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Sovereign God or Paranoid Universe? The Lord of Hosts is His Name

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The more I read the Old Testament Scriptures the more I am struck by the absolute confidence they express in the sovereignty of Yahweh, creator of all that is. What I find most astonishing about this confidence is that it is supremely uninterested in protecting Yahweh from the malign influences that surround him. At the same time I am struck by our modern lack of conviction that this is in fact the case. We seem to believe in a God who is struggling to beat off the rivals that surround him, and live in fear of the power of those rivals to harm us. What follows represents an attempt to assemble some biblical material around the theme of the Lord of hosts, and so begin to address this disjunction between the way things are in the Scriptures and the way things appear to be to us. [1]

I propose to first outline some Old Testament material apposite to the Lord of hosts, and to explore the presence of that theme in the New Testament. Then follows a consideration of the link between a theology of the covenant and the sovereignty of the Lord of hosts. Some tensions in my thinking become clear at that point. The final two sections constitute a brief summary of the applicability of the material to today, and pointers towards a more comprehensive outworking of this topic.

But before any of that, a note on terminology is necessary. The key

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1 An earlier draft of this article was presented as a paper to the Bible College of New Zealand Postgraduate Seminar, for whose discussion of it I am grateful.

distinction I am exploring is that between the Lord of hosts, Yahweh, and all other non-physical beings. Whether they are called demons or angels or gods, they are those who occupy the sphere over which the Lord of hosts exercises his sovereignty. Sometimes they are also referred to as heavenly beings. When that phrase appears, heavenly is intended as the opposite of earthly, not as the opposite of evil. The reason for this will become clear.

Old Testament Material

There is a substantial strand in the Hebrew Bible that evades the question of monotheism, of whether or not God is the only god, and hence it is not interested in a declaration as to the existence of other gods or heavenly powers. This strand is content simply to say that God is supreme amongst the powers.[2] One feature of this is the institution we sense lurking in the background from time to time, and which is often referred to as the 'heavenly council'.[3] There are a number of manifestations of the heavenly council. One is in the call of the prophet in Isaiah chapter 6, where the visionary prophet appears to be drawn into a conversation with a larger group to whom the question is addressed: who will go (Is. 6:8)? There are other call narratives where the council context is also hinted at, but more obliquely than in Isaiah 6 (Is. 40:1-11 for example).

A more explicit instance is the appearance in Psalm 82 of what appears to be an assembly of gods who are called to account by God for their stewardship of justice in the nations. The conclusion of the Psalm is that in the light of their failure there is only one who is truly Lord of all the nations (Ps. 82:8). There is no interest in the fate of these gods other than a hint of their coming fall (v. 7). More important is the concluding assertion that God is the final inheritor of the nations.

Then there is the famous encounter between God and Satan at the beginning of Job, which captures our attention for two reasons. First, the encounter takes place in the context of a meeting between Yahweh and *benei 'elohim* ('the sons of the gods', Job 1:6; NRSV 'heavenly beings'), which again depicts the heavenly assembly.[4] Secondly, although the narrative does not make clear whether or not Satan is a legitimate part of that assembly, it is clear that his influence is constrained by Yahweh. The end result is not the defeat of Satan, but rather

2 This element of the tradition has been explained and analyzed in various ways. For M. Barker, *The Older Testament* (London: SPCK, 1987) and *The Great Angel* (London: SPCK, 1992), as the title of her 1987 monograph implies, this is an older tradition which later reformers sought to purge, a process evident in the Old Testament itself. In contrast A.P. Hayman, 'Monotheism — A Misused Word in Jewish Studies', *JJS* 42 (1991), pp. 1 15, handles the biblical material in the light of developments in post-biblical Judaism and concludes that 'The pattern of Jewish beliefs about God remains monarchist throughout. God is king of a heavenly court consisting of many other powerful beings, not always under his control' (p. 15). While I concur with the general picture painted by Hayman, my view on the control of God is more assured than his.

3 See E.T. Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), especially pp. 209-44.

4 All quotes are from NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

the recognition by Job, and hence by his readers, that 'no purpose of yours (Yahweh's) can be thwarted' (Job 42:2). Satan simply disappears from consideration.

It is my view that this understanding of Yahweh as supreme in the heavenly council lies behind a common Old Testament name for the God of Israel; *yhwh tsev'aoth*, the Lord of hosts.[5] Most of the hundreds of uses of the name are simply that, a name. But there are a number of occasions when the use of the noun *tsav'a* ('host'), normally but not invariably in the singular, offers some clues as to the content of that name.[6] At a human level it often means an 'army' or 'band' or 'division' of warriors (See 2 Sam. 10:7,16 and 18, out of myriad examples, and Num. 10:14 where the word occurs in both singular and plural form). Sometimes the hosts are earthly beings who are led by the Lord, as in Exodus 12:41. At other times the host consists of heavenly beings marshalled by Yahweh. Such is the terminology used in Genesis 2:1, and echoed in the book of Isaiah (13:4-5 and 40:26 for example).[7]

