

The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent: A Canonical Approach to the Tree of Knowledge

By Nicholas John Ansell

Does not wisdom call out?
Does not understanding raise her voice? (Prov. 8:1)¹

She [wisdom] is a tree of life to those who embrace her;
those who lay hold of her will be blessed. (Prov. 3:18)

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to
the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.
(Gen. 3:6)

Say first, for heav'n hides nothing from thy view
Nor the deep tract of hell, say first what cause
Moved our grand parents in that happy state,
Favored of Heav'n so highly, to fall off
From their Creator, and transgress his will
For one restraint, lords of the world besides?
Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?
Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile
Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived
The mother of mankind ... (John Milton, *Paradise Lost I*, 27-36)

Introduction: On Trusting the Serpent (Within Limits)

This essay has three main aims: to foster a positive attitude to the revelatory power of creation as symbolized in the Bible by the call of (and to) wisdom; to develop a radically *anthropocentric* view of the *origin* of evil which also entails a *creation-wide* view of the *nature* of evil; and to explore a "canonical" approach to Scripture that can shed biblical light on these concerns in a way that historical-

Is biblical wisdom the art of hearing the "voice" of creation as the voice of God? Or was God's revelation countered by temptation and deception from the very beginning? In this essay, Nik Ansell suggests that a "canonical" appreciation of the serpent of Genesis helps us discern the human origin and cosmic nature of evil in a way that is missed by most popular and scholarly approaches to the Bible. Formerly a sessional lecturer in Philosophy of Religion and Theology at the University of Bristol, England, Nik Ansell is now lecturer in Theology at The King's University College, Edmonton.

critical and grammatical-historical approaches to the Bible cannot.

To this end, I will offer a rereading of the Fall narrative of Gen. 3, focusing on the significance of the serpent and its relationship to Satan. This is a test case in developing a hermeneutic that calls into question some of the predominant ways in which the Scriptures are read and heard in the Christian and scholarly communities. Attention to the canonical shape of the Bible, I suggest, reveals a relationship between the voice of the serpent and the call of wisdom that has major implications for our own approach to (the tree of) knowledge.

Our view of wisdom and knowledge, and thus our vision not only of scholarship but of life itself, is intimately related to our view of creation. Our ability to trust creation, however, is closely tied to our understanding of the origin and nature of evil. In the Scriptures, human history has its beginnings in original blessing rather than original sin. Evil has neither the first word nor the last word, yet its reality is seen as all-pervasive. So where does this evil come from? Was the power of temptation part of the world that Gen. 1:31 describes as "very good"? Why was there a serpent in the Garden of Eden? In pursuing wisdom today, can we trust the "voice" of creation? These are some of the questions I wish to explore.

One very influential Christian understanding of the nature of evil (recently popularized by the best-selling novels of Frank Peretti) assumes that accepting the biblical account of the existence of Satan, demons, and powers and principalities commits us to an "otherworldly" perspective in which the "real" battle with the forces of darkness takes place "above" this world of appearances in a supernatural realm far beyond our normal experience and natural abilities. In this view, special knowledge is required if we are to contend with the demonic realities that lie "behind" the various manifestations of evil which we may all encounter but which only the charismatically gifted may effectively oppose.² Thus, a particular approach to "wisdom" goes hand in hand with this view of evil.³ Indeed, our ideas of wisdom, revelation, creation, and evil are always interrelated.

This kind of severe dualism reflects some key theological distinctions that were formed in the pre-modern era. By contrast, much contemporary theology is characterized by a focus on our human responsibility for evils such as militarism, nationalism, and environmental destruction. In modern theologies that have been shaped by the "wisdom" of the Enlightenment, it is frequently assumed that biblical talk

¹ All biblical quotations will be from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

² For an example of such a dualistic-supernaturalist approach, see See Frank Peretti, *This Present Darkness* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1986) and idem., *Piercing The Darkness* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989). Some Charismatics will agree with Peretti only up to a point. For a very helpful overview, see Nigel G. Wright, "Charismatic Interpretations of the Demonic" in Anthony N. S. Lane, ed., *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), chap. 8. Here I am merely describing an extreme position within the wider Charismatic movement.

³ Given the obvious links between our view of wisdom and education, it is interesting that Peretti's *Piercing The Darkness* focuses on the struggles of a Christian school.

about evil powers and malevolent beings needs to be translated into more "down-to-earth" categories if it is not to distract us from the tasks at hand.⁴

This approach, while rightly critical of Christian views that are out of touch with the all-too-human origins of the problems we face, nevertheless raises questions about whether we have anything significant and distinctive to say as Christians to a secular world. In this essay, I wish to propose a "third way" that attempts to avoid the twin dangers of supernaturalism and naturalism, dualism and reductionism. I am convinced that we need to develop a view of the origin of evil that rejects the theology of Paradise Lost without losing touch with the story of the Garden of Eden. To this end, I will offer an interpretation of the biblical portrayal of the serpent and Satan that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been suggested before.

At the level of hermeneutics, I will focus on biblical texts in their final form and narrative order within the wider canonical context in which they are to be found. In this approach, Gen. 3 should be read, first and foremost, in the light of Gen. 1-2, then the Book of Genesis as a whole, and then the Pentateuch as the canonical unit in which Genesis is situated. Attention should also be paid to the New Testament development of themes from Gen. 1-3. This approach differs from that of popular theologies that attempt to build up a view of Satan from a collection of isolated texts. It is also a departure from much scholarly writing which tends to be preoccupied with reconstructing the (his)story "behind" the text rather than with elucidating the story "of" the text as it is presented to us.

Despite the dominant "divide and conquer" approach to the biblical writings, a focus on the final form of the Scriptures is certainly not unknown in contemporary scholarship.⁵ Scholars who approach the Bible in this way may be compared to linguists who choose to study the meaning of words by attending to their usage

⁴ For a classic example of a naturalistic-reductionistic approach, see Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology: The Mythological Element in the Message of the New Testament and the Problem of its Re-interpretation" in Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 1-44, especially pp. 1-2, and idem., *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 20-21. For scholarly resistance to Bultmann on the biblical portrayal of evil, see Trevor Ling, *The Significance of Satan: New Testament Demonology and its Contemporary Relevance* (London: SPCK, 1961), 1ff. Ironically, at the level of interpreting how the New Testament authors see the world, Bultmann and Peretti are in substantial agreement. This is because neither realizes that the categories of "natural" and "supernatural" are alien to the Bible. On this point, cf. J. E. Colwell, "Supernatural," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 669, and Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 41.

⁵ See, inter alia, Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), and the different (though not incompatible) approach of James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). There are many works available in rhetorical criticism and synchronic approaches to exegesis, the influence of which may be detected in Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes* (London: The Harvill Press, 1995). Special note should also be made of the Interpreting Biblical Texts series, the first volume of which is Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

in a living language rather than by seeking to determine their etymological origins, which may be irrelevant and even misleading for their present purposes. By analogy, historical or "etymological" questions such as "Where did the notion of Satan come from?," "How can inter-testamental material shed light on its development?," and "Which Egyptian and/or Mesopotamian ideas about serpents have influenced the biblical authors?" certainly have their place. Nevertheless, I will largely ignore such questions because, for the purposes of this essay, I am not interested in reconstructing the various (possibly quite different) ways the ancient Hebrews and first Christians might have thought about the nature of evil. My concern is with the message of the Bible as canon that cannot be reduced to the intentions and beliefs of its authors, their sources, and other influences.

As this is a contentious point in some circles, it might be worth clarifying with an analogy. The recent British film, *The Full Monty* (which tells the story of a group of unemployed steel workers who become male strippers), has not only received critical acclaim but has also sparked much speculation about the origins of its title. One oft-repeated suggestion traces this phrase back to the kind of breakfast enjoyed by Field Marshall Montgomery. Attempts have also been made to establish a link with a restaurant in the north of England and with the author and comedian Ben Elton, who used the phrase prior to the film. As far as I know, all these suggestions may be correct. They could even be interconnected. But to understand what "the Full Monty" now means in our language, one simply must see the film.

Historical-critical concerns are not illegitimate. If some of these historical speculations actually shed light on *The Full Monty* itself and on what people now mean by that phrase, then they are to be welcomed. Etymologies can provide important clues to current meanings. But the film, viewed in its final form, must take priority. What is frequently referred to as the "crisis" in biblical studies⁶ has much to do with scholars who believe that researching precisely what and how much Montgomery ate for breakfast is the best (or at least an important) way to determine what the phrase "the Full Monty" really means today. As an approach to the Bible, such a focus is virtually guaranteed to "lose the plot."⁷

In rereading the narrative of Gen. 3 and exploring the relationship between the serpent and Satan within the story that the Bible tells, my intentions are both critical and constructive. The tendency of dualistic views to locate the staying power of evil beyond humanity in a supernatural realm is supported by (and reflected in) the assumption that the Bible sees the primordial origin of evil in the fall of Satan,

⁶ See, for example, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, edited by Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), and Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970).

