

# **Powers of Darkness: An Evaluation of Three Hermeneutical Approaches to the Evil Powers in Ephesians<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The Book of Ephesians remains one of the main sources for understanding Paul's doctrine of the nature, influence and conquest of the evil powers. Yet, the process of applying this teaching into the contemporary setting has been fraught with difficulties. The continental differences in worldviews significantly affect the hermeneutical process. This article aims to review a number of current hermeneutical approaches to understanding the nature and influence of the evil powers in Ephesians. Though Paul's teaching is timeless, it is salutary that he refrained from over systematizing the doctrine. The interpretation in the African, Asian and Southern American contexts therefore require a modest appreciation of the shared understanding with the biblical worldview of spirits. Yet, it also necessitates cautious discernment against reinventing superstition.

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## 1. Introduction

In the introduction to his classic *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis (1962:3) makes the astute observation that, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist and a magician with the same delight”. This timeless caution is particularly true when interpreting the nature and influence of the evil powers in Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians. The most important factor, it appears, is the presuppositions and worldviews<sup>3</sup> with which an interpreter approaches the biblical data. Yet, as we shall discover, no worldview is immune to either error.

In this article, I aim to illustrate Lewis’ point by evaluating three contemporary hermeneutical approaches to the interpretation of the evil powers. Beyond illustration, another objective is to highlight the need for careful discernment and constant re-evaluation in evangelical understanding of Scripture, regardless of one’s location.

## 2. The Evil Powers in Ephesians

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians<sup>4</sup> is matched only by his letter to the Colossians for its emphasis on the comprehensive victory of Christ over the powers. Words such as *dunamis*, (power), *exousiai* (authorities), *kosmokratōr* (rulers), *archai* (principalities), *kuriotēs* (dominion), *endunamoō* (strength or strong), *pneumatika* (spiritual forces) and *energia* (inward energy) are regularly used. There are also references to the spirit world, evil powers, darkness and secrets of the underworld. Arnold (1989:41) is therefore right when he concludes that

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<sup>3</sup> I adopt Sire’s (1971:17) definition of a worldview as “a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconscious, consistently or inconsistently) about the makeup of our world”.

<sup>4</sup> Pauline authorship of Ephesians is taken for granted (Eph 1:1 & 3:1). It is also assumed that Ephesians was an encyclical from the apostle to a number of churches in Asia Minor, including that in Ephesus.

“Ephesians has much more to say about the powers than any other NT epistle”.

The whole epistle is shot through with references to these powers in such a way that it may be supposed that the apostle was keen to remind the believers about the doctrine. If this was one of his main purposes for his epistle (see Arnold 1989:167, who argues precisely for this view), Paul would have had good reasons for doing so.<sup>5</sup> His inaugural mission to Ephesus (Acts 18-20) demonstrates the tangible effects of the battle of the powers. In the synagogue, the opponents of Paul “refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way” (Acts 19:9). With the weapon of faithful preaching of the truth of the gospel, the Word of God advanced in triumph as “extraordinary miracles” were performed.

It was also in Ephesus that the seven sons of Sceva failed in their attempt to exorcize a demon-possessed man. This otherwise humorous event illustrates an important social and cultural background of Ephesus. With the temple of the goddess Diana looming high over the city, the idolatry mingled effortlessly with superstition, magic, astrological speculations and occultism (Thomas 2001:160; cf. Arnold 1989:20-40). The fear which gripped the city as a result of the failed exorcism in Acts 19:17 demonstrates the reality of the experience of the evil powers. The large volume of magical papyri which were burnt as a result of the success of Paul’s ministry exemplifies the degree to which sorcery and magic was practiced by the ancient Ephesians. The violent response of the silversmiths to the loss of their business underscores the common collusion between these forces and business, culture and religion (Acts 19:27).

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Dibelius (1909:183) has cogently argued that the powers in Paul functioned as an interpretive framework for the development of his Christology, soteriology, and ethics.

