

FORMS OF TRANSCENDENT EVIL IN THE BIBLE

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ABSTRACT

In accordance with the multi-tiered and complex worldview of the Bible we can see different forms of evil at work in the world, besides the individual evil of human beings:

- I. There is the evil "*from outside*", the chaotic fringes of the created world: the nameless chaos that tries to overpower and swallow the good order of creation.
- II. The evil "*from below*", the realm of demons and death: It brings destruction and decay to life in general but especially to human beings
- III. Then there is the evil "*from above*": supernatural powers of the heavens, the "gods" (of this world). They try to dominate and control the world of man.
- IV. Lastly, there is another, intermediate, evil "*from above*": the collective evil of fallen human structures institutions and ideologies, that idolise or even divinize themselves and put man under their sway.

In the wake of the coming of Christ, the New Testament modifies this worldview at several points. The major new insights are:

- The redeemed of God, his church, are closer to him "in the heavenlies" than any other spiritual power or entity.
- All evil is *part of a complex whole* that originates with "Satan", its mastermind and ruler, who *acts out of a fundamental opposition to God, to man* made in the image of God, and to the *goodness of creation* in general.
- At the same time *evil in all its manifestations has been fundamentally overcome* through the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in Christ. But the completion of this process will only take place with the return of Christ and the final judgement.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of the origin and shape of Evil is one of the ancient questions of mankind. In any tangible sense it remains unanswered even in the Bible. However, different perceptions and experiences have arisen over the course of 2000 years of men and peoples walking with their God, which have found their way into the scriptures. To gain a new perspective that goes beyond any cliché or "preexisting" spiritual knowledge, we must first observe, be sensitive, and give justice to those individual experiences and testimonies, however alien they might seem to us. If we then pay attention to how they are continued, modified, and deepened over the course of God's history with his people, we can attain a nuanced and plausible position. We might not achieve a comprehensive explanation, but it will help us understand modern day dynamics of both individual and social processes, approach collective structures and systems, as well as confront undisguised, destructive, and nihilistic malevolence.

In this paper the focus will be on the transcendent aspects of Evil. That is not to say the human side of it is insignificant; quite the opposite. But it is well-researched and much more familiar to us than the side of Evil that surpasses ("transcends") our immediate understanding. It lies "behind" our tangible world, and yet affects it continuously. To draw a modern-day analogy: the operating system of this world is infected with a virus on different levels, whose aim is self-destruction.

Two preliminary remarks before we start:



1. *How to interpret Biblical passages:* Many are used to look at Biblical verses and passages in an isolated way and then combine the different insights into a system. But there are two major problems with this approach. On the one hand *the larger context of a statement* is simply ignored – e.g. its role as part of an elaborate narrative structure, an extended argument or its function within the Biblical book itself. But these larger contexts are often crucial for the real meaning of a certain passage. On the other hand we often overlook the fact, that the Bible is not a book in the traditional sense of the word. Instead it is a whole *library of at least 66 books*, that were composed over a period of more than a thousand years. The individual books offer insights gained from the revelation and experiences that people had in their time with a God, who spoke to them, led them and revealed himself to them more and more deeply. And he did that in a way that was compatible with their horizon and level of understanding – their surrounding culture(s) and worldview.¹ Therefore the revelation of later scriptures *deepens* the insights of earlier ones, *modifies* them or even *corrects* them; at least they are put *in a larger framework* of both the continuous and ever new acts of God. This can be most easily seen in the interaction of Old and New Testament, but is true also within the Old Testament with its 1.000 years of history with God. Therefore we cannot simply add up Biblical statements but need to *appreciate their role within the history of revelation* and so honor their true meaning.
2. *About this paper:* In a first step we will look at creation and primordial history (Gen 1–11), because these texts establish a theological foundation for the Biblical worldview. Creation establishes the *different realms* into which evil will break in later; then primordial history narrates this very process with its *first manifestations*. After that we will look more closely at two of these dimensions, that of *Chaos* and of the *Heavenly Powers*. And finally we will examine some of the major *modifications in the New Testament*.

