

The spirit world awareness in the New Testament – A missiological challenge

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ABSTRACT

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The idea of power concepts and power encounters is not strange to biblical revelation as it is often assumed. This impact of the invisible world onto the material world does not seem to have imposed a problem to the early readers of the New Testament. The spirit world of the New Testament, which is amazingly akin to the African situation (or Third World), needs our theological appreciation for the modern day Church to be in a position to effectively carry its missiological function in the world, especially in Africa.

1 STATEMENT OF ARGUMENT

The spirit world is one area that has been regrettably overlooked by traditional Christian theology. Consequently, (western) missionaries operating in spirit- or experience-orientated communities in the Two-Thirds World countries have acutely become aware of the inadequate preparation for the socio-spiritual conditions in host countries. For many of them the mission field has to become “a field of learning” (Walls 1991:150).

Owing to the limitations of western worldview (Yoder 1972:162; Dyrnes 1992:17f), traditional theology has been incapable to point out that the invisible reality forms the cosmic backdrop of the mission and ministry of Jesus in the New Testament. In the words of Ladd (1974: 53): “The demonic is absolutely essential in understanding Jesus’ interpretation of the picture of sin and of man’s need for the kingdom of God”. Belief in the devil and his forces is absolutely essential to the biblical teaching concerning sin, evil and the doctrine of salvation (Lloyd-Jones 1977:50).

Though some scholars may contend that the whole debate on powers is rather a recent one, Malina et al (1994:14) argue that ancient people regarded the invisible world as the real one, because everything was controlled from there (see also Lloyd-Jones 1977:44). This is the reason why people were forever arguing about which gods ruled the invisible world. For Malina et al the New Testament is in no doubt

about the matter: "God is in charge of everything and everyone" (Rev 4).

It is against this background of the influence of spirits in the world that Professor James Stewart, back in 1951, made a plea in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* for a recovery of the dimension of the cosmic battle in our theology (cf Green 1981:93). Stewart maintains that the spirit world is nowhere more important than in the understanding of the meaning of the cross of Christ.

2 A MISSING PARADIGM

Euro-American theology is, as can be anticipated, a product of the ethnocentricism of the western worldview, a tradition which seeks "to give a critical, rational account of faith using the tools of a discipline that can offer the most exact form of knowledge known to our culture" (Dyrness 1992:18).

Undoubtedly, the cognitive, analytical and critical approach to reality has resulted in "theological impotence" (Mbiti 1976) which Biyo labels as "too abstract and too academic ... on the whole elitist (quoted in Tienou 1990:73). Kraft (1989:87) reckons that "whereas most of the rest of the world is primarily concerned with how to deal with the spirit and human worlds, we in the west are almost exclusively concerned with how to conquer and manipulate the material world". Silviso (1994:103-104) is forthright in his criticism of western worldview: The axiom seems to be, "If you can't prove its existence scientifically, it doesn't exist". This, Silviso attributes to the onslaught of the Enlightenment with its resultant theological presuppositions (see also Bosch 1991:262f; Mostert 1998:146f).

This is aptly illustrated in the experience of Donald Jacobs, a Mennonite missionary, who, in the process of doing missionary work in east Africa, felt that many of his Enlightenment-rooted presuppositions were challenged by his mission context. In his paper, *My Pilgrimage in Mission*, he confesses: "I distrusted any Christian movement that allowed for subjective learning" (Jacobs 1992:147). To this end Kraft (1989:88) concludes that westerners demonstrate a view that virtually ignores the spirit world, even in their theology. Mbiti (1976:7f) illustrates this by telling a story (fiction) of an African who had gone to western institutions of learning to study theology. When he came back he found out that, although he had acquired a PhD degree in theology, he could not deal with a demonised person because in his education all demon possession had been demythologised.

The unfortunate outcome of the western exported Christianity in Africa has been that there is a perception, whether rightly or wrongly,

that Christianity is powerless so that even Christians in the Two-Thirds World often go to diviners and spirit doctors to have their needs met (Kraft 1995:126). In spite of what is taught in churches, some Christians in the Two-Thirds World resort to ecclesiastically unaccepted, clandestine activities in their quest for their health, security and power needs to be met (Kraft 1995:16f).