With this background in mind, a study of the evil powers in Ephesians<sup>6</sup> is instructive. Firstly, Paul was at pains to emphasize the spiritual and wicked nature of these powers. In Ephesians 1:21, he states that the resurrected and enthroned Christ is seated above all *archē kai exousia kai dunamis kai kuriotētos kai pantos onomatos* (“rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given”, NIV). And this elevation to the highest place of honour applies “not only in the present age but also in the one to come”. The supreme exaltation of Christ is therefore complete in both time and space, both vertically and horizontally. *Archē*, which is translated by the NIV as “rule” and by the KJV as “principality”, means the beginner or first person, chief, the original or active cause of something in a place. It occurs only once in the Septuagint, in Jeremiah 13:18 where it is associated with the king, queen mother, greatness and glory. In this sense, *archē* is related to political rule and authority, which influences human events, actions and belief systems.

The term is however used in the pseudepigraphic book of 2 Enoch 20-22 for angelic beings. 2 Enoch 20:1, for example, lists four of the terms used by Paul in Ephesians 1:21 among ten ranks of angels in the seventh heaven. Similarly, 1 Enoch 61:10 describes how “the Lord of Spirits” will “summon all the host of the heavens, and all the holy ones above, and the host of God, the Cherubic, Seraphim and Ophannim, and all the angels of power, and all the angels of *principalities*” (cf. 2 Mac 3:24, *Testament of Levi* 3). Hendrik Berkhof is therefore also right when he concludes that in the inter-testamental apocalyptic literature, *archē* is used for the “classes of angels located in the lower and higher heavens” (1977:16-17).

It is in this sense that Paul uses *archai* for superhuman forces, which are antagonistic to Christ and his people (e.g. Rom 8:38; Col 2:15). Certainly, in Ephesians 3:10, where the apostle again refers to these powers, they are in the

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<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, the apostle refers to Satan on ten occasions—Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 5:5; 7:5; 2 Cor 2:11; 11:14; 12:7; 1 Thess 2:18; 2 Thess 2:9; 1 Tim 1:20; 5:15. Five times, he calls him the devil (Eph 4:27; 6:11; 1 Tim 3:6, 7; 2 Tim 2:26.) and on four occasions with other designations (“Belial”—2 Cor 6:15; “Evil one”—Eph 6:16; 2 Thess 3:3; “god of this age”—2 Cor 4:4 and “ruler of the power of the air”—Eph 2:2. He also refers to demons on five occasions (1 Cor 10:20-21 & 1 Tim 4:1). In addition, the believer’s victory is emphasized in Rom 16:23, 1 Cor 15:24, Gal 4:3-9, Col 1:16, 2:10-15 etc. The influence of the devil on unbelievers also described by Paul in 2 Cor 4:4, etc.

“heavenly realms”—a phrase used by Paul on five occasions in this epistle for “the realm to which Christ has been raised” (Bruce 1984:254). In this sense, *archē* does not only refer to the beings that rule the spiritual realms, but also their rulership—their authority to exert changes in the spiritual realm that affect natural events. Christ has triumphed over all of it.

The association of angelic beings with principalities or regions of rule echoes a notion in Jewish tradition reflected in Daniel 10:13 and 20, where angels are linked with national names (see also 1 Enoch 60:11-12; Jub 2:2). Indeed, it is crucial to appreciate a common theme in the Bible describing the evil influence of spiritual beings on various forms of political authority (e.g. 1 Chr 21:1; Zech 3:1). Yet, as we shall shortly find, Paul, like his New Testament counterparts, was reticent in his characterisations and does not systematize this doctrine.

*Exousia*, which is translated by the NIV as “authority” and the KJV as “power”, refers to liberty of choice, the power of rule or government, authority, absolute power and ruler. It describes “the power of one whose will and commands must be obeyed by others” (Vine 1996:86). It is thus similar to *archē* and indeed Paul often uses the two terms together as a common phrase (see Rom 3:38; Col 1:16, 2:10; Eph 3:10, 6:12; Col 2:15; Tit 3:1). Like *archē*, *exousia* is also used in the sense of earthly political systems as well as the spiritual angelic authorities that influence human events (Dan 7:27). In Ephesians 1:21, Paul no doubt had the latter sense in mind.