There are other times when the distinction between the heavenly and earthly expression of the host becomes blurred, particularly evidenced in the book of Isaiah. See for instance Isaiah 13:5 previously noted, where the host are mustered by Yahweh both 'from a distant land' and 'from the end of the heavens'. And in Isaiah 34:3-4 the mustered army completes its mission of judgement and the stench of death on earth is equated with the fall of the heavenly host: the 'host of heaven' will be dissolved and the 'heavens' (NRSV 'skies') rolled up like a scroll. The judgement on the nations has something to do with the judgement on the host of heaven. A more specific expression of the concept is found at Isaiah 24:21 where 'the host of heaven' and the 'kings of the earth' alike are punished. This blurring of the distinction between earth and heaven is perhaps nowhere better typified than at the stream of Jabbok (Gen. 32:22-32), where Jacob wrestled all night with — whom? Was it a man or God (v. 28)? Although it is true that 'our struggle is not against… flesh and blood' (Eph. 6:12), we do also struggle against flesh and blood—and the two may not be as distinct as we sometimes think.

But as well as paralleling the heavenly and the earthly, the prophet Isaiah also occasionally identifies the heavenly bodies with the heavenly host. Such is the case in Isaiah 34:3-4. In that context we may understand the reference in Isaiah 14:12-15 to one member of the heavenly host as the morning star. As a member of the host his crime was to try and raise himself above Yahweh, and so he is fallen. The likelihood is that there is also a host that is fallen with him. The picture we are left with,

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5 Unfortunately this is obscured somewhat for us by English translations that render the phrase as 'the Lord Almighty'. NIV is one such.

6 See the article on '*tseva'oth*' in R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer and B.K. Waltke (eds), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), vol. 2, pp. 750-51.

7 This is another instance of the strong linguistic links between Deutero-Isaiah and the early chapters of Genesis.

particularly in the Isaiah material, is that the Lord is in control of the armies of the earth as he is of the armies in the heavenlies. Both are subject to his judgement, both are potentially instruments of his, and there is some interconnectedness between the two.[8]

But the interest in the host is not confined to the prophecies of Isaiah. A somewhat later expression of the rebellious member of the host appears in Daniel 8:10-12. A comparison of this passage with 2 Chronicles 33:3 bears out the implication that the hosts can be either instruments of the Lord's judgement or objects of his judgement. According to the Chronicler, one of the crimes of Manasseh was to worship the 'host of heaven', whereas in Daniel 8 one of the crimes of the small horn was to cast down some of the host. There the host seem to have positive connotations which reach their culmination in Daniel 12:3. This makes explicit that the word 'heavenly' is a spatial rather than an ethical concept.[9] In contrast to more dualistic categories of thought, the Hebrew material takes 'heavenly' to mean other-worldly rather than evil.

To return to the book of Isaiah, the existence of the heavenly bodies is in some way a reminder of the sovereignty of the Lord in the heavenly sphere of influence. This expression of the sovereignty of the Lord on the part of Isaiah is peculiarly appropriate to the astrological interests of the Babylonian setting.[10] Isaiah's response to the Babylonian view of the starry host is partly expressed in the idol parody. The trust placed by Babylonian diviners in the power of the sun, moon, and stars is ritually brought to life in the institution of the New Year's festival idol procession, where devotees of the cultus would bear the image of Marduk into the ceremonial house.[11] With biting sarcasm the prophet mocks, not the handcrafted gods, but those who put their trust in something that has to be carried around on their shoulders and will fall over if not propped up (Is. 46:3-7). Yahweh longs to carry the people who seem to think they have to do the carrying. It seems clear that the prophet does not think that the idols themselves can be more powerful than their creators. The complaint behind his mocking tone is over the confidence placed in the forces (or host) they represent. It is important to note that he does not deny their existence, only their efficacy for those who trust in them. The issue is one of allegiance. They cannot harm unless God lets them, but they will enslave those who trust in them (Is. 46:2).

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8 But compare M. Barker, *The Older Testament*, p. 92, whose depiction of the second Isaiah as a reformer seems at odds with the evidence.

9 For further on this, see J.G. Gammie, 'Spatial and Ethical Dualism in Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic Literature', *JBL* 93 (1974), pp. 356-85.

10 W. von Soden, *The Ancient Orient* (tr. G. Schley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 180-82, outlines the identification of Babylonian deities with celestial bodies. Marduk, the best known by the period in question, is linked with Jupiter. Nabonidus famously incurred the wrath of the Babylonian religious establishment for trying to promote the cult of the moon god Sin.

11 von Soden, *The Ancient Orient,* p. 191.