Pomerville (1985:75) ascribes the African religious dilemma to the failure by western theologians “to provide a biblical worldview regarding the spirit world”. Pomerville sums this up as a lack of fidelity to biblical revelation; a lack of articulation and application of the very supernaturalistic-orientated New Testament view of life.

Yet other scholars, like Burgess (1984:3), believe that the reason why any teaching or doctrine about the Spirit or spirits has been exiled to the periphery of theological training, it is because it is a sphere that is believed to belong to extremists and enthusiasts. Undoubtedly, many horrendous activities have been performed in the name of spiritual warfare and exorcism. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that, if the church is reluctant and timid to engage the evil forces, total salvation, as envisaged, taught and practised by Christ in the New Testament, will remain far-fetched.

3 THE SPIRIT WORLD: A SURVEY OF OLD TESTAMENT AND INTER-TESTAMENTAL SCHOLARSHIP

The Bible clearly presents a world where spiritual powers exist, in which struggles and tensions between good and evil are in focus (Kraft 1995:ix). The God of the Bible is vividly a God of power, often revealing himself through “power encounters” with the “wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age” (Eph 6:12 - see Wagner 1996).

According to Verkuyl (1978:95) in what he calls a “motif of antagonism”, we see Yahweh’s powerful wrestling against those powers and forces which oppose his liberating and gracious authority. In Verkuyl’s view the whole Old Testament (and the New Testament as well) is filled with descriptions of how Yahweh-Adonai, the covenant God of Israel, is waging war against those forces which try to thwart and subvert his plans for his creation. He battles against those false gods and human-made idols. In the book of Deuteronomy, God fights against magic and astrology. The revelation of the Old Testament “burns with the feverish desire to defeat these opposing powers” (Verkuyl 1978:95), so that the glory of Yahweh-Adonai shall be revealed among all peoples.

Even though Satan appears to occupy a prominent role in the New Testament, Pagels (1995:11) admits that in the Old Testament Satan is a very minor figure, mentioned explicitly in only three passages, namely, in the prologue of Job, where Satan, appearing before God, disputes Job's integrity and urges God to test him. Secondly, Satan is mentioned briefly in Zechariah 3:1-12 in a vision in which he is presented as the accuser of a high priest named Joshua. Thirdly, in I Chronicles 21:1 Satan is seen as inciting king David to take census in Israel.

Pagels (1995:xvi), in her observation, further reveals that while angels often appear in the Hebrew Bible, Satan, along with other fallen angels or demonic beings, is virtually absent. Contrary to this perception, some church fathers held a view that Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 should be taken as information that gives a clue to the primordial history of Satan (Page 1995:38f). Basing his argument on verses like Isaiah 24:21, Otis (1997:182) contends that demonic princes (archons) are linked to human counterparts - evil kings, priests and governors, who serve as their earthly representatives. Presumably the powers' sin involved their influence upon the kings who are punished with them (Page 1995:60).

Some scholars on powers believe that the princes in Daniel (10:13, 20-21; 12:1) need a revisit in our desire to appropriately engage territorial spirits. Page (1995:63) believes that the fact that Daniel's three-week fast coincides with the three-week struggle between the unnamed angel and the prince of Persia demonstrates a relationship between human intercession and what happens on a higher plane. Daniel's prayers appear to influence angels who play a significant role in shaping destinies of nations (Otis 1997:182; Page 1995:60). Page (1995:64) is therefore persuaded that the portrayal of the princes of the nations in Daniel reveals that the unfolding of human history is not determined solely by the decisions made by human beings, for there is an unseen dimension of reality that must be taken into account. Obviously, Page contends, there are malevolent forces in the universe that exercise a baneful influence in the socio-political realm, especially where the people of God are concerned. This conviction grew more vividly in post-exilic Judaism perhaps due to Zoroastrian influence (Green 1981:24; Hume 1959:211). Wagner (1996) and others of the power encounter school, strongly believe that the church ought to audaciously engage the evil forces that influence the direction and affairs of nations today.