1. THREE BASIC FORMS OF TRANSCENDENT EVIL

The complex collection called the Torah, the five books of Moses, establishes the spiritual and theological foundation for the whole of the Old Testament and is therefore placed at its beginning. Before the Torah introduces the central theme of God's history with Israel in Gen 12, the parameters of the world are described in the form of an establishment of foundations: *creation* (Gen 1–2:3) and the so-called "*primordial history*" in Genesis 2:4–11. The material that is compiled there varies greatly: it consists of a highly complex theological text in Genesis 1, narratives about the origin and fall of man in Genesis 2-4, stories about catastrophes ² in Genesis 6–9 and 11:1-9, genealogies of families and peoples (Gen 5; 10; 11:10ff) and an occasional mythical tale (e.g. Gen 6:1-4).

We do not need to be concerned with the complex background behind all these traditions. What is crucial though, is their compilation into the present final text. Here these narrations illustrate how God's original creation came to be what it is now. For this purpose, all these different traditions are employed.

¹ In the OT this is broadly the culture(s) of the Ancient Near East, in the NT (besides the OT) the Jewish-Hellenistic culture which we have to take into account for a better understanding of Biblical texts. That helps us to set aside our traditional, religious or secular "glasses". Cf. for that perspective: John H. Walton, D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture. Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013.

² "Catastrophe" also in its original sense of "turning point", e.g. in a tragedy.



1.1. CREATION AS ORDERING OF THE WORLD (Gen 1)

Gen 1 describes the creation of order out of the proverbial “tohubohu”,³ the abysmal chaos of the primal flood (*tehom* = “deep, watery abyss”). In the first three days, God establishes *different realms*; during the next three days he creates *their inhabitants*. The former comprises the creation of light (and thus the emergence of *perception* and knowledge); after that comes the formation of the firmament (the “expanse”), which *separates* the primal flood into the waters above and below. Then follows the establishment of the earthly realm with the creation of plants. Now all the parameters are in place. In the following three days these three realms are populated by their respective “inhabitants”: three kinds of stars in the firmament, three kinds of inhabitants of the sea and the sky (sea-monsters/*tannin*, fish and birds), and finally, three kinds of land animals. All this finds its pinnacle in the *creation of humanity*. Finally, on the last day God rests from all his work. Biblically speaking, “resting” means more than just ceasing to work. It always means settling down and taking permanent residence: Therefore, on the seventh day, *God takes residence in his own creation*.⁴

Creation: Dimensions & Order

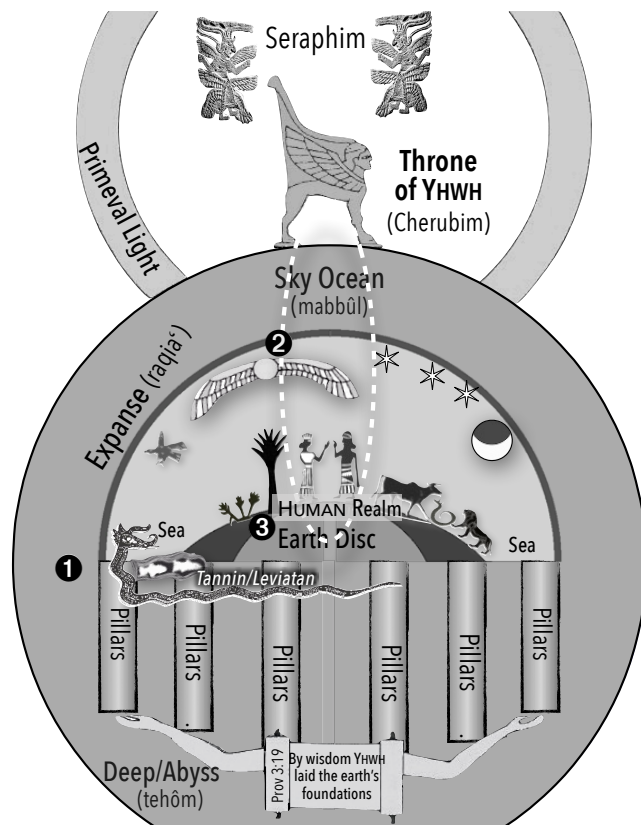
DIMENSIONS

- Day 1 **Light** (→ Darkness)
- Day 2 **„Expanse”** (separation):
2x Water ① ②
- Day 3 **Sea and Land;**
2x Plants ③

