

The God of this World

PAUL'S PORTRAIT OF SATAN IN 2 CORINTHIANS

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ΚΑΤΑ ΤΟ ΖΑΝΝΗΝ

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SATAN HAS THE DISTINCT DISHONOR of being the enemy of the Son of God, and of daring to oppose and tempt Him

(Matt. 4:1-11; 16:23; Mark 1:13; 8:33). Near the end of Jesus' ministry, through Satan's evil influence, Judas willingly betrayed Jesus to the chief priests and Pharisees (John 13:27; 18:1-5). Often referred to as "the Devil,"¹ Satan schemes against God's people with evil methods and traps (2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11; 1 Tim. 3:7; 2 Tim. 2:26). Because of Satan, creation itself appears under bondage to corruption (Rom. 8:22).

Outside of Paul's letters, the New Testament uses the name "Satan" over 20 times.² In his letters, Paul referred to Satan by

name 10 times. With several other titles, Paul described Satan as the Devil (Eph. 4:27), the evil one (6:16), the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4), Belial (6:15), a disguised angel of light (11:14), prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2), and the tempter (1 Thess. 3:5).

Paul knew the power Satan had over nonbelievers. When Paul was under arrest in Jerusalem and in his self-defense before King Agrippa, Paul said the risen Lord Jesus challenged him to serve and witness in a new way. Jesus appointed Paul to open the eyes of Jews and Gentiles "that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (Acts 26:18, HCSB).

The Enemy's Work

In 1-2 Corinthians, Paul's references to Satan's activities fall into four categories: deceiving, tempt-

ing, being subject to the larger purpose of God's will, and maintaining an evil identity. First, Satan's basic deceptive nature appears in 2 Corinthians 2:11, where Paul warned the Corinthians that Satan could take advantage or outwit them when they fail in their duty to forgive a divisive fellow Christian.³ Likewise, Paul captured Satan's basic deceptive character when he wrote that Satan disguises himself as an "angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). Satan's disguise was so effective that some Corinthians agreed with Satan's unrighteousness, deceptively disguising themselves as Christ's apostles (v. 13) and opposing Paul's ministry as an unskilled speaker (v. 6).

Second, Satan's longstanding role as a tempter appears in the context of Paul's discussion of sexual relations in marriage (1 Cor. 7:5). Paul advised spouses not to deprive their spouses sexually lest Satan would tempt them toward infidelity through their lack of self-control (see v. 2). Yet, Paul affirmed that no temptation is too strong for God's faithfulness to provide the believer a way of escape (10:13). Despite his ability to tempt, Satan's power is not absolute, for God, in His power and grace, limits Satan's power over believers.

Third, in 1 Corinthians 5:5 and 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul referred to Satan as functioning as an instrument within God's larger knowledge and grace (see Job 1-2). Without explaining how God works in difficult and painful situations, Paul affirmed that God's sovereignty is able to transform Satan's destructive power into a redemptive conclusion (see 1 Tim. 1:20; Rom. 8:28,38). For Paul, the only positive characteristic of Satan's work is God's ability to transform the enemy's deception, temptation,

Left: Part of the Nag Hammadi Library, end of the Apocrypha of John and beginning papyri from Thomas' gospel, which is mentioned in The Library of the Gnostics.

Above: Rising west of Jericho, the Mount of Temptation, where Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11). The structure at the top is a monastery.

BY BENNIE R. CROCKETT, JR.

DEMONS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD



HUMBABA

The Sumerian demon Humbaba, the giant who guarded the Cedar Forest on behalf of the storm god, Enlil. Images of Humbaba's grinning face supposedly frighten away the demons that might harm the home and its residents. Dated 1800–1600 B.C.



PAZUZU

Pazuzu, Assyrian demon of the southwest wind, which brought famine. Dated to 1st millennium B.C. bronze. Inscribed: "I am Pazuzu, son of Hanpa. The king of the evil spirits of the wind who go out violently in the mountains making rage, is me."



LION-HEADED DEMON

Greek, 13th cent. B.C. wall painting from the Mycenaean citadel. Demon in a hunting scene, disguised to look like a donkey. The demon holds a pole from which his prey hangs. This type of demon originated in Egypt.



LAMASHTU

Amulet depicts the Assyrian demon Lamashtu; dated 9th–7th centuries B.C. Black stone, incised. Pregnant women wore such amulets for protection from the lion-headed, bird-clawed demon Lamashtu, who supposedly killed infants and kept them for herself.



HADES

Second cent. A.D. votive relief from the Derveni region of Greece; depicts god Hades. The brother of Zeus and Poseidon, Hades was the most hated of all the Greek gods, as he was the god of the underworld; later came to be seen as the judge of the dead.

and evil into good that ultimately glorifies Him.

Fourth, Paul offered his most noteworthy images of Satan's evil nature and influence with the two phrases "god of this world" and "Belial" (2 Cor. 4:4; 6:15). In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul discussed his ministry and gospel message as shining light into pagan darkness. However, through the power of the "god of this world," darkness enveloped those who rejected the gospel, which caused them to perish (see Acts 26:18).

Related to Satan's evil nature, Paul's most piercing remark occurs in 2 Corinthians 6:15 where he referred to Satan as "Belial," a transliterated Hebrew word which meant "worthless" or "wicked."⁴ "What fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Belial?" (2 Cor. 6:14–15, HCSB)—no sharper division between Christ and his believers versus Satan and his evil maneuverings exists in all of Paul's letters.