⁷ See the apt comments on the "atomism" and "geneticism" of much Old Testament scholarship in David J. A. Clines, "The Theme of the Pentateuch," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 10 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), 7-10. On going "behind" the text, see the end of "Satan and the Serpent" and also n. 60 below.

who, in the form of the serpent, subsequently seduced Adam and Eve into joining his rebellion against God. A central aim of this essay is to reject thoroughly this assumption and the hermeneutic that supports it. Instead, I shall insist that Gen. 3, unlike all the other accounts of the origin of evil in the ancient world, has been rightly identified by Paul Ricoeur as "the anthropological myth *par excellence*."⁸

The alternative interpretation of the story of the Fall and the origin of Satan that I offer below can be described as "anthropocentric" because it focuses on the way in which the entire creation--that is, not only the "natural world" but all that exists--has been pulled into the vortex of human disobedience. This discussion links the narrative of Gen. 3 to the nature of idolatry, which is arguably the central Old Testament category for understanding the nature of evil.

It is my contention that the phenomenon of idolatry--in which we give our religious allegiance to created realities with the consequence that they gain a power over us--not only sheds light on the New Testament language of "powers and principalities" but also helps us elucidate the nature of Satan and the serpent of Genesis. This perspective honors the important biblical conviction that the power of evil is not reducible to "flesh and blood" without directing our attention "beyond" the creation which has become tragically caught up in our sin. At the same time, my argument assumes that secular naturalistic categories are thoroughly inadequate for getting to grips with the evils that face us.⁹

As my title suggests, I believe that this investigation of the nature of evil has positive implications for our view of wisdom and for how we might approach the

⁸ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 232. My exegesis will differ from Ricoeur's, especially with respect to the role of the serpent. While I am open to the possibility that one or more of the numerous technical meanings of "myth" may shed some light on Gen. 3 and the nature of confessional language in general, I reject Ricoeur's myth/history distinction, preferring to opt for the "history of a special type," which he rejects on p. 235, n. 1. Thus, I also reject the approach of Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), which is rightly criticized from a canonical point of view by Childs in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 154-155. I find myself in basic agreement here with Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 48-62. Another very helpful discussion of this topic, which wisely refuses to oppose the historical and the symbolic by showing how the symbolism of a political cartoon can capture the significance of a historical event, see Albert M. Wolters, "Thoughts on Genesis," *Calvinist Contact* (14 December 1990): 4. Also very helpful is the concept of "certitudinal history" developed by James H. Olthuis in his *A Hermeneutics of Ultimata: Peril or Promise?* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 42-43.

⁹ For a very important example of an attempt to find a third way beyond dualism and reductionism in this context, special note should be made of Walter Wink's trilogy on the Powers, *Naming The Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), *Unmasking The Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), and *Engaging The Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). I am sympathetic to a great deal of what Wink says, although my own perspective differs from his on a number of points (cf. nn. 50 and 52 below).

tree of knowledge. I do not wish to read Gen. 3 as representing a positive step in human development as was popular in German Idealism." Nevertheless, in advocating a thoroughly anthropocentric view of the origin of evil, I am rejecting the view that the Fall was a response to a primordial power of temptation. I am thus not only taking leave of the kind of theology reflected in *Paradise Lost* but am also calling into question the host of Bible translations and commentaries of all theological persuasions that introduce the serpent of Gen. 3 as "cunning" or "crafty." For us as for Adam and Eve, there is, I suggest, a positive link between the call of wisdom and the voice of the serpent that must be carefully--indeed wisely--discerned. When we can make this connection, we should be in a better place to understand how the voice of creation might be heard in faith as the voice of God.

Towards an Anthropocentric View of Evil

Contrary to popular opinion, there is no biblical evidence for the widespread belief that Satan fell prior to the disobedience of Adam and Eve. There is, in other words, no Fall before the Fall. In the Old Testament, there are only three books that explicitly refer to Satan. His most extended appearance--as "the Satan"--occurs in the early chapters of Job. Otherwise, there are just two passing references to him in I Chron. 21:1 and Zec. 3:1-2. His origins are not discussed in any of these texts. The two Old Testament passages to which appeal is sometimes made for his primordial fall--Isa. 14:12-15 and Ezek. 28:12-19--are simply mock laments that celebrate the fall of human kings from power, as both evangelical and non-evangelical commentators have argued.¹¹ In the New Testament, there are just two references to a "fall" of Satan (Luke 10:18 and Rev. 12:9), both of which refer to his defeat in human history.¹² Traditionally, Satan is believed to have fallen to earth with a host of rebellious angels. Yet the very few biblical texts that refer to angels sinning and/or being ejected from heaven (Rev. 12:9, 2 Pet. 2:4, and Jude 1:6) refer to events long after the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

This leaves only the story of the serpent in Gen. 3, which will be the focus of our attention. Instead of letting this chapter tell its own story, the traditional interpretation assumes that this account of the Fall contains gaps that must be filled by

¹⁰ See Christ of Gestrich, *The Return of Splendor in the World: The Christian Doctrine of Sin and Forgiveness*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 92ff. For a more recent reinterpretation of Gen. 3 that also differs from my own, see James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (London: SCM, 1990).

¹¹ For a recent survey from an evangelical perspective, see Sydney H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books; Leicester: Apollos, 1995), 37-42. For a contemporary Roman Catholic perspective, see Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 238 and 322. For comments by scholars representing the Society of Biblical Literature, see James L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 560 and 686.

¹² Some may wish to include John 8:44 and 1 John 3:8 here. These texts are discussed in n. 51 below.

information allegedly gleaned from later parts of the biblical narrative. Appealing to various parts of the canon in this way does not amount to what I mean by a "canonical" approach to the text. The traditional reading does not explore the subsequent deepening of biblical themes that are developed or even implicit in the Genesis narrative. It reads conclusions based on isolated Old Testament and New Testament texts back into Genesis. Not only does the traditional reading do violence to the Genesis text, as I hope to show, but it comes perilously close to implying that its opening narratives form an inadequate introduction to the biblical drama. My counter-proposal is deceptively simple: we should begin by reading (that is, interpreting) Gen. 3 in the light of Gen. 1-2.

When we first meet the serpent in 3:1, there is no textual evidence whatsoever that anything bad has happened in or to the good creation described in Gen. 1-2. To assume that we are supposed to understand a "fallen angel" in this context is unwarranted.¹³ The text describes the serpent as the "wisest"¹⁴ of "the wild animals," a phrase that refers back to the previous chapters. By this we are meant to understand a creature made on the sixth day as described in 1:24-25 and named by Adam in 2:19-20.

Gen. 1:24-25 refers twice to "creatures that move along the ground" of which the serpent is clearly one (see 3:14¹⁵). It is thus of great significance to our understanding of the creature introduced in 3:1 that God says in 1: 26: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, *and over all the creatures that move along the ground.*" The connection with the serpent is reiterated in 1:28, when God tells humanity: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.

¹³ Although there is biblical warrant for linking the serpent and Satan, to be explored in "Satan and the Serpent" below, and although Paul tells us that Satan "masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14), Satan is never defined as a fallen angel in the Bible. Many major commentaries on Genesis stress that the serpent is not a satanic figure, especially given its description as a creature of God in 3:1. See, *inter alia*, Claus Westermarm, *Genesis 1-11*, 237-238, and Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, revised edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 87. For commentaries that accept this while still emphasizing the sinister nature of the serpent, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book Of Genesis Chapters 1-17, New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 187-188, and Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, volume 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), 72-73. For an example of the traditional identification of the serpent as the instrument of Satan, see Meredith G. Kline, "Genesis" in D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer, eds. *New Bible Commentary*, third edition (Leicester: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 84. Satan seems to be identified with the serpent prior to the Fall of Adam and Eve in *Wisdom of Solomon* 2:24, but I do not consider this a challenge to my position as this text is not in the Protestant canon.

¹⁴ On the NIV translation of 3:1 which describes the serpent as "more *crafty* than any of the wild animals," see n. 29 below. The connotations of serpents in the Pentateuch are explored towards the end of "Satan and the Serpent" below.

¹⁵ That God declares in judgment that the serpent will crawl on its belly (3:14) does not mean that it had not done so before. God is simply, though forcefully, doing what Adam and Eve should have done already: putting the serpent in its place (cf. Isa. 65:25).

Rule over the birds of the air *and over every living creature that moves on the ground*" (my emphases). The fact that the serpent not only moves on the ground but is described as "wild" suggests that it represents (and perhaps symbolizes¹⁶) all creatures and all aspects of the world beyond Eden that have not yet been domesticated.¹⁷ Yet the text makes it clear that Adam and Eve are called and empowered to rule over it.