INHABITANTS

- Day 4 **Lights** 3x: Sun, Moon, Stars
- Day 5 **Water & Air**
3x: „Sea-Monsters”, Fish, Birds
- Day 6 **Earth:** 3x Land Animals, Man

- Day 7 **Sabbath of God:**
Indwelling



The illustrations make use of historical images from the Ancient Near East

Creation in the Bible, therefore, is first and foremost the establishment of a highly complex, amazingly interwoven *order of realms* and their inhabitants – the creation of a *cosmos*. The Greek word *kosmos*

³ Hebrew: „void/formless and empty”. The ancient Jewish translation into Greek, the so-called “Septuagint” (abbreviated as “LXX”), renders this phrase as “invisible and unformed”.

⁴ In Gen 2:4 it is taken for granted that God “walks” in the innermost sanctuary and center of creation, the “Garden of Eden”. Cf. the same idea with regard to Israel’s “rest”, e.g. Dtn 12:9; Jer 31:2ff; Hebr 4:9f.



describes it accurately; it means both “ornament” and “order” as well as “world” – this wonderfully ordered and thus beautifully “adorned”⁵ world established by an intelligent creator: God.

1.2. THE FALL OF MAN INTO AUTONOMY (GEN 2-4)

In Gen 2:4 the picture starts to change. The story is no longer about establishing order in the world, it now deals with “primordial history” and how the good and ordered world turned into the world as we know it now.⁶ At first, it takes a slightly different look at the creation of man. As in Genesis 1 he is put into an ordered realm: the Garden of Eden, an image of an ordered and protected place in the center of the earth.⁷ But Man has now one important boundary, one prohibition: not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Yet he consumes the forbidden fruit and *incorporates* it (Gen 3). Now he is able to gain insight into the forbidden independently from God – into Evil, which has not yet emerged. What is crucial here is that the Biblical “knowing” does not happen on an intellectual, analytical level but through a holistic “opening up” of one’s inner core for the object of knowledge and its dynamics. Therefore, this “knowledge” entails *welcoming the very dimension of Evil into one’s life*. This, however, has dramatic consequences: Man falls from the unbroken community with God. The representative of God on earth, the guardian of creation, has opened himself up for Evil. *From here on, evil has access to God’s creation – and threatens its order.*

The consequences of the fall become immediately apparent. Man is cast out of the *presence of God* and falls into *disintegration* – with *himself* (i.e. shame), the *other gender* and therefore *fellow man* in general, as well as the life-giving *earth – creation* itself. Eventually he will die. Starting with his sons the coming generations are increasingly marked by murder, exile and exponential revenge (Gen 4).⁸

With death, a new “realm” opens up. It is rather a “non-realm”: the “Sheol”, the netherworld, realm of the dead.⁹ This is depicted in another description of creation: Job 26:5-14. Here the world of the dead, the “abyss” (*abaddon*) and the “void” (*tohu*) or “nothing”¹⁰ come into view. At the same time, the throne of God is located “above the clouds” and therefore invisible (or “transcendent”).

The “inhabitants” of such an anti-realm, the dead (sometimes described as the “shades”¹¹) are treated in the Old Testament as being cut off from God; they have fallen from his good and wholesome order.¹²

⁵ The seemingly unrelated terms “cosmos” und „cosmetics” have a common root.

⁶ It begins with the headline in Gen 2:4: “This is the *account of the development* (*toledot*, literally: „begettings”) of the heavens and the earth“. The word *toledot* appears 10 times in Gen as a headline (“superscript”) or a closing note (“subscript”).

⁷ “Eden” means „delight”, “bliss”.

⁸ Adam and Eve are sent in to exile; Cain murders his brother Abel and is sentenced to restless wandering, his descendant Lamech escalates the spiral of violence exponentially with his threat of 77-fold revenge.