Paul’s reference to *dunamis*, translated as “might” by the KJV and “power” by the NIV, in Ephesians 1:21, also describes spirit beings. The Septuagint frequently translated the Hebrew word “host”, as in the phrase “the Lord of hosts”, as *dunamis*. The term describes the military prowess and might of angels. *Kuriotētos* means lordship, dominion and power and is again mostly used in reference to evil angelic powers.

To cover all other powers that may be imagined or “named”, Paul stresses that Christ rules over “every title that can be given”. It is clear by this final statement in Ephesians 1:21 that Paul is not attempting to systematize the ranks or categories of evil demonic and spiritual powers over whom Christ has triumphed. He is naming any title that may be identified as an opponent of

Christ. Though Paul stresses that it is *all* powers that have been made subject to the enthroned Christ, much of his interest is particularly on the evil powers. For Psalm 110, from which the theology of enthronement is derived, focuses on the subjection of *enemies* under his feet.

The spiritual and malevolent nature of the evil powers is emphasized further in Ephesians 6, where the apostle describes the spiritual warfare in which believers are involved. The enemy is not “flesh and blood” but the spiritual beings—“the powers of this dark world” and “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”. The term *kosmokratores* was an astrological term describing the influence of the planetary system on world affairs. It shares similar meaning with *stoichea* or elemental spirits (Arnold 1996:55-76). The other phrase in Ephesians 6:12, “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”, is used as a summarative term for all the opposing forces. It is therefore clear that the powers that Paul has in mind in Ephesians are spiritual and malicious.

Secondly, Paul emphasizes the effects of the evil powers in Ephesians. On four occasions in the epistle, Paul directly refers to the devil and shows that his influence extends to both unbelievers and believers. He is the spirit which is at work in the disobedient (Eph 2:2), the “ruler of the kingdom of the air”. He is also called “devil” in Ephesians 4:27 and 6:11 and “evil one” in Ephesians 6:16. The term “kingdom of the air” parallels the heavenly realms in Ephesians and describes the sphere of operation and authority of the evil forces (cf. 2 Enoch 29:4-5). The devil, according to Paul, energizes the acts of disobedience, characterized by “cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (Eph 2:3). In contrast to the “incomparably great power” released by Christ which works in believers (Eph 1:19), the devil’s power causes spiritual death, sinful desires and evil cravings. Consequently, the devil is portrayed in Ephesians 2 as influencing the will, emotions and intellect of those who do not believe (Eph 2:1-3).

Yet, the devil does have some effects on believers. Clarifying further the influence of the devil, Paul, in Ephesians 4:27, warns believers against giving him a foothold. Bitterness, pride and the lack of self-control during anger give the devil a half open door through which he attacks. Though the believer’s enemies are spiritual, the effect of their influence may appear in daily

experiences. This imagery of the devil as lurking around the corner, seeking to exploit any foothold that is offered is echoed by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:7 and 2 Timothy 2:26 and by Peter in 1 Peter 5:8. It is interesting that this reference to the devil is set in the centre of Paul's description of Christian ethical behaviour in this epistle. Even in the midst of living truthfully in obedience to Christ, the believer is to guard against an enemy who would seek to frustrate his efforts.

These malevolent powers aim at causing believers to fall by employing the "devil's schemes" (Eph 6:11) and attack them with "flaming arrows" (Eph 6:16). In Ephesians 4:14, Paul describes the work of false teachers who use "cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" to destabilize the faith of the immature. In Ephesians 6:11, he shows that the devil is behind the activities of such deceitful scheming. This emphasizes the deceptive character of the enemy, who does not always use obvious and easily discernible strategies in his "struggle" with believers. Though the struggle is spiritual, one ought to be careful not to assume that there are no material effects.

