the “stubborn persistence of this topic [of the devil and his minions] in Scripture and in the life of Jesus should cause us to pay greater attention to it.”<sup>124</sup>

Not only does the Christian tradition strongly support a supernatural worldview, inclusive of spiritual beings, but as Keith Ferdinando explains, “Most peoples, for most of history, have believed in spirits, witchcraft and sorcery. The Ohio State University research project found that some 74 percent of 488 societies studied throughout the world had possession beliefs.”<sup>125</sup> Ferdinando continues, “While truth is not established by majorities, the great consensus of most of humanity through time suggests that it may be modern scepticism which is idiosyncratic, and that the burden of proof should fall upon those who deny the reality of such phenomena.”<sup>126</sup> Whether or not one goes as far as Ferdinando, one must note that he effectively highlights the danger of ethnocentrism when such supernatural worldviews are dismissed as “implausible.”<sup>127</sup> Indeed, Kabiro wa Gatumu notes that “some scholars regard the Western church as having failed” to “give sufficient or serious attention to the topic of supernatural powers” because of “anti-supernaturalistic prejudice.”<sup>128</sup>

As Alvin Plantinga puts it, many philosophers have claimed “that it is extremely implausible, in our enlightened day and age, to suppose that there is such a thing as Satan, let alone his cohorts. Plausibility, of course, is in the ear of the hearer, and even in our enlightened times there are plenty of people who think both that there are non-human free creatures and that they are responsible for some of the evil that the world contains.”<sup>129</sup> From a modernistic, anti-supernaturalist perspective such a claim seems rather implausible indeed. However, from the vantage point of the Christian theism depicted in Scripture and most of the Christian tradition, the claim is eminently plausible, being deeply embedded in the very narrative of the Christ event.<sup>130</sup>



According to Ferdinando, the “skepticism of western academics” is an inheritance of the Enlightenment worldview no less than belief in spiritual realities is culturally conditioned and traditioned.<sup>131</sup> As such, Plantinga notes that “whether or not one finds the view in question plausible or implausible will of course depend on what else one believes: the theist already believes in the existence of at least one non-human person who is active in history: God. Accordingly the suggestion that there are other such persons . . . may not seem at all implausible to him.”<sup>132</sup>

Just such a perspective is present in the work of theologian Thomas C. Oden, who contends that biblical reasoning is “incomplete if it lacks reference entirely to the demonic powers,” particularly Satan, the “adversary, accuser, hater,” and “calumniator.” In his systematic theology, awash with citations from the Christian tradition, Oden affirms that the “Deceiver Satan is the primordial adversary to God,” an “angelic being hostile to God, the chief of the fallen angels.”<sup>133</sup> This “devil is not evil by created nature but by choice.”<sup>134</sup> Further, Satan “is able temporarily to play the role of prince of this world (John 14:30),” though “his power is already being overcome and judged by the suffering Messiah (John 16:11).”<sup>135</sup>

C. S. Lewis likewise affirms a robust conception of the cosmic conflict in both his nonfiction and his fiction writings.<sup>136</sup> He affirms that “this universe is at war,” though not “a war between independent powers” but a “rebellion, and . . . we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel.”<sup>137</sup> As such, “there is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second is claimed by God, and counterclaimed by Satan.”<sup>138</sup> Whatever conclusions one arrives at relative to the viability of this view for today, in my view a canonical theology that seeks to derive its conceptual framework from the canon is obliged to incorporate a cosmic conflict framework, in keeping with Christian tradition throughout the ages.

## Conclusion

We've seen that Scripture presents a robust cosmic conflict between God and his followers and the devil and his minions. We've seen, further, that this framework fits within and is eminently plausible, given the traditional framework of Christian theism, contra modernistic anti-supernaturalism. Now, however, we face a number of questions for this approach: What ramifications does it have for the problem of evil? Is such a view theologically compatible with a commitment to divine sovereignty? Does not a cosmic conflict theodicy push the problem back one step to why God created such agencies and why God has granted them, and continues to grant them, such freedom and power? The next chapter will take up the nature of this cosmic conflict toward addressing these and other issues and outlining how this framework fills the gaps in moving toward a theodicy of love.

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1. Donald A. Hagner states that the people's "immediate, natural reaction" is "to wonder about the continuing presence of evil in the world." Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 382.

2. The "reapers" are "angels," who thus play some intermediate role in judgment.

3. Nolland, *Matthew*, 546.

4. Nolland, *Matthew*, 547. Nolland adds that the "figure of 'his enemy' suggests that standing feud is involved" (544).

5. Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 431.

6. These questions correspond, somewhat, to the logical and evidential problems of evil.

7. Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, 431. Further, the "'sons of the evil one' helps underline the power of the devil in the world" (428).

8. Osborne, *Matthew*, 533.

9. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, 168.

10. J. Green, *Luke*, 194. François Bovon notes that the devil is "saying that God has given him the political authority over the kingdoms of this world." Bovon, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 143. Cf. Deut. 32:8–9, discussed below. Although some think the devil is bluffing, Nolland comments, "The reality of this influence of

Satan is not to be doubted” but is “co-extensive with the influence of evil.” Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, 180. Millard Erickson concurs, noting, “Satan actually is the ruler of this domain,” though a “usurper.” Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 588.

