

## **Flesh and Blood or Principalities and Powers**

Hardly a generation passes that does not say, "We are living in changing times." Usually this does not refer to positive changes. Today it is also good for us to reflect on some of the changes we can recognize in our world. Many of us can still remember the days when Biblical injunctions were commonly adhered to in society. Many can remember when it was not difficult to talk with a stranger in the store, at the auction, across the fence, or in the park, and be in agreement about what was right and what was wrong. But today those same people would have a much harder time in finding agreement about music, marriage, divorce, feminism, family discipline, drugs, the death penalty, sexuality, authority, punishment, etc.

In the past Christians often thought that when they fought sin they would have to fight it mostly on a case by case basis. Each would fight against the temptations they themselves faced. Many would face the same temptations, but everyone knew and understood that they were temptations; and if they yielded to the temptations, they and most around them would be aware that something was wrong. Church and society were often on the same side of what was wrong. On the other hand the modern Christian will recognize many temptations as urges to join society and to flee from God, the Bible and the Church. If he strives to fight that temptation because he wants to stay obedient to Scripture, he will become an oddity, an outcast. The very norms of society have become temptations. Society has changed so rapidly and drastically that many have not fully realized the extreme danger Christians face.

In such a circumstance it becomes necessary to be reminded of the seriousness of the battle that is raging between God and Satan. We need to remind ourselves that the struggle that goes on for the full duration of our earthly life is a spiritual warfare.

When the apostle Paul concludes his exhortation to the Ephesians about how to live, he warns them that they are to be fully armed. For the battle they must wage is against more than a mere physical enemy. He warns them that they will be confronted with principalities and powers. He says, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers ..." (Eph.6:12). As we speed toward the end of history we need to identify these enemies as they present themselves in our time.

The word 'principalities' in Ephesians 6:12 refers to the authority and position of the angels and demons<sup>1</sup>; while the term power in the same text comes from the Greek *exousia* meaning authority or privilege ( derived authority )<sup>2</sup>, just as when Jesus gave His twelve disciples '...power and authority over all devils, and to cure diseases.' (Luke 1:9).

Many dedicated and sincere believers are not always focused on the dangers these principalities and powers present when they answer the elders who ask about their life of faith at home visits. Answers often contain an explanation about being aware of our sinful nature and that we do sin, but that we really do not have too many things to struggle against. There are not really any pressing matters that confront us on a daily basis. All the people we work with, the students we study with, the people we socialize with, are believers, so we are not often directly confronted by the world.

Such a situation brings to mind a wonderful book written by John R. Sittema entitled *With A Shepherd's Heart*. In it he draws attention to the work of elders in the Church. This book will help

experienced elders re-focus, new elders prepare for the challenge that lies ahead, and every other reader to open their eyes to many realities in the flock of Jesus Christ that might easily be passed over or ignored. In the section called Knowing the Enemy he reminds his readers, especially the elders, that the wolf that is out to snatch the sheep has many sharp and jagged teeth. He identifies them as Secularism, Materialism, Relativism, Pragmatism and Feminism. When one delves into the definition of each of these and how they affect the 'sheep' in very practical ways we begin to realize that the 'enemy' presents many dangers.

Peter Jones confirms and expands on this point in his book *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back*. In it he confronts comfortable Christians with the reality of evil principalities and powers that are not new to the world. When the Christian religion had become a force in the Greco-Roman world, pagan religions showed the power of the evil principality. "Certain 'Christian' teachers sought to accommodate 'the faith' to pagan religion, in spite of the apostle Paul's warning to the converted pagans in Corinth: 'What harmony is there between Christ and Belial...between the temple of God and idols?'; (2 Cor. 6:15, 16) '[between] the Lord's Table and the table of demons [?]' (1 Cor. 10:21)."<sup>3</sup> These 'accommodating Christians' devised something called 'Christian Gnosticism'. A detailed analysis of Gnosticism is far to great an undertaking here, but it will suffice to realize that one of the beliefs of these Gnostics is redemption by illumination, resulting in self-awareness (sometimes called 'awakening from sleep')<sup>4</sup>.