Although it is a mistake to see the serpent as an evil being at this stage, it is nevertheless important to recognize that the opening chapters of the Bible do not portray anything in creation as "absolutely" good in the etymological sense of being "absolved" from or immune to the relationships in which it stands. When Gen. 1 speaks of a "very good" creation, we should not understand this in terms of a Greek philosophical notion of static perfection. The biblical account is thoroughly dynamic, viewing life before the Fall as on the move towards an eschaton, a fulfillment (in and) of history.¹⁸ It is also thoroughly covenantal or relational. The ongoing goodness of human culture and the non-human creation, which includes those realities symbolized by the serpent, depends on whether Adam and Eve will exercise the authority that they have been given and to which they are called.

Read as an introduction to the whole biblical drama, the opening chapters of Genesis tell us how the Creator began to fill and subdue the earth by making Eden into a home for Adam and Eve and by blessing and empowering humanity to do the same for God with the world beyond the Garden. To this end, they were to extend the work of creation, thus making the whole of existence into a place where God might dwell. The call to "fill" the earth (as well as to "subdue" it) goes beyond human reproduction to include the "cultural mandate" or the call to make history.¹⁹ To fill the earth humanly is a calling to let the earth be filled with God, to let the light of God's presence fill the darkness (Gen. 1:3). In Old Testament language this is the hope that one day the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14).

¹⁶ In my view, this text should be read as an example of symbolically intensified history writing that is focused on questions of ultimate significance. Cf. n. 8 above. On the choice of a wild animal and more specifically a serpent as a symbol, see "Satan and the Serpent" below.

¹⁷ On the significance of wild rather than domestic animals later in the biblical story, see Richard J. Bauckham, "Jesus and the Wild Animals (Mark 1:13): A Christological Image for an Ecological Age," in *Jesus Of Nazareth: Lord And Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 3-21.

¹⁸ On this point, see Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming Of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1996), 264.

¹⁹ This task is closely related to the meaning of humanity being made in the "image of God" (Gen. 1:26-27). While all the other creatures are made after their "own kind" in Gen. 1, this is not said of humans because we are made after "God's kind." On the "cultural mandate" of Gen. 1:28 as being as broad as life itself, see the quotation from Ludwig Kohler in Hans Walter Wolf, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, -1974), 164. See also Albert M. Wolters, "The Foundational Command: 'Subdue The Earth!'" (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 1973).

In the New Testament, the theme of "filling" the earth is picked up most explicitly by Paul in the context of his claim that God will become "all in all." For Paul, God "fills everything in every way," but this fullness is presently concentrated in Christ and his Body (Eph. 1:22-23)--a limitation that will be removed when evil is finally overcome (1 Cor. 15:28). This process is now tied to the redemption and restoration of creation. But for Paul, God becoming "all in all" does not signify a return to a state that existed prior to the Fall. Arguably, Paul assumes that God was not "all in all" in the beginning, even though the original creation was very good. While the coming of the eschaton to a fallen world will involve the eradication of the evil that we have introduced into history, it does not result in the clock being turned back. Instead, it will mark the completion of a calling and process that had barely begun before the eschatological movement of history was closed down by our disobedience.

Paul's language about God as the One who "fills everything in every way" (*pleroumenou*, Eph. 1:23) echoes the language used to describe the original call to humanity to fill the earth (*plerosate*, Gen. 1:28 LXX).²⁰ Furthermore, the subduing of evil and the filling with God's fullness that is now being accomplished by Christ and his Body in 1 Cor. 15:24-28 is explicitly linked by Paul to Psalm 8 and thus to the *imago Dei* and cultural mandate (by means of the quotation of Ps. 8:6 in Eph. 1:22). Thus, Paul would seem to understand the original call to image God, filling and subduing the world beyond the confines of Eden, as a call to finish God's creative work by bringing the whole world to its divine "fulfillment."

But, to return to Gen. 3, Adam and Eve fail to rule over the serpent. The creation that should have been blessed by humanity as humanity was blessed by God is now cursed. The serpent thus goes awry, no longer occupying its proper place in creation. To keep it in its true place as a creature that crawls along the ground will now be impossible without violence and suffering (3:14-15). Similarly, the thorns and thistles that were once easy to keep in check will now flourish and be out of control (3:17-18).²¹ The darkness, which was not evil in the beginning (Gen. 1:3), now resists being penetrated and filled by the light of God's glory (John 1:5).

In Rom. 8:20, Paul tells us that "the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it." Although New Testament scholars disagree about whether it is God or Adam who is referred to here, this may be a false dilemma. God tells Adam that the ground is now cursed because of him (Gen. 3:17). God's judgment, as I read it, only describes and ratifies what humans have done, though the promise of redemption is added. The scope of

²⁰ LXX denotes the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament (and other writings) frequently cited in the New Testament. For a helpful discussion of the Old Testament (rather than Gnostic) background to *pleroma* in this passage, see Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation and Commentary on Chapters 1-3*, volume 34 of *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 203-205. While Barth does refer to the creaturely filling of creation in Gen. 1 (see p. 204, n. 317), the link with the cultural mandate is not developed.

²¹ I think it is a mistake to see 3:18 as speaking of the origin of thistles and thorns as such. Cf. Isa. 5:3-6; 7:23-25 and n. 15 above.

human responsibility is indeed awesome: what we bind on earth will be bound in heaven (see Mt. 16:19).

The bondage or curse of creation is linked in Genesis to Adam and Eve's decision to eat of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." This tree, as I understand it, does not simply represent a limit which humanity must not transgress, as if its role in the story is entirely negative. It also has a positive significance, I suggest, that has gone unnoticed. Given the highly anthropomorphic nature of language for God in Gen. 2-3 (such as God "walking in the garden"), it makes good sense to see this as the tree from which God eats, forming a counterpart to the tree of life from which humanity is to eat. Both trees are in the center of the Garden, providing food for the covenantal meal God and humanity were to enjoy together.

While this interpretation may sound strange, it coheres well with the fact that Abraham is portrayed as providing food for Yahweh in Gen. 18:1ff. near the "great trees of Mamre," which may allude to the trees of the Eden,²² not least because Lot explicitly compares the surrounding area with "the garden of the Lord" (Gen. 13:10). This takes place just before God reveals that the promise made in 15:5 about Abram's descendants will also involve Sarah (18:9ff.). Thus, Abraham and his wife are to be the new Adam and Eve whose offspring will fill the earth. The meal also sets the stage for Abraham and God's discussion of justice and judgment with respect to the future of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16ff.). The covenant between them is so strikingly "mutual" that after Yahweh reveals his plan to destroy the cities, Yahweh stands in the presence of Abraham awaiting his response (18:22)²³ thus repeating the pattern of Gen. 2:19-20 where God waits to see what names Adam will give to the animals. A meal eaten in the context of covenant thus leads to God and humanity grappling together with the knowledge of good and evil.

It is also significant for my interpretation of Gen. 2 that meals were viewed as the occasion for teaching in the ancient world. This is evident in Prov. 9:1-6. The figure of Wisdom who sets her table is also described as a "tree of life" in Prov. 3:18 (see 11:30, 13:12, 15:4), thus linking this material canonically to Gen. 2:9.

The fruit of the tree of life symbolizes the fruit of human fidelity to the covenant. The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is also good food, providing genuine wisdom (see 3:6). But it symbolizes something that belongs first and foremost (and perhaps exclusively) to God's side of the covenant. If eating from the tree of knowledge is understood as gaining the ability to define good and evil, then the story is telling us that (in contrast to the naming of the animals in Gen.

²² The Hebrew term for "trees" in Gen. 18:1 differs from that used in Gen. 2, but this is not decisive for a thematic allusion. The relevance of the Eden story for the rest of Gen. can also be seen in the allusion to the fruit, cursing, and nakedness of Gen. 2-3 in Gen. 9:20-25. On the nakedness of Joseph (Gen. 39:12), see below.

²³ That the Lord stands before Abraham is an ancient Hebrew scribal tradition that, according to many commentators, has been reversed in the Masoretic Text. See the discussion in Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 168.

2: 19-20) the distinction between good and evil may only be established by God.²⁴ Alternatively, if it is seen as gaining the ability to discern the difference between good and evil,²⁵ then this may be viewed as the kind of wisdom that God might share with humanity in a covenantal meal. This fits well with the interaction between God and Abraham in Gen. 18. Adam and Eve are thus like the children of Deut. 1:39 who "do not yet know good from bad" (or "good and evil" [NEB]--the Hebrew for this phrase being the same as that used in Gen. 2-3).

If this latter interpretation is correct, then God may have originally intended the prohibition concerning the tree of knowledge to be temporary. This possibility coheres well with the fact that God will soon be leaving the Garden, to return "in the cool of the day" (3:8). The Hebrew of Gen. 2:26 stresses the fact that humanity can eat very freely from the rest of the trees of the Garden. But the tree of knowledge was something humanity could not "handle" (to paraphrase Eve in 3:3)--at least not while God was away.