As for the development of the idea of a personal devil it had to gradually emerge particularly during the inter-testamental period. The dreadful suffering the Jews went through during the period of Syrian

denomination in the second century BC under Antiochus Epiphanes, led to the reflection on the superhuman forces behind the atrocities and to the conviction that the malevolent forces could be overcome only through divine intervention (cf Page 1995:88). This sort of thinking appears to underlie the demonological teaching we find in both the Jewish apocalyptic literature and the New Testament. In the New Testament the story of Jesus is told against the backdrop of the satanic forces. All the evangelists depict Jesus as being in constant conflict with Satan and demons.

Most scholars seem to argue that the group that contributed largely to our present understanding of the devil/Satan and his cohorts were the Essenes. Prominent among these scholars are Rofé (1988), Koester (1980) and Pagels (1995). These passionate sectarians saw the foreign occupation of Palestine as evidence that the forces of evil had taken over the world and, in the forms of Satan or the prince of darkness, infiltrated and taken captive God's own people, turning most of them into allies of the evil one (Pagels 1995:57). The Essenes saw themselves involved in the war of the "sons of light" against the "sons of darkness". Their writings show knowledge of an entire host of evil spirits and angels. The angels are divided into two hostile armies (Freyne 1980:108). On one hand we find the hosts of the angels led by the "prince of light" or the "spirit of truth" (Page 1995:238). Individual angels are often named, such as Michael, and it is assumed that the angelic army is hierarchically structured. Opposed to these angels is the "angel of darkness" (generally called Belial, but also the angel of enmity - Hebrew *mastema*, Greek *diabolos*) and his host. Belial is both the enemy of God and the tempter of the human race. His angels or spirits are called "spirits of wickedness" or "spirits of error". They make people to sin and they cause evil actions to those who belong to the realm of Belial. Sometimes Belial and his angels also appear as angels of punishment.

The proliferation of the concept of the devil and the demons in inter-testamental Judaism has several distinct theological implications (cf Ladd 1974:50). According to this concept, evil is not imposed upon the human race by God, neither is it wicked fate but it has its origin in personality. This evil, Ladd continues, is not "a disorganised, chaotic conflict of powers as in animism, but is under the direction of a single will whose purpose is to frustrate the will of God". The orchestration and direction of the powers of evil is masterminded by Satan whose "adversarial role" (Pagels 1995:39) is to "oppose the redemptive purpose of God" (Ladd 1974:50).

It is clear, therefore, that Christianity took over many elements of the apocalyptic expectations and teachings which the Essenes, in the

tradition of Hasidim, had cultivated and further developed during the Hellenistic period.

4 JESUS AND THE POWERS

Such a world view in first century Palestine was not contradicted by Jesus and the apostles, but affirmed to be true (Greig and Springer 1993:415) and this background of satanic evil, in Ladd's (1974:51) view, provides the cosmic backdrop for the mission of Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom of God.

In his earthly sojourn, Christ's ministry was characterised and surrounded by the activities of spirit beings – "then the devil left him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to him" (Math 4:11). In both the Old and New Testaments, God's angels are depicted as creatures, holy and uncorrupted spirits in original essence, yet endowed with free will, and therefore not necessarily impervious to temptation and sin (cf Morris 1962). Angels, who are sometimes called spirits (see Heb 1:14), are invisible, supernatural and powerful (cf Guthrie 1981:149). An angel is seen as both a messenger of God and as a minister to human persons (cf Morris 1962:38). Angels are involved in special missions of communication to people, e g Zacharias (Lk 1:11-20), Mary (Lk 1:26-38). God's throne is surrounded by countless myriads of angels (Heb 12:22; Rev 5:11).

On several occasions Christ received the ministry of angels. They announced his conception and birth and ministered to him in his 40-day fast. An angel strengthened him when he prayed in Gethsemane. These ministering spirits announced his resurrection and were present at his ascension into heaven. Thereafter, spirit messengers continued ministering to Christ's servants on earth.