A further expression of this sovereignty over the powers is in the depiction of the role of the gods in the Israelite worldview. This has been noted already in connection with Psalm 82 and Job 1:6, where the gods exercise influence under the presidency of Yahweh. In that connection, the famous narrative of 1 Kings 20:23-34 is instructive. The Arameans perceived that Yahweh was a god of the hills while their own national god belonged to the valleys or plains. The obvious battle plan then was to engage the Israelites on the plains where the Aramean god could prevail. This they did and were thoroughly beaten. The narrative is specific that their defeat was to demonstrate that the god of the hills is in fact Lord over the national gods (v. 28). Once again the folly of misplaced trust is proven.

In summary, the Lord of hosts as a name for Yahweh expresses an understanding of the Lord's sovereignty over the forces of earth and heaven, both benevolent and malevolent. In either case they remain under the hand of God. Malevolent forces are not to be feared unless they are trusted. There is also a rebel figure, the morning star or Satan, who seeks dominion over the host and perhaps leads a fallen portion of the host, but who remains answerable in some way to Yahweh.[12]

Such an understanding of the Lord of hosts helps to explain some quite ambiguous (at least to our western mindset) events in the Old Testament. One of the best known is the visit in 1 Samuel 28 by Saul to the witch of Endor, whom the beleaguered king asks to call up the dead prophet Samuel for a word from the Lord. The words of the prophet through the medium come true and Saul and his sons are killed in the ensuing battle with the Philistines. There is no hint in the narrative that the word so received is other than the genuine word of the Lord. In fact Beuken demonstrates in some detail how the construction of the oracle in verses 16-19 bears the hallmarks of a genuine oracle of the prophet.[13] This ought not to be taken as a licence to disregard the prohibition of Deuteronomy 18:9-14 against dealing in such matters. Saul's guilty conscience at doing so is expressed in his disguise (1 Sam. 28:8).[14] But the episode does shows us that God is sovereign *everywhere*, amongst both kings and hosts. As with the veneration of idols, the key issue over consulting diviners is that of allegiance: 'You must remain completely loyal to the Lord your God' (Deut. 18:13).

Saul also experienced those frightening episodes when an 'evil spirit from God' came upon him and departed only under the influence of David's harp playing (1 Sam. 18:10). In their retelling of the story, first century Jewish writers Josephus and

12 My comment avoids the debate over whether or not Satan and the morning star are to be identified with one another. See the summary of S.H.T. Page, *Powers of Evil, A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Baker Books/Apollos, 1995), pp. 38-39, who concludes that they are not. I think he and others of that persuasion take insufficient account of the concept of the host in the Babylonian context.

13 W.A.M. Beuken, 'The Prophet as "Hammer of Witches"', JSOT 6 (1978), pp. 4-6.

14 Note also the judgement of 1 Chr. 10:13.

Pseudo-Philo both omit 'from God'. They were the first of many whose Hellenised mindset made it difficult for them to cope with these ambiguities.[15]

A similar instance is evident in the vision of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:18-28, where the Lord is holding court with the heavenly host discussing how to get Ahab to attack Ramoth-Gilead so that he would be killed. The suggestion that a lying spirit be placed in the mouths of the prophets was taken up. In this way the evil lying behind the defeat and death of Ahab is perceived to be from the Lord himself.

The outlook implicit in the name the Lord of hosts, that God is supreme in earth and heaven, is seen also in the difficult statement that the Lord brings prosperity and 'creates woe' (Is. 45:7). It is noteworthy that the verb for 'create' is *bar'a*, famously used to describe the creative work of God in the early chapters of Genesis, and seldom used elsewhere except in Deutero-Isaiah with reference to the re-creative work of Yahweh in the new covenant. And the word for disaster, *ra`ah*, is sometimes here rendered 'evil', a translation that is unavoidable in other contexts, and is the same word used in the earlier quoted 1 Samuel 18:10. Even evil seems to be under the creative sovereignty of creator Yahweh.

By now it ought not to surprise us that in the Old Testament the author of both blessing and curse is almost always God himself.[16] This is most clearly illustrated in the blessings and curses of the covenant in Deuteronomy 27-29, which culminate in the reference to 'the blessings and the curses that I have set before you…' (Deut. 30:1). In the context of the covenant, both blessing and curse are to be understood as from God. If we read further in Deuteronomy 30, we come to the declaration by God to the people: 'I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction' (Deut. 30:15). The implication is that the manifestations of blessings and curses — life and death, prosperity and destruction — arise out of the manner in which people live within the covenant. In that context, curses are to be feared not because they subject the people to some malign influence, but because they represent the judgement of God (note Mal. 2:2). Even when a human utters a curse or a blessing on the people of the covenant it is normally as an agent expressing a reality that comes from God. The prescription of the test for an unfaithful wife in Numbers 5:11-31, whatever other issues it may raise, is explicit on this point.

Numbers 22, the story of Balaam, provides a further illustration of the Lord of hosts' sovereignty in the field of the curse. Balaam was asked to curse the Israelites but he found that he could not curse something that was blessed by Yahweh (Num.

15 Cited in G. Twelftree, *Christ Triumphant* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), p. 24. Many centuries after Pseudo-Philo and Josephus, Twelftree exhibits the same tendency when he cites the incident as an early example of exorcism.