The temporary nature of the prohibition may also be supported by an important incident in the Joseph narrative that contains a number of allusions to Gen. 2-3. When Joseph resists the advances of Potiphar's wife, he protests that his master has entrusted him with everything he owns, withholding nothing but his wife, thus echoing the Gen. 2 narrative in which God gives every tree of the Garden to Adam and Eve with only one exception. There is thus a thematic link (and contrast) between Joseph's subsequent nakedness (Gen. 39:12) and that of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:7). The temporary--or better, contextual--nature of the prohibition is highlighted by the fact that in resisting the wife of *Potiphar*, Joseph eventually marries the daughter of *Potiphera* (Gen. 41:46). Thus, in refusing to break covenant, Joseph later enjoys sexual intimacy--a form of *knowledge* according to the Hebrew of Gen. 4:1--at the right time in the right context. Taken on its own, this does not prove that the prohibition of the tree of knowledge is not absolute. But it is the kind of subtle textual interplay that should prompt us to consider whether the traditional reading is so self-evident.

It is significant that the serpent's claim that the wisdom to be gained from the tree would indeed make Adam and Eve like God (Gen. 3:5) is confirmed by God in Gen. 3:22. This kind of wisdom, I suggest, might be appropriate for those made in God's image. The disobedience and the deadly consequences come, however, in treating something that is only God's to give as a possession, as ours by right. Instead of being "like" God by "imaging" God, following the pattern of 1:26, Adam and Eve attempt to become like God without respecting the covenantal nature of

²⁴ For this view, and for a good overview of other suggestions, see Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 241-5.

²⁵ See the commentary in Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1985), 9, which rightly refers to Deut. 1:39 and Isa. 7:15-16. We might combine these two interpretations by saying that to grasp at the fruit of the tree in autonomy is to attempt to "define" the difference between good and evil, whereas to recognize that the fruit is God's to give is to begin to "discern" the difference between good and evil.

their existence. A potential gift of grace leading to great wisdom, but which has not yet been offered, is thus violated as it is grasped autonomously outside of the covenant context.²⁶ (Here we might compare the royal "wisdom" of Ezek. 28, a chapter with many echoes to Gen. 2-3.)

A serious objection to this reading of Genesis could be made on canonical grounds if it were to be shown that John's vision of the New Jerusalem includes only the tree of life and not the tree of knowledge. That this appears to be the case is, I suspect, because the theological tradition that I am rejecting here has distorted many of our translations. The NIV translation of Rev. 22:1-2 reads as follows:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) is strikingly different, however. It reads:

Then the angel showed me the river of life, rising from the throne of God and of the Lamb and flowing crystal-clear. Down the middle of the city street, on either bank of the river were the trees of life, which bear twelve crops of fruit in a year, one in each month, and the leaves of which are the cure for the nations.

The NJB is closest to the literal meaning of the phrase *enteuthen kai ekeithen xylon zoes* (22:2b), which could be rendered as "here and there a tree of life." The NIV is closest to a literal translation of *ta phylla tou xylou* (22:2c) as "the leaves of the tree." At least two points can be made in favor of the NJB here.²⁷ Firstly, its translation removes the logical difficulty of how a single tree of life could be on both sides of the river at once. Secondly, the section that it has placed in italics is intended to draw our attention to the presence of a (free) quotation from Ezek. 47:12, where the prophet has a vision of the temple, which alludes strongly to the Garden of Eden—a vision that includes "every kind of fruit tree." The significance of John's vision would seem to be that *all* of the trees of the Garden are now trees of life (the reference to "the tree" in v. 2c being understood as either grammatically²⁸ or symbolically collective).

²⁶ By contrast, Jesus is given the status of equality with or likeness to God by not grasping at it in Phil. 2:6-11. Although much traditional theologizing about the Fall shows up in C. S. Lewis' Narnia stories and in his science fiction trilogy, the theme of eating good fruit "at the wrong time and in the wrong way" is present in *The Magician's Nephew* (London: Fontana, 1980 [1955]), 162.

²⁷ See the discussion in R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, volume 2 of *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 176-177.

²⁸ Cf. J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, volume 38 of *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 346.

So the serpent is right; eating from the tree of knowledge does not of itself lead to death as if the fruit is simply unpalatable for humans. God himself observes that it makes Adam and Eve like him, as the serpent had suggested (3:22). As I read the story, the consequences are deadly for Adam and Eve because their eating from God's tree in this context is an act of disobedience. Death, which should be understood here not as mortality but in the sense of Deut. 30:15ff., comes not so much from eating of the tree of knowledge *per se* as from breaking covenant and thus no longer being able to eat from the tree of life (see 3:22). For those who grasp autonomously at life or knowledge, the fruit of covenant faithfulness (understood in Deut. 30:15-20 as life, prosperity, land and longevity, compare Prov. 2:22, 3:2, 3:14-16) becomes something that is beyond their reach.

The covenant is broken when the human couple eat from the tree, not when they converse with a fellow creature. The serpent does not have to be understood as lying, deceptive, or seductive. Gen. 3:1, I suggest, introduces the serpent as a genuinely "wise" creature, using the Hebrew word (*'arum*) that appears frequently in the book of Proverbs to denote a wisdom to which we should aspire.²⁹ Adam and Eve break covenant not because they trust the serpent but because they turn to it in a way that involves turning away from God's prior revelation. A parallel may be instructive: When God tells Adam that the ground is cursed "because you listened to your wife" (3:17), the point is not that husbands should distrust their

²⁹ The NIV translation of 3:1--"Now the serpent was more *crafty* than any of the wild animals"--is unnecessarily negative. In its attempt to put the serpent in a bad light, it cannot avoid implying that all of the wild animals are to some degree deceptive. The Hebrew term translated "crafty" here (cf. NEB, NRSV) is usually rendered "prudent" by the NIV. See Prov. 12:16, 23:13, 14:8, 15, 18, 22:3, 27:17, where a positive meaning is beyond dispute. The only clearly negative uses of the term in the Old Testament occur in Job 5:12 and 15:5. (For an example of a conservative exegete who insists on a positive meaning in Gen. 3, see G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis*, volume 1, trans. William Heynen, *Bible Student's Commentary*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 98). The term sounds similar to the Hebrew word used in the previous verse for Adam and Eve's nakedness. We might say that the humans are "nude" while the serpent is "shrewd" (cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 72). In my view, a close parallel may be maintained as neither quality was a cause of shame before humanity's Fall (2:25). Admittedly, Paul refers to the serpent's "cunning" in 2 Cor. 11:3, using a Greek word (*panourgia*) that does tend to have negative connotations (although Paul uses the adjectival form of himself positively in 12:16). However, in my view the serpent's wisdom does *become* misleading and deceptive, though only in relation to Adam and Eve's sin (see below). While my position is thus consistent with what Paul says, my emphasis on how the serpent's positive wisdom became perverted would not have been germane in his context, especially as the (Jewish-)Gnostic veneration of both the serpent and autonomous wisdom, allegedly based on Gen. 3, could have been prevalent in some of his churches. On the possibility that this forms the background to 1 Tim. 2:11ff., see Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not A Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992). Such factors highlight why a canonical reading of the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament should not focus on *isolated texts* stripped of their context, but should look, first and foremost, to the way Old Testament *themes* are developed in the New Testament.

spouses. Neither does God insinuate that women are inherently prone to evil.³⁰ The problem is that Adam listened to his wife while simultaneously not listening to God's commandment (see 3:17). The voice of creation must always be heard in the light of the voice of God. Only then may it be heard as the voice of God.

In other words, creation prior to the Fall is not inherently seductive. Neither is there anything suspicious about the fact that the serpent can "speak" in Gen. 3, as this is a common way of talking about creational revelation in the Bible (for example, Ps. 19:1-4, Prov. 1:20, 8:1-36).³¹ The goodness of creation emphasized repeatedly in Gen. 1 implies that Adam and Eve may be thoroughly open to the world provided their ultimate faith is in Yahweh. In the covenantal dynamics of life, humanity is called to experience the world in the light of God's prior (and ongoing) revelation. Creation is then able to fulfill its own calling, referring human beings to God as the true Origin and Destiny of existence and expressing God's presence with us. If humans keep covenant with God, creation is revelation.

But the ongoing goodness of creation depends on humanity being faithful. In the Fall, Adam and Eve grasp at the knowledge of good and evil rather than respecting it as a gift that God may give in God's time. Similarly, they treat the serpent not as a wise creature of Yahweh but as an autonomous source of revelation.³² As a result, the dialogue with the serpent is cut short. Its potential gift to humanity is violated. The chance to explore why Yahweh has told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge is missed. Although its perspective is clearly finite, the serpent raises good questions and makes accurate observations. Contrary to what the traditional interpretation might lead us to expect, it nowhere actually suggests that the human couple should eat from the tree of knowledge. But through human disobedience and foolishness, the wisest of the wild animals can no longer mediate God's wisdom. The pedagogical process has gone horribly wrong. The serpent's voice is now heard as the voice of temptation.

³⁰ Sexist interpretations of Gen. 1-3 are shown to be unfaithful to the text in Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, volume 2 of *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 72-143. Cf. my *The Woman Will Overcome the Warrior: A Dialogue with the Christian/Feminist Theology of Rosemary Radford Ruether* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 113-117. That Eve is called Adam's "helper" does not imply subordination or inferiority. In fact, this is a term of strength used elsewhere in the Pentateuch only of God (see Gen. 49:25; Ex. 18:4; Deut. 32:38 [implied]; 33:7,26,29).