But Guthrie (1981:149) argues that, if the good angels are portrayed as powerful agencies for carrying out God's will, then there is also a well orchestrated army of evil agencies who counterfeit the activities of those good angels. Unlike the debate on angels which is not vigorous, any mention of the influence of wicked spirits on the physical realm draws skepticism and criticism from a broad range of theological thinkers.

The synoptic gospels, though not attempting to discuss the origin of Satan and demons, are full of the exorcisms of demonised people. Investigation in regard to demon possession reveals that the host of wicked agencies is made up of bodiless spirits (Math 12:43-45), who seek to enter human or animal bodies (Mk 5:12) and they are intrinsically wicked, unclean and vicious (Math 10:1 - Chafer 1919:59-60). In the synoptics, again, Satan, who is in charge of the kingdom of dark-

ness, is shown as a powerful agency of evil, in whom is concentrated intense opposition to the mission of Jesus. Guthrie (1981:127) rightly observes, though, that Satan is never absolute in his power because in whatever demands he makes, he can never exceed the boundaries set for him by God. It stands to reason therefore, that even demons, no matter how powerful they may seem to be, have no absolute power as well.

In his endeavour to describe the character and tendencies of the powers, Berkhof (1962:11) has noted that, even though the powers are not absolute, they are personal spiritual beings. In the first century pagan magicians believed also in personal spirits that bore names. The spirits could be called upon to appear or perform certain tasks. The spirits were greatly feared by common people of the Hellenistic world of the first century (Kraft 1995:44). As it was in the first-century Palestine, the African world view presupposes a world that is inhabited by various spirits that affect humans on a daily basis (cf Mugambi 1989:136f). Of these spirit activities in Africa “the most perplexing area of all is probably that of spirit possession” (Hastings 1976:66).

Wink (1984:104), instead, sees powers as inner dimension of the material. In his view, none of the spiritual realities have existence independent of their material counterpart. Wink (1984:82) believes that the New Testament prefers to speak of powers only in their concretions, their structural inertia, their physical embodiments in history. Wink (1986) carries his argument further by describing the devil as a “collective symbolisation of evil”... “the collective weight of human falleness”. Though his argument has considerable force, it cannot be conclusive. There is a general congruence on the incarnating nature of the spirits but not to the extent whereby the powers are completely subsumed or identified with institutional structures. The consciousness of spirits and magic on the part of the first readers of the New Testament suggests that spirits were construed as personal and powerful. For Kraft (1995:60), belief in personal demons and a keen interest in supernatural power were characteristic of the first century. It is perhaps for this reason that “mainstream” Christianity needs to dialogue more vigorously with the spirit-conscious African Traditional Religion (Shorter 1973:5f).

In the New Testament the conflict between the forces of God and those of Satan are in constant focus. Jesus believed in the reality of demonic forces as personalities in their own right. The power of the kingdom of God became obvious as Jesus defeated the spiritual enemies at work in the world (Kraft 1995:61).

The New Testament takes the devil seriously. Satan occupies a prominent position in the New Testament as the chief enemy of Christ.

His importance is shown by the variety of titles given to him. In the New Testament these include “the enemy”, “Beelzebub”, “the god of this world”, “tempter”, “the accuser”, “the evil one”, “the ruler of the world” and “the prince of demons”.

The public ministry of Jesus began with “an eyeball-to-eyeball” power encounter with Satan himself in his temptation in the wilderness (Wagner 1996:121). The confrontation with the powers continued throughout the life of Jesus on earth. This intense spiritual conflict appears in essentially similar form in all the major writings of the New Testament (Guthrie 1981:127).

The important feature of the confrontation between Jesus and demonic forces is the spontaneous way in which they at once recognise the dignity and the power of Jesus (Guthrie 1981:129). Jesus would not permit the demons to speak because “they knew him” (Mk 1:34). With authority Jesus rebuked and drove out the unclean spirits. While the pagan and Jewish magicians tried to exorcise demons by incantations and other religious rites (cf Greig and Springer 1993:417). Jesus needed only his word of command (Math 8:16). In his gracious majesty, Jesus also gave his disciples authority to cast out demons.