Thirdly, Paul highlights the complete victory of Christ over the evil powers. This is the overwhelming emphasis of the epistle. His reference to the powers in Ephesians 1 was occasioned by his prayer for the believers to come to an experiential knowledge of the power of Christ in their lives (Eph 1:15-19). He then proceeded to enumerate the powers in Ephesians 1:20-22 as a way of assuring the believers of the complete victory that they share with Jesus as they sit with him in the heavenly realms.

Similarly, the apostle's reference to the devil in Ephesians 2, coming immediately after he had emphasized the triumph of Christ, is exactly to portray this victory. As persuasively demonstrated by Timothy Gombis, the theology of Ephesians 2 is woven together by the Divine Warfare motif which shows the victory of Christ. Gombis (2004:405) notes, "This is the purpose of ch. 2: the vindication of the exalted Christ—the enumeration of the triumphs of God in Christ demonstrating that the powers ruling the present evil age are indeed subject to the Lord Christ". Consequently, despite the fact that the devil is active in Ephesians, Paul argues that Christ has triumphed over his powers.

Then, in Ephesians 3:10, the apostle portrays the primary functions of the church with regard to these powers. He notes that through the church, “the manifold wisdom of God” will be made known to the principalities and powers. As she extends the gospel, the very presence of the church is a declaration of the manifold wisdom of God to these evil powers. John Stott’s (1979:123) explanation of this verse is not just poetic, “The multi-racial, multi-cultural community is like a beautiful tapestry. . . . History is the theatre, the world is the stage, and the church members in every land are the actors”.<sup>7</sup>

This triumph of the church of Christ is only inaugurated and not yet fully consummated. For, in contrast to the triumph in Ephesians 1-3, Paul stresses in Ephesians 4-6 that though these evil powers have been defeated by Christ, the victory procession has not yet begun. Like bull dogs bound on long leashes, evil powers may yet hurt those who come within their ranges. An enemy may be defeated, yet, “mopping up” exercises continue till the final victory procession.

Victory has been won, but the believer must continue to stand in that victory (Eph 6:11, 13-14). He must put on God’s full armour for this purpose—armour that God himself shares with his people (Isa 59)<sup>8</sup>. Citing examples of these weapons of warfare, Paul includes the truth of the gospel, the righteousness of God, faith, the word of God, the hope of salvation and prayer. Believers must also be filled with his Spirit, because he strengthens them “with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (Eph 3:16). In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul describes the believer’s weapons with a different imagery—“siege engines with which he intends to “demolish arguments . . .” (Bruce 1984:404). Hence it is inadequate to regard the believer’s spiritual weapons as a narrow bunch of arsenals. It is also noteworthy that Paul’s language in this passage may correctly be described as “defensive”. Believers are to stand in the triumph that has been secured for them, holding their ground until the victory procession begins.

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<sup>7</sup> G B Caird, perhaps with a tinge of exaggeration, claims that “any interpretation of Ephesians stands or falls by this verse” (1976:67)

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the theology of the Divine Warrior, see Neufeld 1997.



In a summary, Paul's language describing the nature of the powers in Ephesians is not systematized. His aim was not to describe the specific nature of the malicious enemies of Christ and his church in fullest detail. Yet, he wants the reader to appreciate their reality within the scheme of God's plan. He characterizes them as malevolent personal beings, using descriptions associated with angelic spirits. His emphasis throughout is on the victory of Christ which believers share with him. Paul's key prayer for the Ephesians was for them to be "enlightened in order that you may know" (Eph 1:18)—that is, discern, understand, appreciate and appropriate the full implications of these facts.

It will be instructive to evaluate how this "knowledge" is being played out in the process of interpretation of these facts into today's world. Three hermeneutical approaches, which we shall label, demythologization, mythologization and hypermythologization<sup>9</sup> will now be evaluated. It is clear that the primary underlying issue regards the presuppositions with which interpreters approach the data.