[11.](#) France, *Matthew*, 135.

[12.](#) Rev. 12:10; 13:6; cf. Job 1–2; Zech. 3:1–2; Jude 9.

[13.](#) Matt. 4:3; Rev. 12:9; cf. John 8:44; Acts 5:3; 2 Cor. 11:3; 1 John 3:8; Rev. 2:10.

[14.](#) John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. Matt. 12:24–29; Luke 4:5–6; Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19.

[15.](#) H. Bietenhard, “Satan, Beelzebul, Devil, Exorcism,” *NIDNTT* 3:468; L&N, 144, 829. The noun *satanas* appears thirty-six times in thirty-three verses in the NT, being used “only as a title or name” (BDAG, 916) and most often (twenty-nine times in twenty-seven verses) with the article, which always refers to the devil. Without the article, *satanas* appears in six verses, all of which also appear to refer to the devil (with the possible exception of the address to Peter). These include three instances of personal address (in the vocative): Jesus’s command, “Go, Satan!” (Matt. 4:10) and the rebuke to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan!” (Matt. 16:23; Mark 8:33). The other three are Mark 3:23; Luke 22:3; 2 Cor. 12:7. The noun *satanas* appears only once in the LXX Apocrypha in reference to a human adversary (Sir. 21:27), and *satan* appears twice in 1 Kings 11:14 (never in the NT) in reference to human adversaries.

[16.](#) Bietenhard, *NIDNTT* 3:468; L&N, 144. In the NT, *diabolos* appears thirty-seven times in thirty-five verses. It appears thirty-one times with the article to describe *the* devil as, among other things, a false accuser, slanderer, usurping ruler, and enemy. *Diabolos* appears once without the article (Rev. 20:2), but it is capitalized: “the devil [*Diabolos*] and Satan [*ho Satanas*].” It appears once in a genitive construction preceded by a vocative, addressing Elymas the magician as “full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil [*huie diabolou*], you enemy of all righteousness” (Acts 13:10). Elsewhere, *diabolos* appears without the article referring to Judas (John 6:70) and to “malicious gossips” (1 Tim. 3:11; 2 Tim. 3:3; Titus 2:3).

LXX translators use *diabolos* twenty times in eighteen verses. Fifteen instances include the article and translate *satan* as *hasatan*, which depicts an adversarial accuser in the heavenly council (Job 1:6, 7 [twice], 9, 12 [twice]; 2:1, 2 [twice], 3, 4, 6, 7; Zech. 3:1–2). One instance is a vocative in direct address (Zech. 3:2), two instances are without the article and are translated as *satan* (1 Chron. 21:1; Ps. 108:6 LXX), and two instances are without the article of Haman (translated as *tsar* and *tsorer*, Esther 7:4; 8:1). It also appears twice in the LXX Apocrypha without the article, once in reference to a human adversary (1 Macc. 1:36 NRSV) and once saying, “Through the devil’s envy death entered the world” (Wis. 2:24 NRSV). The word *diabolē* never appears in the NT and appears only twice in the LXX OT in reference to the “angel of the LORD” (Num. 22:32) and to the “slander of

a strange tongue" (Prov. 6:24), but it appears eight times in the LXX Apocrypha.

[17.](#) Matt. 13:19, 38; John 17:15; Eph. 6:16; 2 Thess. 3:3; 1 John 2:13–14; 3:12; 5:18–19; cf. Matt. 5:37.

[18.](#) Notably Wis. 2:23–24 states, "God created us for incorruption," yet "through the devil's envy death entered the world" (NRSV; cf. 1:13).

[19.](#) F. F. Bruce comments, "If all things were created by Christ, then those spiritual powers" in Colossians "must have been created by him." Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 63.

[20.](#) Thomas R. Schreiner notes that the "terms used [in Jude 9] suggest a legal dispute over Moses' body" and "allude to Zechariah 3," which is "another incident in which Satan attempted to establish the guilt of one of Yahweh's servants." Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 458.

[21.](#) Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:2; cf. Matt. 4:5, 8; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:3.

[22.](#) Human freedom, however, is limited and severely affected by sin.

[23.](#) This depiction of Satan's will provides evidence of the devil's personhood and meets the minimal definition of libertarian freedom discussed in chap. 2.

[24.](#) Luke 8:12; cf. Matt. 13:19; Mark 4:15; John 10:10.

[25.](#) Cf. Matt. 4:10–11; 16:23; Mark 8:33; Luke 4:13; 1 Pet. 5:9.

[26.](#) Pss. 74:13–14 (LXX 73:13–14); 104:26 (LXX 103:26); cf. Job 26:13; 41:1; Ps. 148:7; Isa. 27:1. The word *drakōn* appears thirteen times in twelve verses in the NT, all in Revelation and always in reference to the devil—except once in reference to the sea beast who spoke "as a dragon" (Rev. 13:11).

[27.](#) Cf. Matt. 9:34; Mark 3:22–26; Luke 11:15–20.