³¹ Here we might also compare the positive role of Balaam's ass, who is the only other animal to engage in direct speech in the Pentateuch. For similarities between Gen. 2-3 and Num. 22-24, see G. Savran, "Beastly Speech: Intertextuality, Balaam's Ass and the Garden of Eden" in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 64 (1994): 33-55, reprinted in John W. Rogerson, ed., *The Pentateuch: A Sheffield Reader* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 296-318. This comparison of the serpent with Balaam's ass could have yielded a number of positive points of contact had a traditional reading of Gen. 3 not been assumed throughout.

³² We might say that Adam and Eve's grasping at the knowledge of good and evil is not simply a result of the way they related to the serpent, but symbolizes what they were doing in relating to this creature as if it was an autonomous source of revelation.

In turning away from God, Adam and Eve allow themselves to be misled by what must now *function* as a partial truth and must therefore now be a lie.³³ Rather than allowing an inherently deceptive creature to seduce them into evil, they allow the serpent to *become* a deceiver. As a creature that becomes inextricably caught up in human disobedience, it may only be described as fallen and cursed from this point onwards (in keeping with Gen. 3:14). The Fall is anthropocentric, yet the consequences are cosmic.

Eve attempts to "pass the buck" in 3:13 by telling God, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." While the traditional interpretation might tend to agree with her, it would be wise not to trust her (now fallen) perspective entirely. Perhaps the best way to express the complexity of the situation is to say that the serpent is implicated in what is still *human* evil (compare Lev. 20:15-16). For although the serpent is told by God that it is now cursed "Because you have done this" (3:14) following Eve's accusation of deception, it is significant that unlike Adam and Eve it is not interrogated about its motives--a fact that is most strange if God knows that he is dealing with a fallen angel (or his mouthpiece) intent on inciting the whole creation to rebel against him, but quite understandable if God knows that there is no malicious intent to be uncovered. As I read the story, the serpent, together with the other wild animals and the earth (see 3:14³⁴), is now *fallen* and *cursed*. It has become a source of temptation. But it is no more *punished* for being the origin of evil than is the rest of creation, which is also cursed. The difference between God's conversation with the snake and with Adam and Eve reveals that, unlike the human couple, this creature has not sinned.

If Gen. 3 does not present us with the traditional view of the serpent, neither does it lend clear support to the "free will defense," which is probably the theodicy that is most popular with philosophers of religion who aim to root their views in the Scriptures.³⁵ When Adam and Eve sin, God's reaction is not that of a Deity who knows full well that disobedience is always a possibility with creatures who have been given sufficient autonomy that they may choose to reject God rather than freely love him. Instead, God shows surprise, calling out "Where are you? ... Who told you that you were naked? ... Have you eaten from the tree?" (3:9-11). Divine incomprehension in the face of evil (compare Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35) highlights the fact

³³ In a biblical, covenantal view of truth (rather than in a modern, correspondence view), all truth is God's truth. In other words, for statements and (other) actions to be in the truth, they must ultimately take (their) place in covenant with God. In this view, truth and troth (commitment, fidelity) are closely related. Truth is nothing less than the creaturely manifestation and human incarnation of God. Error (cf. Latin, *errare*) is straying from the Way and the Life (cf. John 14:6).

³⁴ The Hebrew *min*--"above" in the NIV--should be taken as comparative not partitive, thus meaning "more than" rather than "from" in line with the similar phrase in Gen. 3:1. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 78-9.

³⁵ See Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) and Stephen T. Davis, "Free Will and Evil," in *idem.*, ed., *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), chap. 3 for two clear examples of this theodicy.

that the Fall of creation is not an "accident waiting to happen." There is no hint in the text that it is somehow "permitted" (let alone part of some secret divine plan). The origin of evil is deeply mysterious, as evil has no legitimate place in the order of things. The text of Genesis simply narrates. It does not explain. We may wish to speculate. What we are actually told, I suggest, is that human beings alone are responsible for the historical origins of evil,³⁶ while God takes responsibility for liberating us and the rest of creation from the effects of our disobedience (beginning with providing clothes for the naked couple in 3:21). The movement of the biblical narrative towards the Cross has begun.

Idolatry

The serpent, on my reading, is caught up (and in that sense implicated) in human disobedience, as creation has been ever since. In attempting to possess wisdom while God is absent from the Garden rather than being prepared to receive it as a gift and calling in the context of covenant, Adam and Eve play out the dynamics of what the Old Testament as a whole sees as the origin of evil in the world: the sin of idolatry, an evil which always involves our abuse and distortion of human and non-human realities. The serpent of Genesis, in other words, was the first victim of human evil.

Idolatry should not be understood as the sin of listening to the voice of creation when we should only pay attention to God, as if creation is inherently misleading. The parallels between Gen. 2-3 and Prov. 8-9 are instructive here.³⁷ While space prohibits a detailed discussion of the various ways in which Old Testament scholars have interpreted the female Wisdom figure who calls out to humanity in Prov. 8-9, I will briefly set out my own proposal by interacting with two of the most helpful suggestions that have been made.

Thirty years ago, Gerhard von Rad discussed this topic in his famous work *Wisdom In Israel*. Noting parallels between this biblical portrayal of Wisdom and *Ma'at*, the Egyptian goddess of law, justice and primeval order, he also stressed how this powerful figure had been transformed within the Hebrew worldview.

³⁶ Because I am stressing human responsibility, it might sound like I am advocating the "free will defense" myself. Although one could say that humanity was given the freedom to disobey (which in a biblical understanding of freedom would have to mean the "freedom" to lose its own freedom), I would not wish to offer this as an explanation of the origin of evil, which it tends to become in many (perhaps all) forms of this theodicy. Evil can't be explained without being legitimated, that is without being placed within a framework that *makes sense* of it. Here, Blocher, *Original Sin*, 56-58 is very insightful. When all is said and done, I do not want to "make sense" of the evil of innocent suffering. To say that humanity had the "freedom" to disobey does not explain *why* humanity chose the path of destruction. Unfortunately, a full discussion of these issues lies beyond the scope of this essay. *Encountering Evil*, cited in the previous note, provides a very useful collection of essays on this vital topic.

³⁷ The links between wisdom literature and creation have been increasingly recognized by Old Testament scholars. See, for example, Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom And Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

Unlike *Ma'at*, this Wisdom calls out to humanity. She is also clearly created rather than divine, an observation that militates against the traditional Christian interpretation of her as an attribute of God. Von Rad thus suggested that she represented a kind of "creation order," a conclusion reflected in his chapter title "The Self-Revelation of Creation."³⁸

While appreciative of von Rad's proposal, Roland Murphy has suggested the following modification. He writes,

The call of Lady Wisdom is the voice of the Lord. She is, then, the revelation of God, not merely the self-revelation of creation. She is the divine summons issued in and through creation, sounding through the vast realm of the created world and heard on the level of human experience."

Murphy also resists von Rad's tendency to identify Wisdom too narrowly with a mysterious kind of creation "order." He thus puts further distance between biblical Wisdom and the Egyptian *Ma'at* in this respect. While noting that "One need not deny that the presumption of regularity underlies the observations of the sage," Murphy argues that the metaphors used hardly suggest an understanding of Lady Wisdom as *Ordnung*. "Who has ever sued for, or been pursued by, order," he asks, "even in the surrogate form of a woman?"⁴⁰

We can accept the thrust of Murphy's suggestion while also maintaining von Rad's emphasis on the creatureliness rather than divinity of Wisdom, I suggest, if we understand her to be a personification of creation's capacity to reveal God.⁴¹ If von Rad's notion of order is problematic, his emphasis on mystery is insightful.⁴² Wisdom not only reveals the presence of God but also the direction that God would give to human existence. Wisdom is thus the key to abundant life, a mystery that remains hidden except to those who "fear the Lord" (Prov. 1:7,9:10, 31:30).

As I understand the call of Wisdom in Proverbs 8-9, true revelation is *mediated* by creation, having its origin in God. Life is thus first of all a gift, promise, and calling (*Auf/Gabe* and *Pro/Missio*) "before" it is received and worked out in human existence. This is why the Wisdom that calls out to us can be described as the "first"

³⁸ See Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (London: SCM, 1972), chap. 9.

³⁹ Roland E. Murphy, "Creation and Wisdom," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104.1 (1985): 9-10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴¹ Roland Murphy comes very close to this in his more recent work *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 139, where he writes, "One does not have to choose between God and creation in Lady Wisdom, as von Rad does. Ultimately the revelation of creation is the revelation of God. God speaks through wisdom/creation, which is turned to human beings and speaks in the accents of God. Such is the thrust of Prov. 8."