⁹ This is not narrated in primordial history – the *sheol* is not a work of creation after all – but it is a self-evident part of the OT world-view, as the Psalms amply show. Once it is equated with “the depths (*tehomot*: plural of *tehom*) of the earth”, Ps 71:20. It is the “abysmal” aspect that links *tehom* with *sheol*.

¹⁰ *beli-mah*, literally „without something”; the ancient Greek translation has *ouden*, “nothing”. Through the poetic parallelism *sheol* and *abyss* are equated, as well as “void” (*tohu*) and “nothing”.

¹¹ The word that is used here, *refa'im*, has two meanings. On the one hand it refers to “gigantic” men (e.g. Dt 3:11,13) on the other to the inhabitants of Sheol in general like here. May be the term was “democratized”, i.e. transferred from the “mighty dead”, the giants and kings, to all the departed (cf. Is 14:9 with Ps 88:10 etc.).

¹² E.g. Is 38:18; Ps 88:5,11f. Occasionally the hope pops up that God’s faithfulness will prevail over death, e.g. Ps 139:8.



1.3. THE COLLAPSE OF ORDER (GEN 6-11)

With the fall of man from the presence of God and the entrance of evil into the world, all dimensions of the created order are now threatened by destruction. This is shown in the following narratives of primordial history.

The Transgression from Above: The Descent of the Heavenly Powers (Gen 6:1-4)

The account of *the descent* of the “sons of God” onto the earth, where they take human wives and beget giant progeny, the so called *nefilim*, is in itself enigmatic.¹³ In its present context, immediately before the deluge, however, it shows an important facet of the consequences of the fall: The separation of the heavenly and earthly realms, the divide between the realm of the transcendent superhuman powers and the world of men, *has been shattered from above*. God's created order is disintegrating: evil now becomes rampant on the earth. – Later Judaism embellished this narrative and saw in it the origin of evil in the world. Since this time demons were supposed to have come into the world of man; they were but the disembodied spirits of the *nefilim*, the giants that were drowned in the Flood.¹⁴ As such they harass and torment men in their search for bodies.¹⁵

The Onset of Chaos (Gen 6–9)

As a result there is an increasing *collapse of order* in the world of men. *Violence* escalates among them (Gen 6:1). But now God has enough. He himself allows the foundations of creation that separate the different realms to become temporarily permeable. The “firmament” that keeps the different spheres of heaven/sky and earth apart ceases to function properly. The primeval waters of chaos from above and below (Gen 7:10f) flood the earthly realm of sin and disorder and bring all life to an end.

The Transgression from Below: The Ascent of Mankind to Heaven (Gen 11:1-9)

One last episode brings the primordial history to its close. In the story of the “Tower of Babel” postdiluvial mankind lays the foundations of the City, the archetype of all human institutions and civilization. At the same time the building of a tower, more precisely: a temple tower (*ziggurat*), symbolises the *collective ascent of human society into the realm of transcendent powers*. These Mesopotamian step-pyramid towers were symbolic representations of the “mountain of the gods”. With their steep stairways they gave access to a temple on top, the abode of the god – and so to heaven, *the realm of the gods*. The story, therefore, shows nothing less than the attempt of *self-divinization of human society* in its strife for “power” and glory.

With this *ascent of man to heaven* we have the counterpart of the *descent of the sons of God* in Gen 6:1-4. But here as well God intervenes and we see the release of another onset of chaos: Mankind *disintegrates* into the *chaos* of different languages and *is dispersed* throughout the whole earth.

With Gen 11 the primal history of the world has reached its goal: The world has become what it has been ever since.

¹³ Originally it might have been a mythic story about the origin of special “heroes” (in Hebrew: “strong ones”, Greek: “giants”). In antiquity they were regarded as “demigods”, But God reduces them to a mere human level. About the “sons of God” cf. below, ↪ 3.1.

¹⁴ E.g. 1.Henoch ch. 6–16, esp. 15:6ff. The demons mentioned in the OT (*shedim*, *seirim*, *tsiyim*) are of a different kind (see ↪).