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### **3. The Demythologization of the Evil Powers**

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One hermeneutical approach to the biblical data on the evil powers in Ephesians is demythologization. The term "demythologization" refers to the idea of restating Christian beliefs in categories that the "modern" person would understand. It is best associated with Rudolf Bultmann, whose work was paradoxically aimed at refuting the "liberal" approaches of his time. Bultmann argued that the content of the gospel was preconditioned by a pre-scientific cosmology and myth that made it difficult for the modern person to understand. The gospel preached in such pre-scientific terms only becomes "a stumbling block" (Bultmann 1958:17) to the modern man. The task of the biblical scholar was to remove the myths in the Bible and make the message suited to the scientific age.

Consequently, Bultmann's efforts were an attempt to make the message of the Bible fit a European enlightenment paradigm that, he reckoned, did not share the spirit world paradigm of the first century Mediterranean. To him,

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<sup>9</sup> I have coined this term for want of a short hand way of describing this approach.

demythologization was therefore unavoidable. For, those who accept the worldview of evil spirits espoused in the New Testament or insist on adopting and teaching it have “not grasped the hiddenness and transcendence of divine action and . . . seek God’s act in the sphere of what is worldly” (Bultmann 1984:122).

Bultmann’s scientific worldview maintains that supernatural powers cannot interrupt the natural realms of cause and effect. He therefore argued that the biblical language on the spirit world and the miraculous has merely objectified the transcendent into the immanent. Biblical language, he surmised, was a human way of speaking about God and not describing what was happening in actuality. In this sense, the Holy Spirit is not an expression for a Personal Being, but rather a way of describing “authentic Christian living”. To Bultmann, living “according to the Spirit” does not refer to any supernatural influence. Rather, it describes “a genuine human life” that lives out “of what is invisible and non-disposable and, therefore, surrenders all self-contrived security” (Bultmann 1958:17).

As a result of this approach, the miraculous in the New Testament was explained as myths or apocalyptic explanations of natural phenomena. In particular, demonic activities in the gospels were in reality psychological and psychiatric ailments. Bultmann further argued that these ailments occur at periods of time and in places where inhabitants are faced with immense socio-political upheavals such as oppression under colonial rule. The people possessed by demons in Jesus’ time were, therefore, psychologically disturbed—suffering from the brutalities meted out by the Roman occupiers of Palestine.

With regard to Paul, Bultmann insisted that the paucity of references to demons in his ministry (only two occasions, Acts 17 and 19) shows that the apostle had already begun demythologizing the stories about demon possession that preceded him. Paul, he argued, employed a Gnostic mythological paradigm to achieve this process. The cosmic powers described by the apostle were other ways of describing human anxieties such as death, diseases and other cares of the world.

Bultmann's demythologization, though publicly disclaimed by scholars today, is still influential in subtle ways in many circles of biblical scholarship. There are those who reject his views as an anachronistic imposition of enlightenment philosophy on the New Testament data. Yet, they proceed to endorse the "modern" application in practice. Thus, for example, according to Lincoln (1990:64, emphasis added), "The popular demythologizing of these powers in current theology . . . *may well be a valid reinterpretation* of a NT concept but it is reinterpretation". Similarly, Barth (1959:90) asserts that the evil powers are "the world of axioms and principles of politics and religion, of economics and society, of moral and biology, of history and culture".

By overly subscribing to a rather overoptimistic view of the "scientific approach", such scholars are left with no choice but to doubt, or at best allegorize, the biblical record on evil spirits. Surprisingly, the absurd nature of this stance, believing that God and angels exist and yet rejecting the existence of evil spirits, is lost on them. In the end, demythologization turns its proponents into "partial supernaturalists" who may accept that Jesus is the Messiah, but nevertheless insinuate that his victory on the cross is over nothing substantial.

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#### **4. The Mythologization of the Evil Powers**

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In contrast to the dismissive approach of demythologization, a number of interpretations accept the presence of these forces. However, these scholars deny their personal nature or diminish their primary malevolent influence. A representative example of this approach is Wesley Carr's (1981) *Angels and Principalities*. Carr's main argument was that unlike the tumultuous upheavals of Palestine during the time of Jesus, the Gentile world in which Paul ministered was peaceful and prosperous. In his estimation, such a serene condition would not have been conducive to an apocalyptic belief in demons and evil forces. He therefore posits that the powers of the Pauline corpus were not hostile demonic spirits but rather good angelic powers. Paul's language in Ephesians about these forces was aimed at extolling the higher honour of Christ who is exalted to God's throne over the angels.