⁴² Ironically, this mystery is intensified by a number of difficulties in translating some key terms. Is wisdom the "craftsman" at God's side or a "little child" (Prov. 8:30)? Is she "acquired" or "created" in the beginning (8:22)? See the helpful discussion in Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 53-5. I prefer the latter of each of these translation possibilities.

of God's creatures (8:22ff.).⁴³ Idolatry consists in treating creation as the ultimate *source* and *referent* of revelation rather than as that which may reveal *God* to those who fear him (9:10). The *fearful* attempt to gain power over life via idolatry thus stands in contrast to the wisdom that comes to those who *fear* the Lord.⁴⁴

In this context, Adam and Eve can be seen to exemplify the core dynamics of idolatry by attempting to wrest the ability to distinguish good and evil from the very creation to which they were supposed to give guidance. In their disobedience, they oppose the true "meaning" of creation by not allowing it to be a gift of God and a revelation of God's wisdom. To the extent that creation is distorted by human sin, the gift and calling of life becomes the curse and temptation of death. The voice of Wisdom must now compete with the voice of Folly (who is also personified in Prov. 9). Through human disobedience, the food and wine that Wisdom has prepared for us (Prov. 9:1-12) is exchanged for stolen water and food eaten in secret (9:13-18).

Idolatry not only violates non-human creatures and prevents God from becoming all in all, but it also violates our own humanity. It should be pointed out that, strictly speaking, idolatry is not the worship of idols as such. In the Old Testament period, idols or graven images were used to localize or make present a divinity beyond themselves. Thus, the idol stood in the same relationship to the false god as human beings were meant to stand in relation to the True God. In fact, the Hebrew word for image and idol (*selem*) is often the same (see Gen. 1:26-7, 9:6 [image] and Num. 33:52, 2 Kings 11:18, 2 Chron. 23:17, Ezek. 7:20, 16:17, Amos 5:26 [idols]). Idolatry fails to recognize not only that there is only one True God but also that there is also only one true image of that God: humanity.⁴⁵

Just as human beings were supposed to receive the knowledge of good and evil from God and thus fill the earth and subdue it, enabling God to become all in all, so by investing features of the creation with ultimate significance and autonomous revelatory power, we have allowed what are (in effect) false gods to fill and subdue the world. The creation that we were supposed to rule has thus been given the power to rule over us, making humanity in its image. While humans were made to be spirits--by which I mean flesh and blood creatures capable of guiding creation and making history⁴⁶--tragically, through our disobedience, created realities that should have been within our care and subject to our control are given this

⁴³ Wisdom, which comes to us through (or as) the revelatory power of creation, would thus seem to be identified with the light created before all else in Gen. 1:3. This I take to be the light of God's glory/revelation that penetrates and fills the darkness. (Cf. Murphy in *The Tree Of Life*, 135, who asks of Wisdom, "Is this the glory of the Lord that fills the earth [Isa. 6:1]?")

⁴⁴ On these two different kinds of fear, see Ex. 20:20.

⁴⁵ See Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 64-5, and Crispin Fletcher-Louis, "Commentary: Genesis 1:26 and Exodus 20:4f." in *Third Way* 22.9 (December 1999): 21.

⁴⁶ Cf. Hendrik Hart, *Understanding Our World: An Integral Ontology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 292-318. All creatures have histories, are historical. But humans can make history in a unique way.

power. The idols or evil spirits of Militarism, Nationalism, the fertility religions of Canaan, Consumerism, and Scientism are thus born.⁴⁷ The spirits let loose by idolatry are not "flesh and blood" realities that can be reduced to the humans who have unleashed them or who now serve them. Such spirits are complex human and non-human phenomena that have been sinfully invested with a power that was originally entrusted to us as spirits or imagers of God. It is in this way that they have become "spiritual" powers.⁴⁸

In the New Testament, a common way of speaking of such idolatrous spiritual forces is as "powers and principalities." Paul uses such language to refer, not to "demons"⁴⁹ as is commonly believed, but to realities that include (or are closely associated with) the power of death, the present and the future, human offices and titles, the world atmosphere, religious rules and regulations, traditions, and even the Law--all features of creaturely life that today frequently need to be subdued and put back in their proper place.⁵⁰

Satan and the Serpent

In the New Testament, Satan is identified with or closely related to the serpent of Eden (see Rom. 16:20, Rev. 12:9 and 20:2). This canonical connection would seem to lend support to the traditional interpretation that I have been arguing against. By contrast, I would like to suggest that this identification can best be explained by

⁴⁷ For an incisive analysis of contemporary idols, see Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols Of Our Time*, trans. Mark Vander Vennen (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984). Cf. Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, chap. 9, and John E. Smith, *Quasi-Religions: Humanism, Marxists and Nationalism* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1994). Many Christian scholars (including Goudzwaard) have also made a connection between idolatry and reductionism in the various academic disciplines. See Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 180. This important insight also informs much of the discussion of reductionism in Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), chap. 10 and passim.

⁴⁸ I believe that the "personal" nature of evil powers and Satan could be explored along these lines. Thus in what follows, I will sometimes refer to Satan as "he." However, I will often refer to Satan as "it" as this is the pronoun we typically use for the creation. The personal nature of demons is more complex and is beyond the scope of this study. See the following note.

⁴⁹ I hope to address the nature of demons, which I distinguish from the powers and principalities, in a future essay. In that context, I will also develop a "charismatic" (grace-oriented), creation-affirming view of power and spirituality, a view of angels that does not see them as "matterless spirits," and a fresh understanding of the relationship between heaven and earth. For some comments on heaven, see my "Commentary: Colossians 3:1" in *Third Way* 22.1 (February 1999): 22. On angels see my "Commentary: Luke 20:27-36" in *Third Way* 22.2 (March 1999): 20.

⁵⁰ See Rom. 8:38, 1 Cor. 2:8, 15:24-26, Eph. 1:19-21, 2:2, 3:10, 6:12, Col. 1:16, and 2:25. This approach to the powers fits well with the exegetical suggestions of Wink in his *Naming the Powers*. But while he also uses the category of idolatry (for example, *ibid.*, 5, 77, 85, 105), he does not make its connection with the powers of the New Testament as central as I would wish.

seeing the serpent in the Garden as symbolizing a reality which was created good but which, in the Fall of creation, became that reality we are referring to when we speak of Satan, the Devil, or the Evil One.⁵¹

Virtually absent from the Old Testament, Satan rises to prominence in the world of the New Testament. If we focus our attention on the story "behind" the text, we will want to know what outside influences brought about this change or development in Israel's worldview and when this occurred. Viewed from "within" the biblical drama, however, our attention is drawn to the possibility that this Satanic reality is itself developing, perhaps increasing in power and influence as human sin increases over time.⁵²

Viewed from this latter perspective, I would like to suggest a three-stage development. In the first stage, the serpent of Genesis symbolizes a creation (or certain aspects of that creation) that is full of wisdom or revelatory potential. Originally intended as a gift and blessing to humanity that we were supposed to bless by our loving rule as imagers of God, this reality becomes cursed through our disobedience. It thus comes to symbolize the creation inasmuch as our world is caught up in human idolatry. The choice of a serpent as a symbol in this context can be explained in part by the fact that one of the most basic ways in which humans would have experienced alienation from God was in terms of their conflict with the wild animals (hence the portrayal of sin as crouching like a wild beast in Gen. 4:7).

In the second stage, we meet "the Satan" in the opening chapters of Job, a story that (regardless of when it achieved its final literary form) would seem to be situated in the Patriarchal period. Here, the Hebrew term is not a proper name, but refers to "the accuser" in a law court who brings a case against Job, the defendant, in the hearing of the Judge, who is God. "The Satan" does not represent outright evil; otherwise, God's tolerance of its presence would be hard to explain. I would like to suggest that in the Satan, we see a creation that has been abused by human

⁵¹ While New Testament authors were not addressing problems that necessitated teaching (or even recognizing) the distinction that I am making in their use of Gen. 2-3, nevertheless the claim that "from the beginning" the Devil was "sinning" (1 John 3:8) and was "a murderer" (John 8:44) would seem to be a reference not to some evil that the serpent supposedly engaged in prior to Adam and Eve's disobedience (which the text somehow fails to record), but to a time that began with the first sin (Gen. 3) and the first murder (Gen. 4). Neither New Testament passage is interested in ancient or contemporary acts of Satan that are or were independent of human sin. Rather, the focus is on how certain people reveal themselves to be like their father the Devil (1 John 3:10; John 8:41, 44). For a grammatical argument against the latter text being read as referring to a fall of Satan, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, volume 36 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 126, note h.