[28.](#) Cf. Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21–22; Rev. 20:2. See also the reference to Belial (*beliar*, 2 Cor. 6:15). Clinton E. Arnold notes that Satan possesses "wide-ranging power and authority," including "over all the kingdoms of the world (Matt. 4:8–9; Luke 4:6)." Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 80.

[29.](#) Nearly all commentators view "god of this world" as a reference to Satan. See, e.g., Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 327; Barnett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 220.

[30.](#) Matt. 25:41; Rev. 12:7, 9; cf. Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 6:3; 2 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pet. 3:22.

[31.](#) Arnold makes a compelling case that all of these terms, and also the disputed reference to *stoicheia* ("elemental spirits"), "denote supernatural beings." "Principalities and Powers," *ABD* 5:467. See, further, Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*; Reid, "Principalities and Powers."

[32.](#) In my view, the biblical data are underdeterminative regarding the precise categorization of these celestial beings. This work is concerned more with the power/jurisdiction of such celestial beings than their ontology/taxonomy. For more on biblical angelology and demonology, see Page, *Powers of Evil*; van der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*; Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*; Noll, *Angels of Light*.

[33.](#) E.g., Matt. 10:1, 8. Cf. Matt. 4:1–10; 9:33; 17:18; Mark 1:13; 3:15, 22–23; 5:13–15; 7:25–30; 9:17–30; Luke 4:33–36; 8:27–33; 9:38–42; 10:18; 11:14; 13:16; John 8:44; Acts 5:3; 26:18; Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:8; Rev. 16:13–14.

[34.](#) Reese, “Demons,” 2:141.

[35.](#) Noting the widely recognized allusion to Isa. 14 here, Joel Green comments that Satan’s “claim to glory and allegiance (cf. 4:5–7; cf. Isa. 14:13) is antecedent to, even mandates, his fall.” J. Green, *Luke*, 418. See Garrett, *Demise of the Devil*, 50. Here “Luke identifies ‘the enemy’ as the cosmic power of evil resident and active behind all forms of opposition to God and God’s people.” J. Green, *Luke*, 420.

[36.](#) Most recent commentators see Jude 6 and 2 Pet. 2 as alluding to “the story of the fall of the Watchers, which was well known in contemporary Judaism,” particularly 1 En. 6:1–9 and its interpretation of Gen. 6:1–4. Bauckham, *2 Peter, Jude*, 248. Cf. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 447–51. Other scholars (particularly in previous generations) have seen Jude 6 and 2 Pet. 2 as references to a fall of Satan and his angels prior to the human fall. Whatever is said in this regard, Page notes that other texts appear to “allude to fallen angels,” such as Paul’s statement that humans will “judge angels” (1 Cor. 6:3). Further, Page believes the “dragon and his angels” (Rev. 12:7) warring against God presupposes “a number of fallen angels,” perhaps also referenced via the “stars” swept from “heaven by the dragon” as “widely held” (v. 4). Page, *Powers of Evil*, 258. He believes these “fallen angels” underlie OT references to “evil spiritual agencies.” Page, *Powers of Evil*, 82.

[37.](#) Many NT scholars see Rev. 12:8–9 as a reference to Christ’s victory at the cross but some see it as also containing imagery of an earlier fall. I. Howard Marshall comments that “behind the picture” of Rev. 12:8–9 and Luke 10:18 “lies the myth of the fall of Lucifer from heaven (Isa. 14:12; cf. the allusion to this myth in Luke 10:15).” Marshall, *Luke*, 428.

[38.](#) Ezekiel 28:12 appears to refer beyond the human “king of Tyre” since the addressee is called the “seal of perfection” (v. 12), identified as present “in Eden” (v. 13) and “the anointed cherub who covers” on “the holy mountain of God” (v. 14; cf. 16)—that is, a covering cherub alongside God’s throne (Exod. 25:19–20). Twice the text declares this cherub was “perfect,” the second time declaring, “You were blameless in your ways / From the day you were created, / Until unrighteousness was found in you” (Ezek. 28:15; cf. 12). These descriptions suggest the addressee is a celestial being who fell from perfection. This cherub became “filled with violence” by the “abundance of [his] trade [*rekullah*]” (Ezek. 28:16; cf. 18); *rekullah* derives from the root *rakil*, which refers to “slander” (cf. Lev. 19:16), the devil’s *modus operandi*. This cherub’s “heart was lifted up because of [his] beauty” and he “corrupted [his] wisdom” (Ezek. 28:17).

Similarly, Isa. 14 describes the attempt of *helel* (translated “Lucifer” in the Vulgate) to exalt himself above God, saying “I will ascend to heaven; / I will raise my throne above the stars of God” (Isa. 14:13) and “I will ascend



above the heights of the clouds; / I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14). Michael Heiser comments that this "reads like an attempted coup in the divine council." Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, 85. Given what we know of Satan from elsewhere in Scripture, I believe the most plausible identity of *helel* (Isa. 14) and the cherub (Ezek. 28) is the devil, the celestial ruler behind the earthly rulers who are also addressed.