16 On the topic of blessing and curse see the excellent article by M.J. Evans, '"A Plague on Both Your Houses": Cursing and Blessing Reviewed', *Vox Evangelica* 24 (1994), pp. 77-89.

22:12). He dared not 'go, as at other times, to look for omens' (Num. 24:1). We can take this a step further and note that the God of the covenant even transforms the curses of others into blessing (Deut. 23:5). While blessing and cursing is a common feature of Ancient Near Eastern Treaties, the reversal of the curse is unique to the covenant between the God of Israel and his people.[17] The Lord of hosts is sovereign in the area of blessing and cursing.

There are less spectacular examples of God's self-revelation through avenues that we would not have thought possible. The sailors in Jonah 1 are cases in point. They get halfway to an acknowledgement of the creator of the universe by the pagan art of lot-casting. The Masoretic Text has no difficulty with Daniel being the 'chief of the magicians' in the Babylonian empire (Dan. 4:9), implying that the difference between him and the other wise men is not necessarily one of genus. The Septuagint is careful to translate such texts in a way that portrays Daniel as a dispenser of Israelite wisdom and explicitly distinguishes him from his Babylonian rivals. In LXX Daniel 4:18, for instance, he is 'leader of the wise men'. This is another example of the tendency of later interpreters, noted above in connection with Saul's evil spirit, to rescue God from any complicity in evil or pagan influence. Incidentally, it has always impressed me that the first Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus were led to that position through the arts of the Magi. These ambiguities pose no problem to a people secure in the sovereignty of Yahweh over the host.

New Testament Material

There is little argument about the Old Testament perspective on evil and evil spirits as outlined above.[18] There may be more discussion on the matter of linking that perspective to the concept of Yahweh's sovereignty over the host, and on issues of theodicy so entailed. And there would be considerable dissension over how to relate all of this to the New Testament. The Christian tendency generally is to approach the Old Testament in the light of the New, or even in the light of the Greek worldview current at the time of the New Testament's formation and still influential in our scientific age. But such a process has failed to take sufficiently seriously the Old Testament witness to the Lord of hosts.

When we bring the understanding of the Lord of hosts just outlined to our reading of the New Testament, it becomes evident that a conversation between Yahweh and his host continues in the Scriptures of the new covenant. The puzzling comment in

17 H.M. Wolf, 'The Transcendent Nature of Covenant Curse Reversals', in A. Gileadi (ed.), *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), p. 320. See also J.M. Ford, 'Cursing and Blessing as Vehicles of Violence and Peace in Scripture', in C.J. Reid (ed.), *Peace in a Nuclear Age* (Washington DC: Catholic UP of America, 1986), p. 23, on the neutralising of curses in Scripture. Note the soteriological implications of this in Gal. 3:13-14.

18 For a recent survey, see A. McEwen, 'Demonology and the Occult in the Old Testament', *Vox Reformata* 59 (1994), pp. 3-15.

Luke 22:31 ('Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat…') is one such instance, which recalls the heavenly council of Yahweh and Satan and the 'sons of the gods' at the beginning of Job.[19] As in the times of Job, Satan still requires permission to act. The encounter between Satan and Jesus early in the ministry of Jesus, recounted in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 4.1-11; Lk. 4.1-13; and a summary in Mk 1.12-13), can also be considered in the same light. In Matthew's account the Job encounter is further recalled with the reference to attendant angels (Mt. 4:11 and Mk. 1:13).[20] At this point the Gospels, like Job, appear to presuppose the authority of Jesus over Satan. There was a reality in the temptations to which Jesus was subject but Satan himself was powerless to act against him.[21] We might see the same sort of dynamic in Jesus' perception of Satan in the tempting words of Peter (Mt. 16:23; Mk. 8:33). The temptation was real but the result of the struggle against Satan himself was a foregone conclusion.

This sort of understanding also helps to make sense of the difficult statements of 1 Timothy 1:20 and 1 Corinthians 5:5, where Satan is deployed to effect some salutary or redemptive purpose in the lives of individuals in the early church. Such is only possible if the final authority of God is presumed.

Satan therefore seems to function in the terms that his name implies, as the Adversary.[22] The word in Hebrew is *satan*, which simply means 'oppose'. At times, the angel of the Lord himself could express this opposition, as in Numbers 22:32, where the verbal form is used. Satan appears to be one figure in this heavenly assembly committed to the opposition position, and the leader of all others committed to that position (Compare Mk. 3:22). We might almost think of him as embodying the institution of defence lawyer. Since he has given himself over to opposition, then he becomes associated wholly with evil.[23] Isaiah 14:13-14 suggests that the nature of his rebellion was his desire to take sovereignty 'above the stars of God', to usurp the God of hosts. That he was not able to do so relegates him to an inferior position.