⁵² For the difference between viewing this topic "within" the biblical drama and attempting to tell the story "behind" the story, see the introduction above. For examples of the latter, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), chap. 5, and Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995), chap. 2. For another view of the development of Satan from what follows, see Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, chap. 1. See also Kirsten Nielsen, *Satan--The Prodigal Son: A Family Problem in the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

sin and has thus become hostile towards humanity, even though it still maintains something of a positive relationship with God at this stage. Its legal role is compatible with this suggestion as all of creation is understood to be in covenant with God and thus able to call out to him for justice (see Ps. 96:12-13, 1 Chron. 16:33, Luke 19:40, Rom. 8:22-23, and Rev. 5:13).⁵³ Its appearance in heaven need not signify an "angelic" being or status. Access to heaven is presupposed in the covenant relationship. Thus, the creatures of the earth (or their representatives) are pictured in heaven in Rev. 4:7, while believers are said to be in heaven during their earthly lives in Eph. 2:6. At the same time, it is important to note that the Satan is not just doing its job or insisting on its covenant rights. Its cynicism, hostility, and destructiveness (compare the Satan in Zech. 3:1) point to a creation that has become profoundly twisted.

In the third stage, we meet "Satan" as portrayed in the New Testament. Here, its nature has become so identified with the role of the accuser or prosecutor that it has become a proper name (as in 1 Chron. 21:1). This created reality, under the impact of idolatry, has become so distorted that it loses the positive covenant bond with God and is ejected from heaven (see Luke 10:18, Rev. 12:9). An ambiguous reality in the Old Testament, this is now an outright enemy of God and his people.

This Satan is also a far more powerful reality than his Old Testament precursor or manifestation. If an idol represents the way in which a creaturely reality (such as fertility or national identity) has been made into a perverse substitute for one of the many ways God may originally have wished to bless us and be present to us, Satan may be seen as a substitute for God in a more general sense as ruler over the whole creation (1 John 5:19, Mt. 4:8-9). Thus, he is called "the prince of this world" (John 16:11, 14:30, 12:31)⁵⁴ and even "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4).

The nature of Satan as a "god" sheds light on the fundamental unity experienced behind or between what might otherwise appear to be very diverse manifestations of evil.⁵⁵ Humanity, through sin, gives the power and calling with which it has been entrusted over to created realities that it should have shaped but which now shape it. Such powers and principalities, united in their (our) rebellion against

⁵³ On the covenantal agency of creation, see Brian J. Walsh, Marianne B. Karsh, and Nik Ansell, "Trees, Forestry and the Responsiveness of Creation," *Cross Currents* 44.2 (Summer 1994): 149-162, reprinted in Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (New York/London: Routledge, 1996), 423-435.

⁵⁴ The word "world" in the Johannine literature seems to refer at one and the same time to Israel and the world in its rebellion against God, a world that Israel has come to represent in the perversion of its priestly calling.

⁵⁵ Unity is fundamentally a matter of following one and the same religious direction. Thus, the true unity and the true diversity of our world (as correlates) will only become a full reality when all creatures are liberated to respond to God. By analogy, the Powers or idols, despite their great variety and (on one level) mutual hostility, are nevertheless fundamentally united when viewed in terms of their service to the god of this age. Thus, in colluding to have Jesus crucified, Pilate and Herod become friends when they had once been enemies (Luke 23:12). Similarly, the powers and authorities all work together to put Jesus to death (1 Cor. 2:8 but cf. Col. 2:15).

God, in turn give power to, even as they are empowered by, the god of this world in whom they come to live and move and have their being.

In the three stages that I have outlined, creation, inasmuch as it is caught up in human idolatry, becomes increasingly distorted by the growth of human sin until it becomes a power that is totally opposed to the coming of God's Kingdom. The ontological status of Satan in this model is that of an active reality that is external to human beings. This is not a figment of the religious imagination. Neither is it reducible to flesh and blood. But it is not a fallen angel. And it would not have come into being without us.

The serpent, in this view, is seen as a good creature that symbolizes those aspects of creation that call us to wisdom. Through Adam and Eve's sin, however, it becomes seductive and deceptive, thus symbolizing a world that has been cursed by human evil. This perspective not only enables us to connect Gen. 3 with the central biblical theme of idolatry, but it also coheres with the way serpents are viewed in the Pentateuch (the basic canonical unit in which the Book of Genesis is situated).⁵⁶

As proponents of a more traditional interpretation might also wish to draw on pentateuchal material to make their case, it may be profitable to reiterate what I mean by a "canonical" rather than historical-critical or grammatical-historical approach to the Bible at this point. One argument in favor of the claim that the serpent of Genesis is a sinister figure from the beginning appeals to the fact that snakes, as creatures that crawl on the ground, are classified as "unclean" in Lev. 11:41ff. The author of Gen. 3, so the argument goes, deliberately used the serpent as a symbol because he knew that his audience would associate it with death and unholiness rather than with God and life.

This is an argument that rests on the hermeneutical assumption that the best way to determine the meaning of a text is to get "behind" it to the intentions of the author, which are then said to be expressed in what has been written--an approach I have eschewed in developing my own position. If we evaluate this interpretation from "within" the story, however, it can be seen to be guilty of "putting the cart before the horse." The basic narrative order of the biblical story has been ignored. Canonically speaking, the first reference to the clean-unclean distinction occurs after the Fall in Gen. 7:2. There is also a close verbal parallel between God's cursing of the serpent with the words "You will crawl (*halak*) on your belly (*gahon*)" (Gen.

⁵⁶ This argument does not rest on positing a single author for the Pentateuch (though it should carry considerable weight for those who accept that position). But it does presuppose the canonical approach referred to in the introduction. For a pentateuchal reading of Genesis, see John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). While he also argues that the serpent's wisdom is positive (p. 103), he does not support this by connecting the serpent of Eden with the other serpents of the Pentateuch (see, for example, pp. 402-3), thus failing to put his own canonical approach into practice. Fretheim's brief discussion in *The Pentateuch*, 77, and Blocher's section on "The Eden Story and Biblical Inter-textuality" in *Original Sin*, 42-48, are also disappointing in this respect.

3:14) and the command in Lev. 11:42 that "You are not to eat any creature that ... moves (*halak*) on its belly (*gahon*)."⁵⁷ This links the uncleanness of the serpent in the Levitical legislation to its fallenness but not to its original nature.⁵⁸

The appearance of serpents in the narrative material of the Pentateuch suggests that using Lev. 11 to bolster the traditional reading of Gen. 3 is, at best, highly selective. In some references, serpents are clearly viewed as dangerous (Gen. 49:17, Deut. 8:15), yet they may also be agents of God's judgment in this context (Gen. 49:17, Num. 21:6, 7).⁵⁹ Harder to reconcile with the traditional view is the very positive role of the staff of Moses that turns into a serpent to demonstrate God's power and authority (Ex. 4:3, 7:15).⁶⁰ More surprising is the story of the bronze serpent that God commands Moses to make so that the Israelites may look at it and be healed from the deadly effects of the serpents sent in judgment (Num. 21:8, 9).⁶¹ This snake plays such a positive role that it is compared to Jesus himself in John 3:14.

In fact, the ongoing story of what happens to the bronze serpent provides us with the most startling canonical confirmation of the approach that I am suggesting. I believe that it also holds the key to understanding why the specific symbol of a snake (rather than any other wild animal) appears in Gen. 3. In 2 Kings 18, we are introduced to Hezekiah, a King of Judah without equal (v. 5) who "held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow him, keeping] the commands the Lord had given Moses" (v. 6). In telling us how Hezekiah "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done" (v. 3), the writer says, "He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it" (v. 4, my emphases). So here we have a clear example of a snake which was made under Yahweh's orders and given to his people to bless

⁵⁷ This is noted by Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 79. These are the only two occurrences of the Hebrew word *gahon* (belly) in the Old Testament.

⁵⁸ In an interesting variation on the kind of argument I am rejecting, P. Wayne Townsend in "Eve's Answer to the Serpent: An Alternative Paradigm for Sin and Some Implications in Theology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 33.2 (November, 1998): 399-420, argues for a link between Eve's (correct) insight that the tree is not to be touched (Gen. 3:3) and the prohibition against touching unclean food in, for example, Lev. 11:8. This too ignores the distinction between Creation and Fall. But it also raises the following question: If, within the wider canon, the clean/unclean food distinction is *temporary* (cf. Acts 10:9ff.), why not the prohibition against the tree of knowledge?

⁵⁹ On the positive cultural significance of Gen. 49:17 (Jacob's prophecy for the tribe of Dan), see David Hilborn, *Picking Up the Pieces: Can Evangelicals Adapt to Contemporary Culture?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), chap. 6, and his "Commentary: Gen. 49:13-17 & 19," *Third Way* 21.3 (April 1998): 23.

⁶⁰ For a helpful discussion of the Egyptian background to the serpent-staff, see John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), chaps. 5 and 8. As his investigations shed light on God's confrontation with Egypt recorded in the text, this work illustrates how going "behind" the text need not be in opposition to a focus on the story that the text is telling. But the canonical investigation into the significance of serpents that I am offering is not *dependent* on such historical research (though it may be *enhanced* by it).

them, but which now has to be destroyed because it gets caught up in their idolatry. The serpent of Genesis, I am suggesting, should be interpreted in a similar fashion.⁶²

Is There a Future for the Serpent?