Relative to Ezek. 28, Lamar Eugene Cooper Sr. makes a strong case that "Ezekiel presented the king of Tyre as an evil tyrant who was animated and motivated by . . . Satan," noting that most "elements associated with the king of Tyre" here also appear relative to "the king of Babylon" in Isa. 14. Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 268. See, further, Bertoluci, "Son of the Morning"; Boyd, *God at War*, 157–62. Heiser believes these passages refer to a celestial being (the devil) because the "divine rebellion motif accounts for all the elements in both biblical passages (which have clear touch-points to the *nachash* [serpent] of Gen. 3), but the same cannot be said for appeals to Adam or the Keret Epic." Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, 83n1; cf. 75–91.

[39.](#) James D. G. Dunn believes that "all four terms" here—thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities—"refer only to the invisible, heavenly realm" and dovetail with "repeated emphasis on Christ's supremacy and triumph over the 'principalities and powers' in 2:10 and 15" who are "hostile to God's cosmos." Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 92.

[40.](#) Gordon D. Fee comments that Israel "had rejected God their Rock for beings who were no gods, indeed who were demons" (see Deut. 32:17), perhaps a development of "Israel's realization that the 'mute' gods of the pagans did in fact have supernatural powers." Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 472.

[41.](#) Reese explains that this refers to "pagan gods," the "spiritual reality behind the apparent nothingness of idols." "Demons," 2:140, 142. So also Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 95; Noll, *Angels of Light*, 81. As such, all of the many references to the gods of the nations and idolatry are references to cosmic conflict.

[42.](#) Although some believe this refers to another demonic ruler, Bruce has "little doubt that the devil is the being described as 'the ruler of the domain of the air.'" Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 282. Likewise, Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 95; M. Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 214; Page, *Powers of Evil*, 185.

[43.](#) Cf. Rom. 8:38; 13:12; 2 Cor. 10:3–5; Col. 2:15. Whereas the terminology relative to Satan, demons, and principalities and powers has been taken by some to refer to merely human systems of power or world systems with inner spirituality (on the latter, see Wink, *Walter Wink: Collected Readings*), Eph. 6:11–12 explicitly references "the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." Bruce sees this wording as referring to Satan's "host of allies, principalities and powers." Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 404. Page adds that to "demythologize the powers and equate them with sociopolitical structures . . . fails to do justice to the historical

context of the New Testament" and "to the explicit statements about these powers in the New Testament itself." Page, *Powers of Evil*, 240. Similarly, see Noll, *Angels of Light*, 119. Robert Ewusie Moses notes, "Paul shows that the powers" actually "operate across all levels simultaneously—cosmic, personal, political, social." Moses, *Practices of Power*, 209. See also Arnold's strong case for the reality, personhood, and systemic impact of evil celestial agencies, in Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 194–205.

[44.](#) As John J. Collins explains this widely held view, this prince "indicates the patron angel of Persia," consonant with the "widespread" ancient "notion that different nations were allotted to different gods or heavenly beings" and the ANE "concept of the divine council." J. Collins, *Daniel*, 374. So also Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 63; Page, *Powers of Evil*, 63. See the discussion of Deut. 32:8–9 later in this chapter.

[45.](#) Towner, *Daniel*, 147.

[46.](#) Longman, *Daniel*, 250.

[47.](#) Longman, *Daniel*, 256.

[48.](#) Archer, "Daniel," 124. So also Longman, *Daniel*, 249; Page, *Powers of Evil*, 64.

[49.](#) Goldingay, *Daniel*, 291.

[50.](#) Longman, *Daniel*, 254. See Longman's excursus on these issues in *Daniel*, 254–65; Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*. Cf. Boyd, *God at War*.

[51.](#) Tanner, "Book Three of the Psalter: Psalms 73–89," 642.

[52.](#) Jeffrey H. Tigay explains, "Although 'elohim and 'el(im) literally mean 'god/gods,' they also refer to various types of supernatural beings and heavenly bodies that form God's retinue." Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 514.

[53.](#) Goldingay, *Israel's Faith*, 43. Michael S. Heiser notes, "Common phrases in the Hebrew Bible which seem to deny the existence of other gods (e.g., Deut. 4:35, 39; 32:12, 39) actually appear in passages that affirm the existence of other gods (Deut. 4:19–20; 32:8–9, 17)" and tend to "express incomparability, not nonexistence of other gods (Isa. 43:10–12; cf. 47:8, 10)." Heiser, "Divine Council," 10. Cf. Block, *Gods of the Nations*.

[54.](#) Cf. Gen. 11; Deut. 4:19–20; 29:26. The MT of Deut. 32:8 reads "sons of Israel," but most scholars agree that the original most likely corresponds to the DSS "sons of God," which likely explains the LXX rendering "angels of God." So Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 302; Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 377; Christensen, *Deuteronomy* 21:10–34:12, 791; P. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 228; Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 326; Clements, "Deuteronomy," 2:529. Contra, e.g., Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 413. For support of the reading "sons of God," see Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8"; Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, 114. Cf. Jub. 15:31.