¹⁵ See Mk 5:11. According to this Jewish tradition the “sons of God”/“angels” that took human wives are imprisoned, often subterraneously, by God until the final judgement (e.g. 1.Henoch 6–7; Jubilees 5:1-12). This is referred to in Jude 6.



1.4. CONCLUSION: TRANSCENDENT POWERS – THREE THREATS TO CREATION

The chapters of primordial history show us several forms of transcendent threats. Interestingly enough, in the perspective of Genesis 1–11 they all go back to man's separation from God. This – and only this – enables the unfolding of three dynamics of evil which lead to the disintegration and destruction of creation itself. The dynamics that we have observed correspond to the three realms of creation. We have to keep in mind that the ancient worldview, based on human sensory perception, knows two additional dimensions beyond the four cardinal points of the flat earth:¹⁶ the “Above” (the “supra”-human realm of the gods) and the “Below”: the sub-human realm, the powers of *chaos* (the “abyss”) and *Sheol*, the realm of the dead. The *demons* of the New Testament, the powers of disintegration and morbidity are also located there (↪).¹⁷

1. **CHAOS (❶ in the illustration):** The realm of the “primeval flood”, of shapelessness, is more than simple “entropy”. *Chaos* itself, which once was “tamed and framed” by God in creation, can now wreak havoc and threatens to overpower the very order of creation. Through the Fall it has turned into an active and destructive force which threatens to “flood” and destroy everything. But is is order alone, i.e. stable correlations, that enable life in the first place. So Chaos threatens life in its entirety. The Psalms experience this both on the level of the individual person and of corporate Israel. As parts of the *destructive* force of the “abyss” (*abaddon*), to which they both are related, Chaos and Sheol can therefore blend into one another.¹⁸ At the same time the “darkness” of chaos is the counterpart of “light”, which represents perception, consciousness, wisdom and reason – the *logos* of John 1:1-18 (esp. 1:4-5,9-10).
2. **SHEOL (❷):** The anti-realm of death and decay is not mentioned in primordial history, but it is implied there. In the rest of the OT, e.g. in Psalms, it plays a major role. In the Psalms the supplicant cries to God in life-threatening situations and asks to be “saved” from sheol. Because there is no relationship to God in this “place”,¹⁹ there is no *shalom*, no wellbeing, no life. It is the realm of complete isolation and unrelatedness. Ps 88 expresses this view with different metaphors: the sheol is the place of the dead, the “pit”, of “utter darkness”, “regions dark and deep”, in the “depths”, a “grave”, a “prison”, a place of “destruction”, an „abyss“ (*abaddon*), in short: the „land of oblivion“, indwelt by those who “are cut off from Your hand ... whom “You remember no more”.
3. **GODS AND INSTITUTIONS (❸/❹):** The realm of the “super-human” powers impacts the earth, the realm of man, in various ways. The OT offers us several perspectives to understand these dynamics.

Deities (❸): One is that all the nations have their *respective deities* – in the Hebrew Bible called “gods” or “sons of God” –, but they are always subordinate to YHWH. This perspective overlaps with the concept of the “*heavenly council*”, an assembly of counsellors and executive agents of YHWH. Among them is also a kind of chief-prosecutor called *ha-satan* (“the accuser”, ↪). – This perspective corresponds to the general view of the Ancient Near East: the lesser “sons of God” are subordinate to the

¹⁶ Front / back / right / left, i.e. East / West / South / North; cf. the “four ends – or ‘winds’ – of the earth”.

¹⁷ See Philippians 2:10: „... so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in *heaven* and on *earth* and *under the earth*“.

¹⁸ E.g. Ps 71:20; 88:6-7,12; Job 26:5-13; 28:14,22; Prov 15,11; Jon 2:2,6

¹⁹ So the majority of the passages in the OT, e.g. Ps 88; 6:6; 30:10; 115:17; 116:3 Isa 38:18. But in some passages the trust in God's all-pervasive faithfulness opens up a new hope (e.g. Ps 139:8ff; Job 19:25ff).