The casting out of evil spirits by just a commanding word was not an easy task. The opponents of Jesus recognised both that he did this and also that it required a power greater than human. They therefore attributed the exorcisms to Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Math 12:24). The answer that Jesus gave was a dramatic one: “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Math 12:28).

The implied meaning is that the exorcism of demons is proof that the *basileia* of God has come among people and is at work among them (Ladd 1959:47). The exorcising of demons is itself a work of the kingdom of God. It is evidence enough that the dynamic rule of God in Christ has invaded the evil *aeon* (Ladd 1959:49; Wagner 1996:124f). The theology of the kingdom of God is essentially one of conflict and conquest over the kingdom of Satan (Ladd 1974:51).

Other lessons gleaned from the Beelzebub controversy is that it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that demons are driven out. In his mission declaration statement Jesus claimed, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...” (Lk 4:18). In the Beelzebub controversy the importance of Pentecost is realised because it marked the filling of Christ’s followers with the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). The signs and wonders done by the Spirit-filled apostles of Christ include the casting out of evil spirits, healing the sick and raising the dead.

Another important thing we learn in the Beelzebub controversy is that Satan is a defeated foe - he is bound. According to Ladd (1959:48) "the binding of Satan means that the coming of Christ, his presence on earth, the exercise of his power among men, has accomplished a defeat of Satan so that his power is broken". Page (1995:106) perceives the analogy of the tying up or the overpowering of the strong man (see Lk 11:21-22) as naturally suggesting that the exorcisms were preceded by a decisive victory over Satan. Some say this victory came in the temptation of Jesus in the desert, which came after his investiture at his baptism and prior to his ministry. Others suggest that the exorcisms themselves constitute the occasion of Satan's defeat (Page 1995: 106-107).

Page (1995:107) comes to a conclusion that, regardless of whether it alludes to the temptation in the desert, the parable of the strongman definitely implies that during his earthly ministry, Jesus "vanquished Satan in some way albeit not fully comprehensible in human experience". The parable suggests that Satan suffered an unprecedented defeat at the hands of Jesus. Ladd (1959:48) is quite categorical in his conviction of Satan's defeat: "Satan is bound". Prabhu (1994:158) adds: "Satan's rule has ended". Green (1981:49) understands the binding of Satan as meaning that the devil has no rightful authority over human beings: he is simply a usurper and his power is durbed. According to Green the devil cannot prevent, though he can hinder the spread of the gospel; he cannot prevent, though he can hinder the ultimate victory of God.

There is general agreement among scholars that the cross of Jesus was the climatic experience of the cosmic conflict. Shenk (1983:210) believes that the way to the realisation of the kingdom is through the cross. According to Ridderbos (1962:171), "as long as Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection has not become a fact, the kingdom of heaven can only very partially be realised". It is in the shame and faux pas of the cross that God's kingdom is inaugurated.

At the cross of Christ the kingdom of Satan was dealt a fatal wound (see Col 2:15), because it is there where a great power was released (Wimber and Springer 1992:30).

5 THE EARLY CHURCH CONFRONTING THE POWERS

The coming of the Holy Spirit signalled a new era in the people's struggle with the forces of darkness. What the disciples had seen and experienced in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, they determined to continue to do without a flinch. The disciples had very little choice, if any, to neglect the messianic work started by the Saviour because they

were driven and led by the same Holy Spirit who drove or led Jesus into the wilderness for the fiercest of combats with the chief enemy, the devil.

There is evidence in the book of Acts that the struggle against spiritual wickedness continues unabated. It is also quite vivid that Paul was acutely conscious of the opposing forces of the evil one. In Paul's epistles the devil represents "the embodiment of antithesis to the will and purpose of God" (Guthrie 1981:140). Satan is viewed as a hindrance in the apostolic mission (1 Thess 2:18). He seeks to take advantage over Christians through tensions which arise in church life (2 Cor 2:11). The devil also uses different means to harass God's people, as in the case of Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7). The Johannine literature presents the devil as the archenemy of God, "the father of lies" and a "murderer" - the antithesis of truth and life.