[55.](#) Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 379. Longman argues that this "refers to God's angelic creatures who make up his heavenly council as 'the sons of God.' There are angels, in other words, 'assigned' to different nation states." Longman, *Daniel*, 250. For Tigay, this refers to "when God was allotting nations to the divine beings." Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 302. So also P. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 228; Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 326.



[56.](#) Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 340. Similarly, Alexander Di Lella sees the “guardian angel” view of Dan. 10 as a vestige of the Deut. 32:8 view that “each city-state or nation or empire had a tutelary god who was in a particular way its protector.” Hartman and Di Lella, *Daniel*, 283. Cf. Towner, *Daniel*, 172; Christensen, *Deuteronomy*, 796; Block, *Gods of the Nations*, 30–32.

[57.](#) The notion of deities assigned to geographic territories appears in other texts, such as Jephthah’s message to the king of Ammon: “Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess?” (Judg. 11:24; cf. Ezra 1:2–3; 1 Kings 20:23; cf. 20:28). Further, God “executed judgments on [Egypt’s] gods” (Num. 33:4; cf. Exod. 12:12; 15:6, 11; 18:10–11; 23:32; Deut. 29:24–25; 1 Sam. 5:7; 6:5; 1 Kings 11:5, 33; 18:24; Jer. 5:19, 30–31; 46:25; 50:2; 51:44). Cf. also Rabshakeh’s taunts: “Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? . . . Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their land from my hand?” (2 Kings 18:33–35; cf. 19:12–13; 2 Chron. 32:13–17; Isa. 36:18–20; 37:12). Many other passages refer to the gods of the nations (e.g., Exod. 12:12; Deut. 6:14; Josh. 24:15; Judg. 6:10; 10:6; 2 Kings 17:29–31; 1 Chron. 5:25; 2 Chron. 25:14–15, 20; 28:23; Jer. 34:12–13; Zeph. 2:11). Yet God is unequivocally superior (1 Chron. 16:25–26; 2 Chron. 2:5–6); there is “no one like [Yahweh] among the gods” (Ps. 86:8; cf. Pss. 77:13; 95:3; 96:4–5; 97:9; 135:5; 2 Chron. 6:14). See also Block, *Gods of the Nations*.

[58.](#) Cf. Lev. 17:7; Ps. 106:37; cf. 1 Cor. 10:20–21. The LXX translation of Ps. 96:5 (LXX 95:5) says, “All the gods of peoples are demons [*daimonia*].” There is also considerable evidence indicating that “Azazel” in the Day of Atonement ritual (Lev. 16:8–10) likely refers to a demon enemy of God. See Gane, *Cult and Character*, 247–51.

[59.](#) Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, 328.

[60.](#) E.g., 1 Kings 22:19–23; 2 Chron. 18:18–22; Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7; Pss. 29:1–2; 82; 89:5–8; Isa. 6:1–13; Zech. 3:1–7; Dan. 7:9–14; cf. Isa. 24:21–23; Jer. 23:18, 22; Ezek. 1–3; Dan. 4:13, 17; Amos 3:7–8.

[61.](#) Mullen, “Divine Assembly,” 2:214. Mullen notes that some “idea of a council or assembly of the gods that met to determine the fates of the cosmos” was “common to the mythopoeic world of the ANE.” This “council of the gods . . . constituted the major decision-making body in the divine world” (2:214). See also Mullen, *Divine Council*. However, the OT conception departs significantly from that of other ANE literature. John E. Hartley notes that whereas “several passages in the OT” appear “to assume that God governs the world through a council of the heavenly host . . . in the OT the complete dependence of these sons of God on God himself and their total submission to him is not questioned,” in keeping with “monotheistic belief.” Hartley, *Job*, 71n6.

[62.](#) Indeed Noll notes, “Heaven is populated by spiritual beings, whether they are loyal servants or not (Ps. 82).” Noll, “Angels,” 46. Robert L. Alden

comments, "Apparently God has a council or cabinet," but "not every one of them is good because 1 Kings 22:20–23 speaks of a 'spirit' willing to be a 'lying spirit in the mouths of all his [Ahab's] prophets.'" Alden, *Job*, 53.

[63.](#) Job 3:8; 41:1; Pss. 74:14; 104:26; Isa. 27:1; cf. Job 9:13; 26:12; Isa. 51:9; Rev. 12:3–9; 13:1–3. On the divine warrior motif, see Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*. Such monsters are closely associated with the nations that oppress Israel. At times, Rahab is another name for Egypt (e.g., Isa. 30:7), and Babylon is associated with a dragon (Jer. 51:34). Yet behind these and others stand the celestial "gods."

[64.](#) Some interpret this psalm as a reference to merely human judges, reading Christ's use of it in John 10:34 in this vein. However, nothing Jesus says in John 10:34 seems to demand reading "gods" as merely humans. Indeed, Christ's quotation appears to make more sense if Ps. 82 is taken as a reference to celestial beings. See Page, *Powers of Evil*, 57–58; Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, 68n3. Further, the internal data of Ps. 82 overwhelmingly support reading this as a reference to celestial beings ("gods"). The LXX supports this reading—rendering *ba'adat-'el* as *en synagōgē theōn*, "in an assembly/synagogue of gods"—and is favored by most commentators. So, e.g., Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 334; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 331; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 155; Tanner, "Book Three of the Psalter," 643; McCann, "Psalms," 4:1006.