Based on his examination of the socio-political climates of the era, Carr (1981:43) concludes that "the concept of mighty forces that are hostile to man,

from which he sought relief, was not prevalent in the thought world of the first century AD". In order to support this thesis, Carr argues that Ephesians 6:12, in which Paul specifically describes the powers as malicious, was a later interpolation into the original epistle by a second century Pauline enthusiast. Carr's views have been flatly rejected by most scholars for their lack of evidence and methodological inconsistencies (for an example of rebuttal of Carr, see Arnold 1987:71-87).

A less negative yet still inadequate evaluation of the evil powers in Paul was provided by Walter Wink in his trilogy on the "powers" (1984; 1986; 1992). Wink argued that Paul's language of the powers in Ephesians and elsewhere was an attempt by the first century person to describe real social, economic, psychological and political structures that affected their everyday lives. Rather than personal evil spirits, these forces are the inner or spiritual principles of an institution or nation—the culture, ethos and *gestalt* that affect how things run. The evil powers refer to "the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power ... the *spirituality* of institutions" (Wink 1984:5). Wink also denies the existence of a personal being called the devil, insisting that it is a "collective symbolization of evil" and "the collective of weight of human fallenness" (Wink 1986:43). Accordingly, though he does not deny that the powers in Ephesians are evil, Wink identifies them with the socio-political environment rather than with personal spirit beings.

There are specific advantages of Wink's approach. It highlights the effect of human socio-political systems in opposing God. Throughout history, overtly evil socio-political systems like the idolatry of the Roman Caesars, the anti-Semitism of Hitler's Nazism, the evil of chattel slavery, the atheism of the Communists, the dehumanization of Apartheid, the wickedness of the ethnic cleansing in parts of Africa, racism and terrorism of all forms, and the greed of capitalism have all demonstrated the extent to which the evil powers may go to influence the world systems and seek to thwart the blessings of humanity.

In covert forms, evil powers continue to influence humanity in the addiction of young people in the drugs culture, in postmodern hedonism, in the tyranny of secularism which denies people their true liberty to serve God, the disdain for the sanctity of human life, etc. It is indeed important to be reminded that Paul adds the phrase to the list of the evil powers in Ephesians 1:21—"every name

that is named” (KJV), thus making the list of evil powers an open ended possibility. Any enemy of Christ and his cause is made subject to him. Wink’s interpretation, therefore, reminds Christians not to forget how the world system operates against the advance of God’s kingdom in his world.

It also highlights the need for the “full armour” of God in the struggle with these powers. As we shall shortly see, there is a strand of evangelical interpretation which focuses purely on “prayer and deliverance” as the main weapons of spiritual warfare. In so doing, the need to exhibit righteous behaviour as a weapon, the proclamation of the gospel, the life of faith, hope and love, obedience to God’s word and constant filling with the Holy Spirit are seemingly neglected.

Where Wink erred was to deny any particular influence of personal spirits in implementing the stratagems of the evil powers. In so doing, not only is the teaching in Ephesians undermined, the negative effects of increased spiritism, witchcraft and occultism in some societies are ignored. Consequently, Wink more-or-less creates a new myth of the existence of impersonal spirits whose effects are corporate and not personal. He commits a not infrequent mistake of the Cartesian enlightenment philosophy that regards any other worldview as “primitive and unscientific”.

Perhaps Oscar Cullman’s preceding correction to this attitude would have helped avoid this error. Regarding evil spirits, Cullman (1962:192, emphasis added) noted, “Whatever our personal attitude toward this view may be, we must conclude from this fact that these powers, in the faith of primitive Christianity, *did not belong merely to the framework ‘conditioned by the contemporary situation’*. It is these invisible beings who in some way . . . stand behind what occurs in the world”.