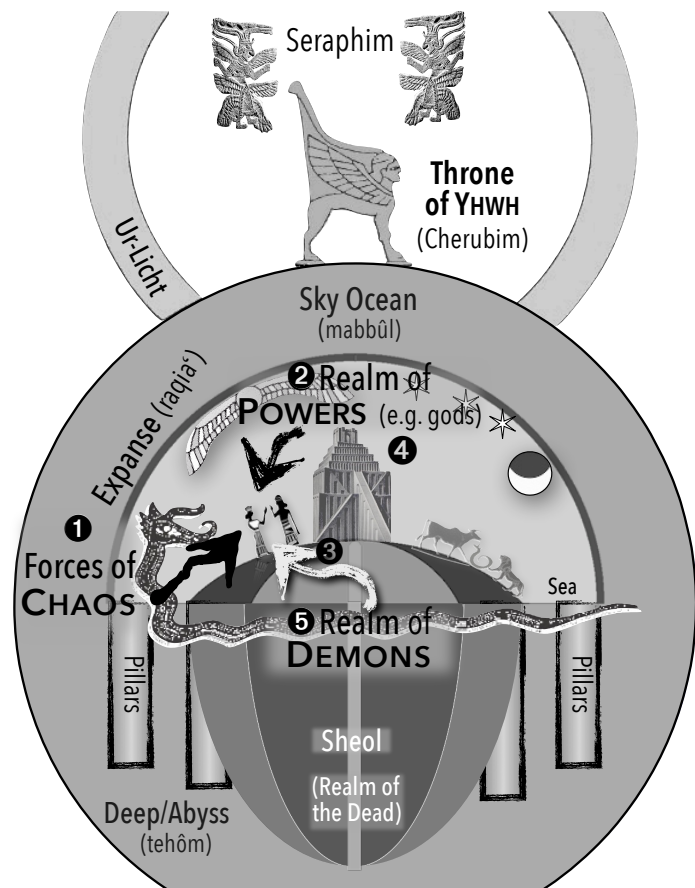
main deity. In the OT, however, they are placed on a much lower level than God – both in terms of their authority, their “place” in heaven and their essence.²⁰

A second perspective is that especially the prophets decry these “gods” as vain and ineffective „weaklings”²¹, despite the devastating conflicts Israel experienced with other nations and their gods. But compared to the insurmountable power of the Creator God, they are relegated to the rank of some lower-level spirits at best.

Institutions (④): But then there is another important aspect, which is often overlooked. The *concept of the „city”* serves to describe metaphorically the flip-side of all human institutions and civilisations: They always strive to subjugate human beings and make them subservient to their own goals – which in the long run always amounts to usurping the place of God. So these originally human institutions become supernatural powers, idolising or even deifying themselves.²² Due to their claim to be “god” they are intent on subjugating man who is made in the image of God – and especially the nation that worships YHWH as its only God.

The Fall and Evil in Primordial History

	THE FALL (Gen 3–11)
Gen 3	Expulsion from the Presence of God →
Gen 4;	Murder, Violence: Death ↘
6–9	1) Sheol : Realm of the Dead “Netherworld”
	2) “Sons of God”: DESCENT „Nefilim” (→ demons)
	3) Outburst of Chaos
Gen 11	4) „Babel”: ASCENT City/Tower: theme of Power Divinization of the “City” / institutions



The illustrations make use of historical images from the Ancient Near East

We will now look at these dynamics in greater detail.

²⁰ The “angels”, the “messengers” of God, are placed on a lower third level.

²¹ Note the wordplay in Hebrew between *elilim*, “weaklings” and *elohim*, “gods” in Ps 96:5; 1Chr 16:26.

²² In antiquity cities were often revered as „gods” e.g. „Roma”/Rome.