[65.](#) Tanner, "Book Three of the Psalter," 641.

[66.](#) Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 334, 340. Hossfeld and Zenger similarly see this as the "hierarchical assembly of the gods or the heavenly council," together with the idea of "the assignment of particular territories within the world to individual deities by the god-king." Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 329. See also Noll, *Angels of Light*, 37.

[67.](#) Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 334. Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 334; McCann, "Psalms," 4:1006. Page adds that saying they will "'die like mere men' assumes that those addressed are not human." Page, *Powers of Evil*, 55.

[68.](#) Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 156.

[69.](#) James L. Mays writes that this is "a petition to God to take over as judge of the earth in place of the gods." Mays, *Psalms*, 268.

[70.](#) For Joseph Blenkinsopp, this describes the punishment of the "celestial and terrestrial powers hostile to Yahweh's purposes," the "heavenly patrons to the nations of the world (e.g., 1 En. 90:22–25; Sir. 17:17; Dan. 10:13, 20–21; cf. Deut. 32:8–9)," the "malevolent celestial powers" in "league" with "the rulers of the nations." Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 356–57.

[71.](#) Longman, *Daniel*, 250.

[72.](#) Hartley, *Job*, 71. See also Clines, *Job 1–20*, 17–18; Pope, *Job*, 9; Alden, *Job*, 53.

[73.](#) Victor P. Hamilton thinks this question might suggest the *satan* is "an intruder," while allowing the alternate view that he is "a legitimate member." Hamilton, "Satan," 5:986.

[74.](#) Carol A. Newsom comments that there “is a formal, almost ritual quality to the initial exchange between Yahweh and the satan.” Newsom, “Job,” 4:348. Further, some take *hithallek* in the satan’s reply as asserting “dominion or sovereignty over” the earth (cf. Ezek. 28:14). Klein, *Zechariah*, 100. Many others view the satan here as a rover or watcher of the heavenly court (cf. Dan. 4:13), perhaps reflective of the Persian “royal spy system” but more likely grounded in the much older ANE imagery of “the divine court scenes.” So, e.g., Pope, *Job*, 9, 11.

[75.](#) Pope, *Job*, 11.

[76.](#) Newsom, “Job,” 4:349. Newsom thinks the satan’s charge “exposes” God “to dishonor” and that Yahweh here “defends his own honor.” Newsom, “Job,” 4:349.

[77.](#) Newsom believes this is “no wager but a challenge to a test.” Newsom, “Job,” 4:349. Cf. Andersen, *Job*, 89.

[78.](#) Wilson, *Job*, 34.

[79.](#) Andersen, *Job*, 89. Cf. Alden, *Job*, 55.

[80.](#) Hamilton, “Satan,” 5:985. So also Day, *Adversary in Heaven*, 76.

[81.](#) Andersen, *Job*, 95. Conversely, Clines (as others) depicts God as guilty of wronging Job. Clines, *Job 1–20*, 25; cf. Newsom, “Job,” 4:350.

[82.](#) Although the remainder of Job does not mention the satan, other hints of cosmic conflict appear, including Leviathan, other monsters, and Eliphaz’s report: “A spirit passed by my face” and “I heard a voice:

‘Can mankind be just before God?

Can a man be pure before his Maker?

He puts no trust even in His servants;

And against His angels He charges error.’” (Job 4:15–18; cf. 5:1; 15:15)

See Tonstad, *God of Sense*, 255–56.

[83.](#) According to Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, the “technical language” of “*md lpony*” (“standing before”) itself “reveals” the vividly portrayed “Divine Council setting” as the “Heavenly Court over which Yahweh presides as chief judge.” Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 182. Citing similarities with Job 1–2, Ralph L. Smith concludes, “There can be no doubt that the scene is that of the heavenly council.” Smith, *Micah–Malachi*, 199.

[84.](#) Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 186. Cf. Gen. 37:10; Ruth 2:16. Yet they believe that “God’s rebuke is not directed toward the function of the Accuser per se, but rather to the way in which he is carrying out his responsibilities.”

[85.](#) Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 188. Mark J. Boda likewise believes the standing ones “are attendants in the divine council (see Jer. 23:18) who participate in its deliberations and carry out its orders (1 Kings 22:19–23; Isa. 6, 40).” Boda, *Zechariah*, 248.

[86.](#) Newsom, “Job,” 4:347. So, e.g., Pope, *Job*, 9; Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 183; Boda, *Zechariah*, 229–30. However, Peggy L.

Day notes, “No analogous office has been convincingly identified in the legal system of ancient Israel, nor do the divine councils of the surrounding cultures include a deity whose specific assignment is to be an accuser.” Day and Breytenbach, “Satan,” 728. While some argue that “professional informers/accusers existed in the early Persian period” and the *satan* is modeled after these, Day contends that the “evidence for this is inconclusive” (728).

[87](#). Newsom, “Job,” 4:347. Cf. Pope, *Job*, 9.