It is good to realize that the early Christians also had strong opposition from the Evil One. Satan was hard at work discrediting the work of our Saviour. He tried very hard to confuse the believers with lies and twisting of the truth.

Some fifty years ago, fifty-two papyrus texts were discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt. These writings were from Gnostics around the time of the early Church. Among them were such titles as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Philip. From them we can learn that already back then there were those who believed in a god who was both Father and Mother. Other Gnostic teachings opposed authority in favour of finding divinity within oneself. They also placed a strong positive emphasis on homosexuality. Elaine Pagels, in her book *The Gnostic Gospels* tries to convince the modern reader that 'these extraordinary texts compel us to reconsider profoundly the traditional view of the origins and meanings of Christianity.'<sup>5</sup>

That brings us back to Peter Jones. He remembers the Beatle's John Lennon and his song Imagine in which we are asked to imagine: 'no heaven, no hell, no countries, no possessions, no greed, no hunger, no religion...'. John Lennon sought to introduce a new age, the Age of Aquarius. "In this new Age of Aquarius, where there is neither good nor evil, the ultimate liberation of mankind will finally be realized - liberation from ethics, from guilt, from sexual norms, and from God. Only one religious option will not be allowed to live life in peace, namely, biblical Christianity."<sup>6</sup>

"Our world is entering a new period of spiritual, demonic delusion cavorting about in fake clothes of spiritual renewal."<sup>7</sup> Is it a mere coincidence that those writings of the Gnostics were discovered just fifty years ago? Do we not see in the revival of the Gnostic writings and the unveiling of the New Age movement the principalities and powers at work? It is not merely a wrestling with flesh and blood. We are involved in a spiritual warfare where we wrestle with principalities and powers that are overwhelming. We ought not to take such a reality lightly. Satan is a very strong power. He

will gather all the earthly powers of philosophy, economy and politics and join them in one final assault on the people of God. The Bible tells us that at the end of time he will be allowed to disillusion man to such a degree that if it were not for the early return of our Saviour it is doubtful that there would be faith at all.

But at the same time we may be comforted by the inspired words of Paul as he not only exhorts, but also instructs and comforts the Ephesians (6:13ff) and Church of all ages. He urges us to put on the whole armour of God, so that we may be able to stand in the evil day. We are reminded to put on truth and righteousness. We must have our feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; take the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. He reminds us always to pray in the Spirit.

Joyfully we may know and believe that these are not vain gestures, but true means of salvation. For “then comes the end, when he [our Saviour, Jesus Christ] shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority [principalities] and power.” (1 Cor.15:24).

#### **PdB**

1 Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia, Moody Press, Chicago, page 1403

2 *ibid*, page 1387

4 *ibid*, page 688

3 The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back, Peter Jones, P&R Publishing, page 6.

5 The Gnostic Gospels, Elaine Pagels, Random House, cover.

6 *ibid*, page 4

## *UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE*

### THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALTER (1)

The Book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible, with 150 chapters which are designed to be sung in worship. And all too often, we think of the Book of Psalms as a loose collection of poems, sort of an Israelite hymnal. But is this so, or does the final and canonical form of the book, as God has set it out, help us interpret the book?

We begin by noting that the Book of Psalms is intimately connected with David. He, of course, was the second king of Israel and the man with whom God renewed the covenant (cf. 2 Sam.7). David is one in a line of men, from Adam onward, who were made to be heads within a renewed covenant. Noah, Abraham, and Moses, as well as David, were all this sort of covenant heads. God renewed the covenant with each of them, after the previous administration of the covenant had failed. Through these covenant heads, the LORD introduced a new administration of the one covenant, a new covenantal regime. And all these Old Testament representative men failed. All of them, like Adam before them, fell into, or presided over some fall into sin. God renews the covenant with Noah and almost immediately Ham rebels; He renews the covenant with Abraham and Abraham almost immediately tries to bring the promised seed through Hagar; He renews the covenant with Moses and almost immediately Israel worships at the golden bull. None of these representative men, these heads within the covenant, could deliver the world from sin.