The Believers' Understanding

How the Corinthians understood Paul's references to Satan is a complicated issue because of the puzzling social makeup of the city and the church. Corinth was a cosmopolitan and polytheistic Roman colony, the capital of Achaia, which in 44 B.C. Julius Caesar had reestablished and populated with Roman freedmen and army veterans.⁵ Because of its strategic location near the sea, Corinth was a wealthy city.⁶

Polytheistic in Paul's day, Corinthians celebrated the Isthmian athletic games with invocations to Poseidon, and worshiped in various pagan temples to Apollo, Asclepius, Aphrodite, and Octavia (Caesar Augustus's sister).⁷ Prior to becoming Christians, some Corinthian believers practiced idol worship (1 Cor. 12:2), and Paul accused pagans of worshiping demons (i.e., pagan gods) by eating food offered to idols (10:20).

According to Acts 18:4, Paul reasoned with both Jews and Greeks

on each Sabbath in the Jewish synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the Corinthian synagogue, and all the people in his house became believers in Jesus. Also, Titus Justus (a Gentile worshiping in the synagogue) and other gentile Corinthians believed in Jesus (Acts 18:7–8). Subsequently, some Jews beat Sosthenes, the succeeding ruler of the synagogue, in the presence of the Roman tribunal (v. 17). Possibly, this was the same Sosthenes, a believer and colleague of Paul, who joined him in writing 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:1).

Into this mixed social context of converted pagans and Jewish Christians at Corinth, Paul referred to the enemy as "Satan," "Belial," "disguised angel of light," and "god of this world." For Jews, both "Satan" and "Belial" deceived people and opposed God, and, yet, was subjected to God's sovereignty. Persons living in Paul's day would have understood the implication of Satan being referred to as "Belial." First-century Jews in

the Qumran Community said that wicked people followed in the ways of Belial and eventually would be condemned to everlasting fire.⁸

Some Greeks at Corinth may have understood “this world” within the context of Greek philosophy’s (i.e., Plato) negative appraisal of the material world.⁹ The influence of Plato’s philosophy on Greco-Roman religions came to fruition in the growing gnostic religious systems of the first, second, and third centuries A.D. Pagan Corinthians influenced by gnostic ideology could have understood “the god of this age” possibly as the present evil world created by an evil god.¹⁰

Paul’s phrase the “god of this world” relates the “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) which is passing away (1 Cor. 2:6; 7:31) to that which one must not be conformed (Rom. 12:2). The Corinthians—whether Jewish Christian or converted pagans—understood that the rulers of this age (1 Cor. 2:6,8) exemplified opposition to God through their crucifixion of Jesus.¹¹ The god of this world’s opposition to Paul and the gospel message coalesced with unbelieving and blinded minds (2 Cor. 4:4). Such a negative consequence betrays the reality that believers have the privilege of housing “this treasure in earthen vessels” (v. 7, KJV).

The Inherent Contradictions

Paul likened the weakness of the body with the evils of this world’s god, while he likened the strength of the inner self to that which

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (19/9/3)



Above: Meat market or “Macellum” at Puteoli, which is on the western coast of Italy. Paul admonished believers not to eat meat that had been offered to idols.



Left: Bust of the philosopher Plato, whose teachings influenced Gnostic thought.

is unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:4,16,18; 5:1). For those who think they are wise in this world, that supposed wisdom is sheer foolishness (1 Cor. 3:18-19), for the form of this world is passing away (7:31).

Although this world and its god(s) display eternally destructive circumstances, consequences, ideas, and behaviors, “the transcendent power belongs to God...so we do not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:7,16, RSV).

1. Matt. 4:1,5,8,11; 13:39; 25:41; Luke 4:2,3,6; 8:12; John 6:70; 8:44; 13:2; Acts 10:38; 13:10; Eph. 4:27; 6:11; 1 Tim. 3:6,7; 2 Tim. 2:26; Heb. 2:14; James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8; 1 John 3:8,10; Jude 9; Rev. 2:10; 12:9,12; 20:2,10.
2. Matt. 4:10; 12:26; 16:23; Mark 1:13; 3:23,26; 4:15; 8:33; Luke 10:18; 11:18; 13:16; 22:3,31; John 13:27; Acts 5:3; 26:18; Rev. 2:9,13,24; 3:9; 12:9; 20:2,7.

3. “For if you forgive people their wrongdoing, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don’t forgive people, your Father will not forgive your wrongdoing.” (Matt. 6:14-15, HCSB).

4. In the KJV, “Belial” appears several times in the Old Testament. Contemporary translations translate the Hebrew word with terms such as “wicked man,” “worthless man,” “perverted men,” “base fellow,” or “wicked woman.”

5. Strabo, *Geography*, 8.6.23, in H. C. Hamilton and W. Falconer, *The Geography of Strabo*, 3 vols. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856), 2: 65.

6. Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20, in Hamilton and Falconer, 2:60.

7. In the pagan mind, Poseidon ruled as god of the sea; Apollo, god of the sun, oracles, music, and the intellect; Asclepius, god of healing; Aphrodite, legendary for temple prostitutes; and Octavia, the focal point of the Emperor cult.

8. “The Community Rule,” 1QS II, 5-9, in Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 99.

9. Plato, *The Republic*, 509-513, in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. in chief Robert Maynard Hutchins, trans. Benjamin Jowett, vol. 7 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 386-88.

10. Irenaeus recorded a detailed gnostic account of an evil god creating an evil world. Irenaeus, *Irenaeus Against Heresies in The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 1:5:2 (p. 322).

11. Dominated by “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2), “this age” is the “the dominion of darkness” (Col. 1:13).

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