[88](#). See Hamilton, “Satan,” 5:985. Cf. HALOT 3:1317. Meyers and Meyers see in this root “a set of meanings that are derived from the hostility of one who is an opponent.” Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 183.

[89](#). The infinitive construct (*lesitno*) in Zech. 3:1 is demonstrably of *hasatan*. Psalm 109:6 has sometimes been taken as referencing the devil but likely refers to a human accuser (in a legal context similar to Zech. 3); the same chapter uses *satan* of apparently human accusers in three other verses (Ps. 109:4, 20, 29). Two other instances refer to the “angel of the LORD” standing “as an adversary [*satan*]” against Balaam (Num. 22:22; cf. v. 32). Eleven other instances refer to human accusers or adversaries (1 Sam. 29:4; 2 Sam. 19:23 [ET 22]; 1 Kings 5:18 [ET 4]; 11:14, 23, 25; Pss. 38:21 [ET 20]; 71:13; 109:4, 20, 29).

[90](#). HALOT 3:1317. According to Day, the “majority of scholars” believe *śātān* is a proper name, though Day does not hold this view. Day and Breytenbach, “Satan,” 729–30.

[91](#). “Σατάν, Σατανᾶς,” NIDNTE 4:265. So also Page, *Powers of Evil*, 24, 34; Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 62.

[92](#). Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 183. Hamilton similarly views this as the third “appearance of a malevolent celestial *śātān*,” while recognizing it could be read otherwise. Hamilton, “Satan,” 5:987.

[93](#). Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 183.

[94](#). “Σατάν, Σατανᾶς,” NIDNTE 4:265. The parallel in 2 Sam. 24:1 depicts Yahweh as the agent who “incited David.” Various views of why the Chronicler identifies *satan* instead as the agent are possible. Some maintain that earlier OT literature emphasized divine causality, even in instances of weak actualization. See Hamilton, “Satan,” 5:987; Page, *Powers of Evil*, 35. This view may dovetail with what Noll calls the “OT reticence to speak of evil angels and Satan in particular,” in keeping “with its ‘apophatic angelology.’” Noll, “Angels,” 46.

[95](#). The only instances where *hasatan* is not translated by *diabolos* with the article is the second instance in Zech. 3:2, rendered with the vocative, *diabole*, and one instance where it is rendered by a pronoun (Job 1:8). Interestingly, the LXX uses *diabolos* to translate *satan* only in Job 1–2; Zech. 3:1–2; 1 Chron. 21:1; and Ps. 108:6 LXX, without the article in the two instances without the article in Hebrew (1 Chron. 21:1; Ps. 108:6 LXX). However, the infinitive *endiaballō* and the feminine noun *diabolē* are used in some other instances.

[96.](#) Cf. Mordechai Cogan's view that "śātān developed the meaning 'prosecutor' (cf. Zech. 3:1–2; Job 1:6) and eventually became the name for the one who incites to sinful acts (cf. 1 Chron. 21:1)." Cogan, *1 Kings*, 330.

[97.](#) First Kings 22 might be read in various ways; space does not permit an adequate treatment here. For now, notice that some deliberation among council members (v. 20) precedes the celestial being coming forward to deceive, who then offers his own plan (vv. 21–22; cf. Rev. 16:13–14). This pattern comports well with Joseph Blenkinsopp's description of "the deliberative nature of the council," according to which "Yahweh engages in discussion and solicits opinions but does not give orders (Isa. 6:8; 1 Kings 22:20–22; Job 1–2)." Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 179. That Micaiah informed Ahab about the "deceiving spirit" suggests that God did not intend to actually deceive Ahab.

[98.](#) Robin Routledge notes, "Not all of the heavenly beings who have access to the divine council are necessarily Yahweh's loyal servants." Indeed, "the divine assembly in the Old Testament" may include "evil as well as good" celestial beings. Routledge, "'Evil Spirit from the Lord,'" 18–19.

[99.](#) Hartley, *Job*, 71, 71n8. Similarly, Robert Alter sees here "an element of jealousy" and "cynical mean-spiritedness." Alter, *Wisdom Books*, 12. Cf. Tonstad, *God of Sense*, 245–46. Page thinks it "obvious" that "the disasters heaped upon Job were Satan's [malicious] doing." Page, *Powers of Evil*, 28.

[100.](#) Boda, *Zechariah*, 230n29.

[101.](#) Andersen, *Job*, 87.

[102.](#) Wilson, *Job*, 32–33. After noting that some "scholars (e.g., Gibson, Newsom, Weiss, Clines, Seow) regard 'the satan' as an expression of the dark side of God himself," Wilson contends, "none of these scholars demonstrates from the text of the prologue that 'the satan' should be so understood" (32). Even Newsom recognizes that "Yahweh and the accuser take opposing views of the character of Job" such that the *satan* "subtly becomes God's adversary." Newsom, "Job," 4:348.

[103.](#) Klein, *Zechariah*, 136, 134. He thinks (without offering a compelling reason) nevertheless that "'Satan' in v. 1 probably is not Satan in the New Testament" (134).

[104.](#) Newsom, "Job," 4:348.