Guelich elaborates this point by noting in detail that whenever Jesus encounters Satan or his demons, his authority is not in question.[24]

> We find no hint of a struggle in these encounters. Jesus does not have to subdue the demons. Their behaviour from the outset shows them to recognize the hopelessness of their situation before him. They come as supplicants rather than

19 'Demand' is slightly too strong a translation of *exaiteo* in Lk. 22:31. NIV uses 'ask', which probably does not quite capture the intensifying prefix.

20 In Job 1:6, the words *benei 'elohim* ('sons of the gods') are translated as 'angels' by the Septuagint. Many English versions follow suit.

21 R.A. Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare: Jesus, Paul and Peretti', *Pneuma* 13 (1991), p. 40.

22 Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare', p. 37.

23 I use the personal pronoun for Satan, but appreciate Scott Peck's habit of always referring to the devil as 'it', on the grounds that only beings reflecting the image of God can properly be understood as personal. See M.S. Peck, *People of the Lie* (London: Rider, 1983), especially pp. 182-207.

24 Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare', pp. 40-42.

> negotiators…Jesus simply orders the demons to leave the victim. This picture stands in stark contrast to the exorcisms of the world of antiquity which often reflected a power struggle between the demon and the exorcist.[25]

Exorcisms in the Gospels, then, take place as demonstrations of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, not as part of a spiritual battle on the outcome of which the Kingdom is somehow dependent.[26]

Speaking of the Kingdom, Beasley-Murray has argued in detail that the concept of the Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Gospels is inherent in the Old Testament.[27] I suggest that Jesus' demonstration of the Kingdom of God is partly a demonstration of the sovereignty of Yahweh over the host, and it is in those terms that his encounters with demonic forces should be understood.[28] It is no accident that Isaiah was so formative in Jesus' understanding of himself and of the agenda of the Kingdom (Lk. 4:18-19). For it is in Isaiah, set as it is against the Babylonian backdrop, that the interaction between Yahweh and the host is most evident. So it is there that the dynamics of the Kingdom have already begun to be worked out.[29]

When it comes to Paul, the same reality of the host and the same absolute confidence in the sovereignty of the Lord over the host is evident. As we have noted, Paul is even able to speak of handing believers over to Satan as a disciplinary measure. Whereas the Synoptics use the terminology of angels and demons to describe this sphere of Christ's lordship, Paul speaks of principalities and powers and occasionally *stoicheia*, however that word may best be translated.[30] These heavenly powers are expressed in different ways (compare 1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 2:10 and 2:20), yet in each instance the rule of Christ over them is assured.[31] The final verses of Romans 8 illustrate in a wonderful way that 'neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things at hand nor things about to be nor heights nor depths nor anything else in cre-

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25 Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare', p. 40. He footnotes Mk. 1:23-18; 5:1-20.

26 Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare', p. 39. Note also G.H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist* (Peabody, MT: Hendrickson, 1993), p. 173: 'Jesus stands out in his era as one who not only relied on his own resources for success in exorcism, but at the same time claimed that in them God himself was in action and that that action was the coming of God's eschatological kingdom.'

27 G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Paternoster, 1986), pp. 3-70. Note also G.E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), as cited in Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare', p. 35.

28 Guelich,'Spiritual Warfare', p. 36, hints at this possibility in his exposition but does not develop it.

29 For more on this point, see Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare', p. 36. Not entirely incidentally, it is also in Deutero-Isaiah's expressions of hope that we confront in acute ways the 'already but not yet' of the sovereignty of God, which is a feature of the Kingdom in the Gospels.

30 See the extensive exposition on the subject of *stoicheia* by W. Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 67-96.

31 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, p. 11. This volume is the first of Wink's trilogy on the subject, all of which are germane to a much fuller discussion of the present topic. See also *Unmasking the Powers* ((Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) and *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). Note also the comments of T.D. Pratt, 'The Need to Dialogue: A Review of the Debate on the Controversy of Signs, Wonders, Miracles and Spiritual Warfare Raised in the Literature of the Third Wave Movement', *Pneuma* 13 (1991), pp. 27-29.

ation is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:38-39, my translation). Whether loyal or rebellious, all things are under Christ's lordship and subject to the purposes of the Lord of hosts. And Christ delivers the kingdom to God by virtue of his ascendancy over all of these things (1 Cor. 15:24).[32] This is the overarching reality.

Allegiance and the Covenant

To round out these comments on the biblical material, I return to the question of the covenant, which was briefly discussed with respect to the nature of cursing. There it was suggested that, because of the supremacy of Yahweh over the host, those who were part of the covenant could not be forcibly subject to the effects of curses. In a similar vein, we have noted that the idols exercised their malign influence only when they were the object of misplaced trust. We also saw Isaiah employ a genre that has been identified as the idol parody, likewise evident in such places as Psalm 115 and Jeremiah 10:2-5.[33]

These parodies were part of a wider strategy designed to prevent God's people placing trust in the gods of other nations they encountered, a strategy evident in various forms. The incident at Ai is one of a number of cases in point. The fear of the Israelites on their defeat was that it was a harbinger of the defeat of the Lord's name (Josh. 7:9), with the implication that another national god had proved to be as powerful. In fact it was the sin of Achan, not the weakness of God as feared, that had brought defeat (Josh. 7:20). Later Jeremiah perceived the same principle of allegiance when he urged his people not to fear the things that the nations fear (Jer. 10:5).