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## **5. The Hyper-Mythologization of the Evil Powers**

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A third category of error is an over-exuberant interpretation that goes beyond what the apostle teaches concerning the evil powers. Two examples of this error will be cited—a North American and an African variety.

Perhaps taking a cue from C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness* is a fictional story that represents a particular understanding of the way evil spirits operate today. First released in 1986, this novel sold over a million and a half copies in its first few years. It is set in a small American college town at the centre of the spiritual warfare being waged on its behalf by assigned good angels and bad demons. What was at stake in this warfare was to "establish still another foothold for the coming New World Order and the New Age Christ" (Peretti 1986:257).

In riveting storytelling, Peretti manages to excite imaginations on how evil spirits may operate to influence the daily happenings in villages and towns across the country and in the world at large. Though a novel, Peretti's creative account has quickly influenced a theological worldview in some evangelical circles that sees demons underneath almost every mug in the kitchen or table in the study. Without intending to do so, he has facilitated a systemization of the evil powers in the world, beyond what Paul intended to do.

The error in this understanding is that it produces a determinism that removes the responsibility of the human agent from the equation. Events in the world are regarded as purely subject to the outcome of the battle between good and evil spirits. Human beings become pawns in this battle of the spirits for which their responsibility is limited to prayer and deliverance (see Guelich 1991:33-64 for analysis of Peretti). Another effect of this emphasis is the fear and paranoia that this pervasive awareness produces. Rather than emphasizing the victory of Christ, such over exuberant interpretation may rather produce a "paralysed" Christian witness. Superstition can easily replace belief in the supernatural.

In significant parts of African biblical circles, there is no difficulty at all in accepting the existence and reality of the influence of evil spirits. The African and the first century Mediterranean share similar beliefs about the spirit world (Loubster 2003:225).<sup>10</sup> It is therefore not surprising that any demythologization of the teaching on evil spirits from Ephesians proves hollow on the continent. Neither will attempts at relegating the nature and influence of evil spirits in the life of the average African be successful.

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<sup>10</sup> This is also true for Asia, Southern America and possibly the Middle East.

Consequently, in their examination of the application of the Ephesian concept of evil powers into the context of the Tonga people of Zambia, for example, Westland and Hachibamba (2003:342) have rejected Wink's interpretation as "problematic . . . a major transformation (or transculturation) of the intended meaning of the biblical text".

On the contrary, any first time visitor to an average church service in any of the cities of West, Central and Southern Africa will be most impressed by the frequent reference to the devil and his demons. There are prayers for exorcising demons, binding Satan and delivering the oppressed in the congregation. Not only are the worshippers conscious of the battle against evil spirits, many church members and preachers specialize as "prayer warriors" who wage spiritual warfare against evil spirits.

A number of African scholars have argued that the situational context of Africa demands a contextualization that regards specific teachings as special cases for Africans. As eloquently put by Emmanuel Asante (2001:358), "Understood as deliverance not only from one's sinful selfhood but also from evil forces, salvation must address the concepts of evil and sin in the African context". It makes no sense to the African, and perhaps also the Asian or South American, to deny the presence of evil powers, or to have a Saviour who could not provide a complete and decisive victory over the powers. Asante further explains, "The African reality demands a Saviour who has the power not only to deliver the believer from evil powers but also transform the lives of the bewitched and the dehumanized, enabling them to live actively in the community" (p. 359).

Though this is very true, I now humbly argue that, in its details, a number of emerging teachings indicate that the "special cases" being made for aspects of Christianity in Africa may inadvertently result in an over systemization of the data from Scripture. The possible danger could be a Christianized form of animism that merely adds the Lord Jesus Christ to the list of powers in the African context. Contextualization needs a crucial nuance.

Two of these "special cases" that have evolved in discussions on evil powers in the African context are the emphases on ancestral curses (or spirits) and territorial spirits. Though not restricted to the African continent, the

interpretation of these two doctrines has acquired special significance for several regions of West, Central and Southern Africa since it does resonate with particular cultural and anthropological presuppositions.