David stands in this line of covenant heads, of the leaders of Israel. He becomes king after the Mosaic administration of the covenant had failed and been Judged in the events of 1 Samuel 1-4; he becomes king after the failed kingship of Saul. Through David, the conquest of the land is completed and the Ark of the Covenant's exile ends (2 Samuel 5-7). As a result, David is allowed to sit on the "throne of the LORD" (1 Chron. 28:5; 29:23). It is with David that the covenant is renewed and there is the promise of an everlasting kingship (2 Sam. 7). In many ways, David is, with Moses, the chief Old Testament covenant representative and type of Christ.

Just the sheer amount of material in the Old Testament about David is staggering. The books of Samuel and 1 Chronicles, as well as part of 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles are all about David - the things which led up to his kingship, the things he did, and the things that resulted from his kingship. In fact, we could also add the book of Ruth and, at least, the closing chapters of Judges to this list. Many of the prophets refer back to David, his reign, and the promises made to him. In addition, at least 73 of the Psalms list David as author. David is also the human subject of these Psalms.<sup>1</sup> Further, all the rest of the authors of the Psalms, except for Moses, are associated with David. David appoints Heman, Asaph,<sup>3</sup> and the sons of Korah as the choir directors, the writers of Psalms and Songs (cf. I Chronicles 15:16-24); and, of course, Solomon was David's son.

As a matter of fact, prior to David, worship in the Tabernacle had been silent. There were no Levitical singers, there was no Levitical orchestra. The priests went into the Holy Place; they trimmed the lamps on the lampstand, once a week they changed the bread on the table of shewbread and poured out the drink offering, and, when needed, they sprinkled blood on the horns of the golden altar of incense and the veil separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place. Once a year, the High Priest went into the Most Holy Place to sprinkle blood on the cover of the

Ark, but it was all silent. There was no singing of praise in the Tabernacle. Only with David does there come the Levitical singers. Only with David does there come the Levitical orchestra. When we read I Chronicles, it is striking how often we are told that David appointed these singers, and that he sent some to Jerusalem and others to Gibeon to do their work. How is it that David from the tribe of Judah may re-organize the Levites? Who is David that he could presume to alter what had been established through Moses? Well, David does it as the covenant representative. He changes the Mosaic ritual; he beautifies it with music and with singing. The covenant renewed with David is more glorious than the covenant renewal at Sinai, just as the Temple was more glorious than the Tabernacle.

The result of this is that through David, the people of Israel are made more like the heavenly host; they are made more like the angels who sing the praises of God in heaven. We can see this when we compare Psalm 22:3 and Psalm 80:1. God is enthroned above the cherubim and He is enthroned on the praises of His people. Thus, when His people join in the praise set forth in the Psalter under the direction of the appointed choir and orchestra, they are like the cherubim; they are the earthly heavenly host, as it were. Yet, it is still limited, because with David and with the Temple, only the “first-born” tribe, only the Levites sing these songs in the Presence of God. God governs the history of redemption by transforming each covenant administration into a more glorious one. While the glory of the covenant renewed with David is not complete, yet it represents a real growth and development for God’s people.

1See Bruce K. Waltke, “A canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” *Tradition & Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, eds. John S. and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), pp. 10f.

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## ANGELS

Angels and devils fight. We stand between them. What will the outcome be?

In the spirit world there is also good and evil. Even though not much is said about it, the Bible shows us very clearly how this conflict between good and evil began. At a certain moment the devil appears in Paradise to deceive man. Judas tells us a little more when he says: the angels did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling. They were rebellious angels who were not satisfied with the position God had given them. That’s how they became devils, under the leadership of the archangel, Satan (Adversary).

This war has begun in heaven, but later expanded to the earth. Satan sought man as an ally and Adam choose for him. Then man met God’s angels, the cherubs, as his adversary. They protected Paradise from which man was driven.