It has to be acknowledged that the Old Testament Scriptures reflect a tension over whether other gods ought not to be feared because they are non-existent or because they are powerless before Yahweh. Note, for instance, the complexities involved in interpreting Deut. 32:7-9 and 15-17. The Greek tradition of verse 8 reads 'according to the number of the gods' (so NRSV), whereas the Masoretic Text reads 'according to the number of the sons of Israel' (so NIV).[34] Verse 17 on the one hand contrasts God with demons and on the other parallels demons with gods.[35] The tension, writ particularly large in these verses, lies partly in an interweaving of different traditions and partly in the irrelevance of the distinction to the Hebrew writers. The point of this paper is that the powerlessness of other gods ought not to be devalued, especially in the face of the absolute sovereignty of

32 Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare', p. 48.

33 See W.M.W. Roth, 'For Life He Appeals to Death (Wis. 13:18), A Study of Old Testament Idol Parodies', *CBQ* 37 (1975), pp. 21-47. See also D. Greenlee, 'Territorial Spirits Reconsidered', *Missiology* 22 (1994), p. 509. Greenlee's collection of texts forms the basis of my discussion at this point.

34 Hayman, 'Monotheism', p. 6, reads the Greek as 'original'.

35 McEwen, 'Demonology', p. 5, says these verses 'bear witness to the reality of spiritual beings to whom the Israelites gave false worship'.

God for those who are within the covenant.

This is not at all the same thing as saying that other gods or heavenly beings cease to exist if we cease to believe in them. However, they do lose their power when they lose their relevance. Using a number of modern case studies Greenlee makes a similar point from a missiological perspective.

> …spirits claiming a territorial domain have lost their control through military conquest, political changes, immigration, the building of a canal, the imposition of colonial government structures, and land reform, *all with the clear link to cessation of veneration of the spirit*.[36]

Greenlee begins his article with a call to avoid 'the confusion of ontological reality —what the Bible declares as "really real" — with phenomenological reality — that which is *perceived* by people to be real'.[37] At this point he is less helpful than his subsequent marshalling of the material in illustration of the point. For in much of the biblical material it is not the ontological reality of the host that is in question, but rather the scope of its influence. Hence again the importance of remaining within the provisions of the covenant, where the sovereignty of the Lord of hosts may be experienced.

This becomes more evident when we move into the New Testament. It is clear that the existence of the host is not in question for the New Testament writers. But, notwithstanding the perception of Guelich that Jesus never had to struggle with demonic powers, there were times when his disciples did (Mt. 17:14-21; Mk. 9:14-32; Lk. 9:37-43). The call also goes out in Ephesians 6:11 and James 4:7 to take a stand against the devil, with the implications of struggle entailed in such a stand (Note also 2 Cor. 10:4).

To employ again the principle that Old Testament understanding can help in New Testament interpretation, it is useful to ask if the concept of the covenant and the related issue of allegiance can be of assistance in interpreting the New Testament perspective on encounters with the demonic. I suggest that the answer is 'yes'. Jesus' response to his disciples' struggle with the epileptic boy was a sense of despair at the level of their belief (Mk. 9:19). Romans 8, which culminates in the hymn to the Lord of hosts already mentioned, begins with the assertion of freedom from judgement to those who are 'in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8:1). In connection with the handing over of individuals to Satan (1 Cor. 5:5 and 1 Tim. 1:19b-20) Marshall makes the point that,

> To belong to the community of faith, and thus be incorporated into Christ, is to enjoy protection from the ravages of Satan. To be expelled from the community is to forfeit that protection and be "handed over" (…cf. Rom. 1:24, 26, 28) to the realm controlled by Satan…(This) "handing over" is a matter of the withdrawing of God's protective hand…so that unrepentant malefactors experience the full consequences of the choice they have already made to "hand themselves

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36 Greenlee, 'Territorial Spirits', p. 512. The context of Greenlee's remarks is his concern that 'recent discussion of "territorial spirits" has given them more "territory" than they deserve…' (p. 507).

37 Greenlee, 'Territorial Spirits', p. 507.

over" to sin (…Eph. 4:19).[38]

Similarly the writer to the Colossian Christians, in declaring among other things their freedom from the 'worship of angels' (Col. 2:18), reminds the Colossians that Christ 'disarmed the rulers and authorities' (Col. 2.15) and that they 'have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority' (Col. 2.10).