The concept of generational curses is an endemic worldview of parts of Africa, that the “sins of the fathers” are visited upon the generations after them (Exod 20:4-6). It is defined by Marilyn Hickey (2000:13) as “an un-cleansed iniquity that increases in strength from generation to generation affecting the members of that family and all who come into relationship with that family”. In parts of Africa, this is believed to include clan curses and spirits that are effortlessly inherited, even by those who marry into the family.<sup>11</sup> Whereas this may be so, a failure to emphasize the complete victory of Christ over such generational spirits only fosters a mentality that paralyses believers.

With regard to the concept of territorial spirits, Opoku Onyinah (2004:337) points out that it is “the notion that the demons assume a hierarchy with powers of greater and lesser ranks, and having specific geographical assignments”. Derived from Daniel 10, the teaching emphasizes that territorial spirits wield their influence over particular geographical regions. Peter Wagner (1990:77) elaborates that they are “high ranking members of the hierarchy of evil spirits [delegated by Satan] to control nations, regions, cities, tribes, people groups, neighborhoods and other significant social networks of human beings throughout the world”. The result of their influence is to change the course of the social, economic and political situations in the world. Consequently, it has been argued that their power and influence should be considered in formulating strategies for world evangelization and missions (Lowe 1998).

Systematizing this teaching further, some interpreters on the continent have speculated that these demonic powers have specific names that are required to be known if spiritual warfare is to be successful. In yet a further interpretation, the concepts of ancestral spirits are merged with territorial spirits to produce a doctrine that requires nations to exorcize the demons of economic mismanagement and corruption before the African continent may begin to prosper (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004:389-406).

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<sup>11</sup> For a review of this teaching, see Asamoah-Gyadu 2004:389-406.



Undoubtedly, there is scriptural evidence from Daniel 7 and 10 that evil powers do seek to influence human politics.<sup>12</sup> Yet, there is no particular systematization of this teaching in Paul. Certainly, the apostle did not demand knowledge of the specific names of evil spirits assigned to particular cities before the invasion of the gospel. To Paul, any “name that may be named” is conquered by the enthroned Christ. David Stevens (2000:411) has also shown that the influence of the “territorial spirits” of Daniel 10, was largely personal and socio-political and not geographic.

In attributing political mismanagement, ethnic hatred, and even laziness to evil spirits, this teaching is in danger of providing some African politicians excuses for incompetence. Equally, it fails to address the socio-political issues such as the unfair global trade system that contributes to poverty. At a personal level, the teaching on inherited ancestral spirits could result in the physical and emotional abuse of women and children who are purported to be possessed by demons and accused of being witches. The harrowing case in the UK in February 2000 of the systematic abuse and eventual death of nine year old Victoria Climbié by her “Christian” guardians is one such example.<sup>13</sup> These guardians, among other things, believed that the child was possessed by an ancestral spirit.

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## **6. Conclusion**

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In conclusion, Paul emphasized the existence of evil spirits not just as a peculiar worldview for his environment but an expression of a reality that believers of all worldviews neglect to their peril. His focus in Ephesians was to show the victory that Christ wrought through his death and resurrection. Yet, he also reminds them that there is “mopping” up to do after this victory. The devil, though defeated, is active in influencing those who do not believe and in attacking those who believe. Paul’s aim was not to produce a systematic picture of evil spirits that puts undue emphasis on them. His aim was to raise the awareness of the spiritual realities of their Christian existence.

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<sup>12</sup> David’s disastrous census instigated by the devil (1 Chr 21:1) and Satan’s opposition of the high priest in Zech 3:1 are two other Old Testament examples.

<sup>13</sup> See The Climbié Inquiry, accessed from <http://www.victoria-climbié-inquiry.org.uk/> on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2008

The errors of demythologization, mythologization and hyper-mythologization that are eloquently described by C. S. Lewis should be borne in mind in the hermeneutical application of Paul's teaching.

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