2. THE POWERS OF CHAOS: DESTROYING THE STABILITY OF LIFE

2.1. THE FORCES OF CHAOS: THREATS TO CREATION

The myths of many cultures know that creation is threatened by the forces of chaos. In the OT chaos is held in check by the omnipotence of the creator God. If, however, human evil, i.e. individual and social chaos, become prevalent, then God allows the forces of chaos to temporarily overwhelm the order and stability of creation. The most famous example is the story of the Flood in Gen 6–9. The waters of the heavenly ocean, the *mabbul*, pour down and the waters of the abyss, the *tehom*, rise up; together they drown the realm of humanity and bring life itself to an end. The chaos-motif shows up in other stories as well, for example in the punishment of Sodom in the *rain* of fire and sulfur from *the sky*, in the ten *plagues* of Egypt and the *flood* drowning its army, or in the flood-judgement against the city of Tyre.²³ Last but not least the series of judgements in the book of Revelation describe the gradual demise of creation by the forces of chaos; among them a host of demonic locusts rises up from the *abyss*, whose god is called *Abaddon*, the “Angel of the abyss”.²⁴

MANKIND

The OT links two further motifs with chaos: it describes God as “rebuking” the Sea or the floods of Chaos, i.e. he angrily *coerces them with his word*: he forces them back into their *proper boundaries*, renders them *powerless* or *puts them to flight*.²⁵

Another facet sees the sea monsters (*tannin*) not just as huge creatures in the sea but as an embodiment of the predatory nature of chaos threatening the world of men from its boundaries. The motif of God overcoming chaos refers on the one hand to *creation* – YHWH has slain the sea monsters and thereby restrained chaos – but also to the *historical threats for the people of God* through the chaotic *sea of the nations* (see below). And lastly it refers to an *eschatological event*: ultimate salvation begins with the annihilation of the chaos-monster.²⁶

2.2. THE FORCES OF CHAOS: HISTORICAL THREATS

The *primeval* threat of an all-devouring chaos reverberated in the *historical* experiences of the people of God with the nations. Again and again Israel is in danger of being swallowed by the “sea of nations”²⁷ under the leadership of imperial powers like Assyria, Babylon or, later on, the Hellenistic and Roman

²³ Sodom: Gen 19; 10 plagues: Ex 7–11; 12,29ff; Red Sea: Ex 14 (cf. Is 51:10; Ps 77:15–19; 106:9); Tyre: Ez 26:19.

²⁴ Rev 6:12ff; 8:7ff; 16:2ff; 9:1ff. Rev 9:11 explicitly mentions *abbaddon* as a Hebrew name and translates it as Apollyon.

²⁵ E.g., Ps 18:16; 104:6–7; 106:9; Is 50:2; Nah 1:4. In the NT we see Jesus “rebuking” the chaos of the churning Sea of Galilee (Mk 4:39), but also the demons (Mk 1:5; 3:11–12; 9:25) and people (cf. Mk 8:30,33).

²⁶ The sea monster(s) are given different labels and names, like the “gliding” or “coiling” serpent “Leviathan” or “Rahab”. A) As a symbol for curbing and overcoming *tehom* in creation: Job 26:10–13; Ps 89,9–11; 74,13f; B) as a historical event e.g. Jer 51:55; Is 51:9; Ez 29:4f; 32,2, and C) as a (saving) event in the endtimes: Is 27:1. – On the other hand Leviathan (the Greek translation speaks here of a “dragon”) is described in the creation psalm 104:26 as God’s plaything. In Ps 148:7 both the “monsters” and the “primeval floods” (*tehomot*, plural) are called to praise God. Apparently the physical “monsters” of the sea are both creatures of their own right and a visualisation of their transcendent counterpart, the monster of the primeval chaos. – But Ps 148 also clarifies, that the *tehom(ot)* is/are not evil, i.e. anti-Godly, in itself. So we find two traditions or perspectives side by side: on the one hand, chaos is a “natural” part of the creation process, on the other it is an all-devouring enemy. We have to wait until the New Testament to see the reason for this.