Even Ephesians 6:10-20, the manifesto of modern proponents of spiritual warfare, must be read in the light of the first two chapters of the epistle, which affirm the dominion of Christ in 'the heavenlies' (*ouranioi*, Eph. 1:20. See also 1:10).[39] Believers also occupy that position of authority with Christ (Eph. 2:6), as a result of which they are 'members of the household of God' (Eph. 2:19). Here the Old Testament language of covenant, implicit in the references above, reverberates loudly. Such struggles as there are with principalities and powers must be understood in the light of Christian membership of the covenant.[40]

At this point some tension may be felt between the theory I am expounding and empirical experience. Evil and Satan continue to exert considerable influence on people who are seeking to dwell within the covenant. I do not want to understate that power or underestimate the cost of engaging it. But the context within which that engagement takes place is of God's sovereignty on earth and in heaven and in the inexplicable shadowland where earth and heaven meet.[41] At the same time, by referring to the covenant I do not wish to imply that God has somehow abandoned the rest of his world. The discovery and application of his sovereignty 'in earth as it is in heaven' is a task that the church has to be about. Again, the presupposition of that task is the sovereignty of God.

So What?

But does any of this matter, or am I simply splitting hairs to no particular purpose? I believe it does matter. My concern with the topic is that the church in New Zealand, particularly in its more charismatic and evangelical expressions, is in danger of surrendering the doctrine of the Lord's sovereignty in favour of what has been well described as 'a paranoid world-view which militates against

38 C.D. Marshall, *Classed with Criminals* (unpublished MA (Peace Studies) thesis: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, 1995), pp. 127-28.

39 See C.E. Arnold, *Ephesians, Power and Magic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 103. I note with Arnold that Eph. 6:10-20 'is the only place in the Pauline corpus where believers are explicitly called upon to struggle against the "principalities and powers"'. Part of Arnold's thesis is that the emphasis in Ephesians arises from the fact that Paul is applying the gospel to Ephesus as a centre for magical practices (pp. 14-28, 103-22).

40 D. Prince, *Blessing or Curse, You Can Choose!* (Old Tapper, NJ: Chosen Books, 1990), p. 125, rightly comments that 'included in the covenant is the right to invoke God's protection against curses that proceed from any external source'.

41 Events of Daniel 10 suggest that Yahweh's supremacy is assured but it has not been without a struggle, something of which can be experienced by those on earth. But this is not the same thing as a dualistic tug of war between good and evil. See T. Longman and D.G. Reid, *God is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 82, and J.E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (Waco: Word, 1989), pp. 312-14.

rational and common-sense interpretations of reality'.[42] There is a real need for a detailed application of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in today's theological landscape. The concern of this article has been to propose a biblical starting point for such an application, and there is space now only to point to several key areas of applicability. Each one instances thinking which, when applied in inappropriate contexts or beyond the bounds envisaged by its advocates, demonstrates a tendency towards paranoia and needs to heed the corrective brought by an appreciation of the Lord of hosts.

The first is in the call for a revamped worldview by what has been called Third Wave Theology. The most well known architect of this theology has been Peter Wagner with important contributions from Charles Kraft, Don Williams and John White. The ideas have principally been mediated to this country through John Wimber and Kevin Springer.[43] The 'power encounter theology' they espouse can give rise to a naivety about the nature of principalities and powers, and I believe is not well suited to forming a theology of evil.

A second concern is the prevalence of spiritual warfare imagery, which has been spawned by power encounter theology. There is no doubt that warfare is a rich metaphor in our understanding of the nature of the world and God's involvement in it. But there is danger when this metaphor is adopted as a movement that informs everything that we do[44]; distortions inevitably follow. One such is a loss of confidence in the covenant faithfulness of God. Too often we try to rescue people from evil influences through some form of spiritual warfare, when the prior need is for them to exercise faith in the risen Lord who has all things under his feet (Eph. 1:22).

A third concern is with some views on blessing and cursing.[45] Often what are diagnosed as curses are psychological factors which need to be addressed at a psychological level. Sometimes they are expressions of the self-fulfilling power of words at

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42 A. Walker, 'The Devil You Think You Know: Demonology and the Charismatic Movement', in T. Smail, A. Walker and N. Wright, *Charismatic Renewal* (London: SPCK, 1995), p. 89. Walker's essay was a major stimulus to my thinking on this topic, as he encapsulates so many ideas that I have long felt but been unable to articulate. Note, incidentally, Walker's perspective that this paranoia owes little to classical pentecostalism, which 'kept (demons) firmly under the bed and firmly under control. There has been little interest or fascination in the habits, habitat or *haute couture* of evil spirits.' A glance through S.H. Frodsham, *Smith Wigglesworth, Apostle of Faith* (Springfield MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1948) confirms this. Wigglesworth evinces a lively sense of the activity of the devil, of conversion as being 'set free from bondage', occasional explicit release from evil spirits, and above all an unbounded optimism in the sovereignty of Jesus.

43 A number of Wagner books could be footnoted. For our present purposes we note only C.P. Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit: Encountering the Power of Signs and Wonders* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1988). See also J. Wimber and K. Springer, *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), and *Power Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). For details of other authors and an excellent summary of the issues, see the article cited above by T.D. Pratt, pp. 7-32.