We continue to see this war develop throughout history. When Christ returns to heaven as the Victor there is no longer place for Satan. He is thrown out (John 12:31; Rev. 12). But woe to the earth, for the devil knows that he has but little time. The war on earth intensifies. But this also means that the devil has been restricted somewhat. Earlier he was the accuser who could incriminate us before God. But now he doesn’t have a place before God anymore, and has become

the great deceiver on earth. He tries to get his finger in every pie. He is everywhere, but try to get a good look at him, that is very difficult.

We can become frightened when we hear people speak of devils and evil spirits. Sometimes we can hear scary stories that send shivers down our back. Missionaries discover voodoo's, unexplainable phenomena, among people who are heavily influenced by evil spirits (Curacao, South Africa and South America). Also among American Christianity, especially in the South (black Baptist churches), there is talk of experiences with the devil. (Author Frank Peretti has become known for his books about such experiences.)

Does that mean that we now have proof for the existence of spirits, just because we have had experiences with the devil? Is that why we now believe in good and evil spirits? Here we actually come to the same point we arrived at in a previous article where we wondered if we could deal with angels at all since we had no experience with them. Now the pendulum has swung the other way. But the point is still the same; it would then be our experience that becomes decisive. And then we have to recognize how different people are. The one is very sober and says: I've never seen a thing of it, as far as I'm concerned we don't need to busy ourselves with this. While another, very sensitive individual might explain: I have spiritual interests, for me angels and devils are very real. Does this matter of existence of spirits depend on each individual's own ideas? For whom do these angels really exist? They are there for God, created by Him in the beginning. Not only was the earth populated but heaven was also. God created the heavens and all their hosts, also hosts of angels (Ps.34; Job 38). They were even called sons of God, servants of the most high God, attending spirits.

There is an enormous number of angels, they vary, there are different types of angels, with diverse tasks, rank and position. They are organized in armies with their own leaders. Some prominent angels are specifically named in the Bible: Michael, leader of an army; and Gabriel, the ambassador of God.

These angels inhabit heaven, they are the servants in God's palace, the heavenly court.

The Lord of Hosts! That's what God is called when he speaks through His prophets in the Old Testament. That's also how the Lord reveals Himself to John on Patmos. The hosts, those are the armies of God's angels who also come to earth as His messengers. Then the angel can say to John: I am your co-servant; we have the same task, the task of God. We must do the bidding of Him Who guarantees that the work of His messengers will have effect. It is for this reason that the angels are interested in the strife of the church on earth. There is much interest concerning us among the angels. The Lord Jesus tells of the joy among the angels when someone repents (Luke 15:10). They are extremely involved in how we fare (the little ones, 'their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.' - Matth.18:10). They are also interested in what is revealed in the preaching (1Peter 1:12).

With Hebrews 1:14 you can say two things: angels perform liturgy and diacony. They are serving spirits, performing service to God. They are sent out as servants of the elect; they help and support God's people on earth!

## **Heavenly Servants**

Do we notice anything of their work? Let us first say that we believe what God tells us about this, and we sing about it (Psalms 34 and 91). We also speak about this in our prayers: ‘as in heaven, so on earth’ - grant that we may fulfill our tasks as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven do theirs.

When the Lord deems it necessary we will also meet angels. When God has a message for man he sends an angel; e.g. about the birth, life, suffering, resurrection and ascension of Christ or the revelation to John. When people need comfort an angel can help (Hagar and Ishmael, the servant of Elisha). They who stand with us, on our side, are far mightier and numerous than the opposition. It should not escape our notice that these appearances have become fewer. At Pentecost no angels appeared in Jerusalem. Then God’s own Spirit came. God Himself came to His people in His Spirit. That is a special privilege for the Church. We have received God’s Spirit and He will always remain with us. And that’s why we believe that the supporting service of the angels is also there for us. It is not always visible, but real, actual, we may take it into consideration. In real terms: let us not make the angels ashamed when they see what we are busy with.

Our angels are with God, they are standing before His face. They are involved in our struggle here on earth. And they look forward to soon bringing us home, just like they jubilantly welcomed our Lord Jesus Christ. Soon they will bring us home, when we have overcome, because we participate in the victory of Christ.

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