Given the perspective I have been outlining, it follows that redemption is to be seen in terms of the reestablishment of humanity in its task of filling and subduing the earth, thus returning those created realities that have gone awry to their proper and legitimate place in creation. Only then can God become all in all. What might this mean for (those realities symbolized by) the serpent?

In the context of redemption, the human rule over creation is not simply a matter of obeying the cultural mandate of Gen. 1. It now involves walking in the way of the cross. The theme of dominion, which occurs for the first time in the opening chapter of the Bible, is spelled out in Psalm 8. When Paul tells us that "God placed all things under [Christ's] feet" (Eph. 1:22), he is quoting from this psalm (v. 6) and understanding this dominion in the light of the crucifixion.

Paul sees Jesus as fulfilling a role that is, in principle, given to all human beings. This position of authority, he says in the following verses, is now extended to Jesus' followers. In Gen. 1, God rested on the seventh day to show that the stage was now set for the human task. Adam and Eve could "rest" in the knowledge that they had been given all they needed to bring God's work to fulfillment actively. Similarly, we may accept the gift of God's "finished work" in Christ and then actively implement that victory in the power of the Spirit. Creation and redemption as gifts promises of God's grace are also human callings to be pursued in the power of that divine grace and in the grace of that divine power. Thus, Paul, after emphasizing the all-encompassing scope and sufficiency of Christ's death on the cross (Col. 1:20-22), can go on to write, "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions" (Col. 1:24).

This perspective presupposes not only a high Christology, but also a high ecclesiology. I have already drawn attention to the way Paul alludes to the command in Genesis to fill the earth in the way he speaks about God filling everything in every way in Eph. 1:23.⁶³ He may also have a Christological and ecclesiological fulfillment to Dan. 2 in mind here, for in that vision, a rock that is uncut by human hands strikes and shatters a giant statue, representing the four kingdoms that would

⁶¹ The same Hebrew word that appears in Gen. 3 is used in all these references (and in 2 Kings 18:4 to be discussed below). It does not appear in Lev. 11.

⁶² The point I am making is compatible not only with the possibility that both passages were penned (or took shape orally) at the same time but also with the possibility that Gen. 3 (in some sense) lies behind 2 Kings 18, or vice versa. Attention to the canonical shape of the Scriptures does not require adherence to any particular authorship theory.

⁶³ See "Towards an Anthropocentric View of Evil" above. On the links between the Cosmic Christ of Eph. 1 and Gen. 1, see Crispin Fletcher-Louis, "Commentary: Genesis 1:26 and Ephesians 1:22," *Third Way* 22.10 (January 2000): 22.

rule over God's people, and this then becomes a huge mountain that "fills the earth" (*eplerosate pasan ten gen*, Dan. 2:35, LXX compare Gen. 1:28, LXX). An important strand of Pauline teaching about the Church would have us believe that if Jesus is that rock, we are the mountain. If Jesus is the cornerstone, we are the rest of the temple (Eph. 2:20-21). If Jesus is the head, we are the body (Eph. 1:23). If Jesus is the New Adam, we are the New Eve (Eph. 5:29-32). We are the fullness of Christ, in whom is the fullness of God. That means that we extend the incarnation beyond the limits of the one man, Jesus. As Jesus himself says in John's Gospel: "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). Jesus and the Church are the New Adam and Eve who are to rule together over the creation as mediators of the fullness of the God who fills everything in every way.

The scope of redemption is as wide as creation, for God has "reconciled to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven through [Christ's] blood shed on the cross" (Col. 1:20). Central to the present discussion is the fact that the powers and principalities, explicitly mentioned four verses earlier, are included in this process of reconciliation (see 2:15), a process in which the Church is to play a key role (Eph. 3:10).⁶⁴ Also crucial to the present discussion is the fact that the task of subduing the creation is to be done by implementing the victory of the crucifixion and thus by walking in the way of the cross. Our stance towards the creation is to be one of suffering love, that it might be liberated from the effects of our disobedience.

In place of "righteous indignation" against Satanic powers, I am proposing a thoroughly anthropocentric view of the *origin* of evil and a creation-wide view of the *nature* of evil. We are called to recognize that the rest of creation (including non-human realities and cultural phenomena) has become embroiled in our sin and is thus in need of liberation. For as Paul says, echoing the language of the Exodus,⁶⁵ "the whole creation [which] has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time ... waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed [for it too] will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:22, 19, 21).

The whole world is waiting for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed that they (we) might restore shalom to the rest of creation in the power of the Spirit. For the Church that is faithful to its calling, there will indeed be conflict with powers that are not flesh and blood. But while the language of the Satanic and demonic may often be entirely appropriate, we must not lose sight of the fact that the real enemy is, at root and in origin, always ourselves."

⁶⁴ Cf. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 5.

⁶⁵ See Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "Exodus and the Intertextual Transformation of Tradition in Romans 8.14-30," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 54 (1994): 29-56.

⁶⁶ Forms of "spiritual warfare" (to use language popular in the Charismatic movement) that distract us from this central reality need to be recognized as strategies of avoidance and projection. At the same time, we ignore the genuine insights and intuitions of the Charismatic

As we seek to bring a Christian analysis of evil to bear on and in our various cultural pursuits (including the sphere of scholarship), two themes need to remain very central: repentance and hope. The first step in our own liberation and in the healing of the whole creation lies in humanity taking responsibility for the curse we have brought (and continue to bring) on our world by subjecting it to our idolatry and thus letting it gain a spiritual power over us. Repentance sets us free to live in expectation of the final liberation of all God's creatures, including those realities symbolized by the serpent of Genesis. For in the perspective I have been developing, Satan will only be thoroughly defeated when the serpent is put in its place and is enabled to become the "wisest of the wild animals" once again.⁶⁷

This might sound shocking in the light of our traditional orthodoxies. But if I am right, then this has major implications for our approach to wisdom, the revelatory power of creation, and (the tree of) knowledge. Thus, as I draw this discussion to a close, I will conclude by exploring the canonical intertextual interplay of some key scriptures to see whether such a hope can claim any biblical support.

In this context, it would do well for us to bear in mind the vision of peace between the wild and domestic animals in Isa. 65:25, where God says, "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain." This was a striking vision in a world in which domesticated animals were often powerless to protect themselves from the creatures of the wild. In the Old Testament, God's people often found that they could identify with the vulnerability of domestic animals when they were facing the hostility of their own human enemies. It is in this light that the Psalmist (in Ps. 74:19) can pray, "Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts; do not forget the lives of your afflicted people forever." Conversely, in Isa. 11:8, we are also promised that "The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest." When Jesus is said to be "with the wild animals" in the desert in Mk. 1:13,⁶⁸ we see this promise coming true for the Second Adam.

Later in his ministry, when Jesus sends out the twelve into extremely hostile territory in Mt. 10, he uses language drawn from this deadly conflict within the animal kingdom. Perhaps he is alluding to these very Old Testament passages in the famous words of v. 16 when he refers to the dove, together with the wolf, the lamb, and the serpent. If Jesus' words are read in the light of Isaiah's vision, we may be hopeful about how this conflict will finally turn out when God is all in all.

movement at our peril. My aim is to redirect, not reject, Charismatic theology,

⁶⁷ I am, of course, not arguing here for a future for Satan per se, that is, Satan as evil. Ultimately, evil has no future. My concern is with the serpent (and what it symbolizes). Hence, a text such as Rev. 20:10 is not a major obstacle. Furthermore, I would interpret this text as referring to what happens to Satan in this present age rather than to a judgment that is still to come. I have explored this in some detail in an unpublished manuscript entitled *The Birth-Pangs of the New Creation: A Covenantal Reading of the Book of Revelation*. But the reinterpretation of the final chapters of Rev. is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶⁸ Cf. Bauckham, "Jesus and the Wild Animals."

Given the deadly nature of the evil that the disciples are facing, it is striking that Jesus' language contains a positive reference to the creature that Gen. 3:1 introduces as "the wisest of the wild animals." This is, to say the least, not what our most time-honored theologies would anticipate. Yet it coheres surprisingly well with the perspective that I have been developing in this essay. Having authorized his disciples to "drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Mt. 10:1), Jesus tells them (in 10:16) that he is sending them out "like sheep among wolves," exhorting them--as he exhorts us--to be not only "as innocent as doves" but also "as wise as serpents."⁶⁹

⁶⁹ This essay is an edited version of a paper entitled "Putting the Serpent in its Place: Towards an Anthropocentric View of Evil" that was first presented at a conference on the demonic organized by the Theological Forum in Swanwick, England, on 27 February 1996. This forum was set up to explore "a radical charismatic agenda." It was revised for presentation to an education think-tank for the Open Book project of the Bible Society in Cheltenham, England, on 19 November 1998. Thanks to David Collins, Ruth Deakin, Roger Forster, Henk Geertsema, Laura Keller, Jim Olthuis, Lloyd Pietersen, David Smith, and Alan Spicer for their comments. Thanks also to Roger Olson and Bruce Longnecker for their suggestions and for passing on the comments of other scholars to me.

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