44 A point well made by Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare', p. 34.

45 Note for example Prince, *Blessing or Curse*.

critical stages in the formation of a person's psychological make-up. Too often the early diagnosis of a curse circumvents a more full-orbed analysis of some evil situation. Perhaps most important of all, much curse theology fails to appreciate the role of the covenant with respect to curses.

A fourth concern is closely linked, namely the development of elaborate demonologies to explain the power of evil in people's lives. Where demons are diagnosed, these are cast out and the problem ought to be fixed. Sometimes that is the case. At other times it is not the case, although demonic terminology is effectual in that it allows people to recognize and confront things in themselves. But on occasions an incorrect diagnosis leads to a prescribed cure which is inappropriate if not harmful.[46] Often elaborately ordered demonologies are presented, despite the fact that neither the Old nor the New Testament is interested in such naming and ordering of spirits. It is enough for the scriptural authors that the Lord is sovereign over the host.[47] Again, an inadequate appreciation of the nature of evil is another outcome of too much credit being given to demons.[48] The world and the flesh do not enter into the equation, with the result that personal responsibility can be evaded.

My final question in the light of the sovereignty of the Lord of hosts is with the understanding of territorial spirits. This has been touched on lightly in our earlier discussion of Greenlee's article. Too often the biblical bases presented in support of the idea are inadequately exegeted.[49] The results are not dissimilar to those arising out of misunderstanding curses and mobilising elab-

46 G. Collins, 'Psychological Observations on Demonism', in J.W. Montgomery (ed.), *Demon Possession* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1976), p. 246, writes, 'There is abundant evidence from studies in perceptual psychology that people see and act in accordance with the expectation of those around them. If someone convinces me I am demon possessed, unconsciously I might begin to experience the symptoms and show the behaviours which fit the diagnosis. In like manner, if I assume someone else is possessed, I may begin looking for symptoms to prove my hypothesis. It is easy to develop a demonology mind-set in which almost everything we see or do is attributed to the devil.' Cited and quoted in M. Brimblecombe, 'Demons & Deliverance' (unpublished paper, 1989?), p. 5.

47 Beuken, 'The Prophet as "Hammer of Witches"', pp. 6-11, in a careful analysis of 1 Sam. 28:8-14, reinforces this point by demonstrating that the medium loses the initiative to Samuel in the encounter with Saul, and that the narrative in fact never sees an apparition.

48 See N. Wright, *The Fair Face of Evil* (London: Marshall & Pickering, 1989), pp. 42 and 67. If God and the world he created are ordered and quantifiable and describable, then the world of evil is none of those things. Orderly ranks of demons is an unlikely scenario in such a world. Note also the extraordinary list of demons in the Hammonds' *Pigs in the Parlour*, as cited in Guelich, 'Spiritual Warfare', pp. 28-29. Guelich observes that 'Many of these terms fall within the Pauline category of "works of the flesh" (Gal. 5:19-21). This list would be humorous if the authors were not serious. A list as complex as this shows the absurdity of some demonological schemes. This one leaves no room for personal responsibility. It reduces everything to dualism.'

49 Warner's treatment of the story in 1 Kgs. 20:23-34 is a case in point. T.M. Warner, *Spiritual Warfare* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), pp. 34-36, reduces the question to power encounter terms in saying 'the real issue was between God and the gods, not just between the people in the nation of Israel and the people in the other nations. This is why battles were always won or lost on the basis of spiritual power, not military power.' The issue was as much one of allegiance to the God of hill and plain.

orate demonologies.

Prospects

I do not wish to deny the validity or effectiveness of any of the above approaches. We are in debt to their main proponents for a needed rebellion against the western rationalistic dualism that enslaves us. But their cumulative effect can blind us to other truths if we are not prepared to critique them, and this article is offered as a start in that process. There are several issues raised but not addressed herein which would need to be part of such an on-going critique:

1. Further work on issues of theodicy with respect to the understanding of the sovereignty of God presented herein. The biblical understanding of the covenant and the call for allegiance may point the way here.

2. More analysis of the nature of the host or principalities and powers in our own day. In this connection Hiebert's concept of 'the excluded middle' could provide a way ahead.[50] He is concerned to bridge the gap created by western dualism between this-worldly and other-worldly spheres. An application of Hiebert's study to the Maori understanding of the spirit realm could also well be worthwhile.

3. Further wrestling with the concept of evil in the light of the biblical material on the Lord of hosts. Something that is by its nature chaotic and anarchic cannot ultimately be explained, but it would be useful to bring this perspective to bear on the problem.

Conclusion

In the meantime, on the grounds that 'neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things at hand nor things about to be nor heights nor depths nor anything else in creation is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:38-39), I prefer sovereign God to paranoid universe.

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50 P.G. Hiebert, 'The Flaw of the Excluded Middle', *Missiology* 10 (1982), pp. 35-47, reprinted in P.G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp. 189-201. For an application of the concept in the Western context see R.J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).