The early Christians were no better than their Master, Jesus Christ. The battle with the forces of evil became acutely realised in Ephesus, under the ministry of Paul. In Ephesus there was a presence and prevalence of the occult, magic and sorcery, things that the New Testament calls satanic and not mere chicanery (Morgan 1946:353). Morgan clearly attributes the evil in Ephesus to the agency and activity of spiritual personalities. On the other hand, the coming of Paul to the city was the opportunity that heralded the activity of the Spirit of God. Through the power of the Spirit of God Paul became an instrument against the evil spirits. In the midst of the sorcery, magic and idolatry, "God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul" (Acts 19:11). People, using handkerchiefs and the garments that Paul wore, had their sicknesses healed and evil spirits cast out.

These victories created a crisis in Ephesus (Morgan 1946:355). The exorcists that attempted to use Paul's method, failed dismally. These men had used charms and incantations before but now they were trying something else, following the successes of Paul: "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth" (Acts 19:13). The negativity produced by the unsuccessful exorcism by the sons of Sceva increased hostility against Paul. The chief clerk, Demetrius, who led the campaign of persecution against Paul, was becoming aware that vested interests were suffering.

Despite the opposition the word of God grew in Ephesus. Later Paul wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus reminding them that, "for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of the wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12).

The awareness of the spirit world in the New Testament times is also quite conspicuous in the book of Revelation where there is a strong stress on spiritual agencies. The world of the book of Revelation is a world in which angels are busy carrying out the commands of God. The contents of the book of Revelation is said to be made known through an angel (1:1). Repeatedly, it is said an angel proclaims with a loud voice (5:2; 10:1; 18:1; 19:17). Angels are powerful creatures (18:21). They form the courtiers around the throne (5:11; 7:11). It is not only the angels that are portrayed as powerful agencies in the book of Revelation; the devil and his demons are also depicted as an army of evil agencies who oppose the activities of God's angels. Satan is identified as *diabolos* (Rev 2:10; 12:9, 12), the dragon (13:2), and as that ancient serpent (20:2), as deceiver of the whole world (12:9) and the accuser of the brethren (12:10).

The forces of evil, which are foul demonic spirits, influence the nations of the world to gather at Armageddon (Rev 16:13f). The final triumph is not achieved until the overthrow of all adverse agencies in chapter 20. The book of Revelation is notable for its demonstration of the absolute power which God exercises over the world.

In the immediate post-apostolic period, Christians continued to wrestle against the forces of darkness. Benko (1984:115) illustrates this using the life of Justin Martyr, who pointed out that Christians prayed to be preserved from the demons by Jesus Christ, "the power of whose name even the demons fear, and at this day, when they are exorcised in the name of Jesus they are overcome" ... "The concealed power of God was in Christ the crucified, before whom demons, and all the principalities and the powers of the earth tremble".

In modern times, especially in the African context, the African Initiated Churches and African Pentecostalism seek to follow in the steps of the early Church in addressing African spiritual needs. Maimela (1985:71) observes that the greatest attraction of the African Initiated Churches lies in their open invitation to the Africans to bring their fears and anxieties about spirits, witches, sorcerers, bad luck, poverty, illness, and all kinds of misfortune to church. Anderson (1991:72) is also persuaded that the Christian message has something to say to the inadequacies of traditional African spirit concepts.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In view of the study of the spirit world of the New Testament, there appears to be Biblical repertoire to adequately engage the spirit world and power structures.

It is important to note that the church has progressed well where there has been a recognition and engagement of the powers by the followers of Christ. Such an approach calls for a revisitation of the cosmic background against which the kingdom of God in Christ was revealed in the New Testament. Engaging the powers should include, inter alia, a ministry of adventure and experimentation by those who follow in the footsteps of Christ as it is the case in the New Testament. Even though the area of power encounter is quite a risky one and full of pitfalls, it can only be hoped that the Spirit of truth, who desires that humanity experiences God's total salvation, will lead and guide those who desire to engage the powers.

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