[105.](#) Boda, *Zechariah*, 230. Cf. Noll, *Angels of Light*, 103.

[106.](#) Boda, *Zechariah*, 230.

[107.](#) Day, "Satan," 728.

[108.](#) Hartley, *Job*, 71n8.

[109.](#) Boda, *Zechariah*, 230. Cf. Page, *Powers of Evil*, 29.

[110.](#) For a brief introduction to the development of the concept of the devil in extra-canonical Second Temple literature, see Hamilton, "Satan," 5:987–88. Further, see the brief overview in D. Brown, *God of This Age*, 21–60; Russell, *Devil*, 174–220. Although the extra-canonical Second Temple literature displays a much more elaborate angelology and demonology than that found in the biblical canon (see, e.g., Stuckenbruck, *Myth of*



*Rebellious Angels*), the core components of the reading offered in this chapter seem to be supported therein.

[111](#). Noll suggests Satan's "full-fledged appearance in the Gospels" might be understood as "concomitant with the coming of the Son of God." Noll, "Angels," 47.

[112](#). Wilson, *Job*, 32. Wilson cautions, however, against "reading later ideas of Satan or the devil back into this text" (32).

[113](#). Bultmann, *New Testament Mythology*, 4.

[114](#). Noll, "Angels," 45.

[115](#). Gavriluk, "An Overview of Patristic Theodicies," 6. Cf. Greg Boyd's argument that the "warfare worldview of the Bible was adopted and even expanded" in successive generations prior to Augustine. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 39. Cf. Tonstad, "Theodicy," 169–202; Burns, *Christian Understandings of Evil*, 27–39, 45–58.

[116](#). Russell, *Satan*, 226. In what many take as a description of the rule of faith, Irenaeus refers to "the angels who transgressed and became apostates." Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1 (ANF 1:330). Similarly, Tertullian notes a baptismal formula wherein "we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels." Tertullian, *De Corona* 3 (ANF 3:94). A similar statement appears in many ancient baptismal formulas thereafter. See Gilmore and Caspari, "Renunciation of the Devil," 488–89. Noll, speaking of the Nicene Creed, which apparently draws on Col. 1:16 (itself widely understood as a very early christological hymn), adds, "Confession of 'things visible and invisible' seems indeed to be the dogmatic position of the historic catholic faith." Noll, "Angels," 47.

[117](#). Russell, *Satan*, 187. "The main lines of the concept are clear: the Devil as created, fallen through his own free choice, the chief of evil forces in the cosmos, mortally wounded by Christ, and doomed to ruin" (220).

[118](#). Russell, *Prince of Darkness*, 166.

[119](#). Russell, *Satan*, 226.

[120](#). Russell, *Mephistopheles*, 299, 301.

[121](#). Russell, *Satan*, 225.

[122](#). Russell, *Mephistopheles*, 299.

[123](#). DeWeese, "Natural Evil," 63. Cf. Page, *Powers of Evil*, 180.

[124](#). Balthasar, *Action*, 197–98.

[125](#). Ferdinando, *Triumph of Christ*, 376. Reese adds, "Some conception of evil spirits or demons was held almost universally by the religions of the ancient world." Reese, "Demons," 2:140. Cf. Boyd's survey of the "nearly universal intuition of cosmic conflict" across cultures. Boyd, *God at War*, 18.

[126](#). Ferdinando, *Triumph of Christ*, 376.

[127](#). In his extensive case for miracles, which documents numerous cross-cultural cases, Craig Keener decries the ethnocentrism of anti-supernaturalistic biases. Keener, *Miracles*, 1:222–23.

[128](#). Wa Gatumu, *Pauline Concept of Supernatural Powers*, 52, 51. Cf. Moses, *Practices of Power*, 221–24.



[129](#). Plantinga, "Self-Profile," 42.

[130](#). As Brian Han Gregg notes, "The conflict between God and Satan is clearly a central feature of Jesus' teaching and ministry." Gregg, *What Does the Bible Say?*, 66. So also, Page, *Powers of Evil*, 135; Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 16.

[131](#). Ferdinando, *Triumph of Christ*, 378.

[132](#). Plantinga, "Self-Profile," 43. Anthony C. Thiselton adds, "Belief about supernatural interventions in the affairs of [humans] is not necessarily primitive or pre-scientific, as the Enlightenment view of myth would imply." Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 289.

[133](#). Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 831. Cf. T. F. Torrance's description of the "organized kingdom of evil and darkness" and "an utterly rebellious evil will or spirit which the Holy Scriptures call Satan." Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 227. Cf. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 415–20.

[134](#). Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 832.

[135](#). Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 832. John G. Stackhouse Jr. adds, "Satan temporarily enjoys the status of the 'prince of *this* world,'" having "considerable influence over individuals, corporations, and structures throughout the world in this era." Stackhouse, *Can God Be Trusted?*, 39 (emphasis original).

[136](#). Consider the prominence of the theme in Lewis's fictional works such as *The Screwtape Letters*, the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, and the *Space Trilogy*, inspired by John Milton's masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*.

[137](#). Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 45.

[138](#). Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," 33.