²⁷ See Ps 65:7; Is 17:12; Ez 26:3.



empires.²⁸ In times of Israel's apostasy this chaos overwhelms and ravages the land, the city and even mount Zion itself with the temple of God. The only thing that could have saved her did not happen: true repentance, returning to the One God. – For the “endtimes” another “battle of the nations” is to be expected—and it will only be won through the sovereign intervention of God.²⁹

2.3. THE FORCES OF CHAOS AND SHEOL: THREATS TO THE INDIVIDUAL

There is yet another aspect, one that is very important from the perspective of inner healing. *The image of the all-devouring power of Chaos is used for interpreting deeply unsettling existential experiences of the individual.* For example Ps 18 describes the drowning of the individual through enemies that are described as a flood, and God's intervention as a battle against the forces of chaos (verse 15-17). The motif of the abyss or the primeval flood is frequently mentioned in this context, alongside its embodiment through a monster of the sea (*tannin*), e.g. the sea creature Leviathan. In the Septuagint, the Jewish translation of the OT into Greek, *tannin* is often translated as *drakon*, “dragon”.

We can also observe that the images of *abyss/depth* and the *realm of the dead, Sheol*, often merge; both have in common the connotation of an all devouring power.³⁰ The story of Jonah portrays this most vividly: Jonah is swallowed by a sea-monster³¹. In its belly he prays:

“From the belly of Sheol I cried out for help, ... you hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, ... the engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me ... to the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. – But you, YHWH my God, brought my life up from the pit!”³²

From a human point of view the forces of chaos, that threaten creation, and Sheol, the anti-realm of the dead, ultimately coincide. Both rip man from creation where the presence of God is to be found, and throw him into utter isolation and despair.

Together with Job the Psalms are the book that most intensively deals with human need and suffering. The Psalms always do that in the form of prayer. Those prayers put many and diverse experiences into words, including severe trauma, – and they most often do it in *symbolic pictures*. Therefore it is all the more noticeable when it comes to the suffering of the individual, that powers of evil are mentioned hardly anywhere except the “abysmal” forces of chaos, which often are seen at work behind the human enemies of the worshipper.³³

²⁸ E.g. Assyria destroys the Northern Kingdom (“Israel”) 722 BC and devastates 701 AD the southern Kingdom of Judah, without being able to conquer Jerusalem. This happens later through the Babylonians in 587/86 BC, who raze the city of Jerusalem and the temple of YHWH to the ground. From 167 BC on Antiochus IV. of Seleucid Syria even tries to annihilate the Jewish religion completely, desecrating the Jerusalem temple in the process. The visions of the book of Daniel are envisioning the series of empires in the form of predator animals *rising out of the Sea* (Dan 7:2-7).

²⁹ E.g. Ps 46; Is 17:12-14; 29:5-8.

³⁰ See e.g. Ps 42:7; 71:20.

³¹ In the Hebrew version of the story the *tannin* is purposely “demythologized” by being called a “great fish”. The Greek translation, however, uses the term *ketos*, “monster”. In the early Christian sarcophagi, where this scene is often depicted as a symbol for death and resurrection, it is portrayed as a monster, a gigantic serpent of the sea.

³² Prayer of Jonah: Jon 2,3-10, here verses 2-3, 5-6.

³³ Cf. the many psalms of suffering, e.g. Ps 22:12-21. Notice the symbolic animal pictures in verses 12-13, 16, 20-21, the “sword”, as a symbol of war in verse 20, and the “water and wax” symbolism in verse 15.



2.4. OTHER NEGATIVE FORCES IN THE OT

The Snake (Gen 3)

We should notice that the “snake”, i.e. the land animal (*nahash*), *only once* plays a theologically important role in the OT. In the pivotal story of Gen 3 the snake enters the scene as a force of temptation and destruction, whereas the cultures of the Ancient Near East saw the snake as a highly positive being. For them it was, first of all, a symbol for *wisdom* and (*everlasting*) *life*, but also for *healing*. It also stood for *vitality, power and magic*. And finally it could also be a symbol of *death*.³⁴

In contrast to this view Gen 3 depicts the snake as an intelligent tempter, that entices man with *wisdom* (the “knowledge of good and evil”), *power* (“you will be like God”) and *eternal life* (“surely you will not die!”), Man’s disobedience then results in falling from God’s good order of creation and his very presence into disintegration and death. Along with man the earthly realm, his sphere of authority, is subjected to decay.

Demons in the OT

In contrast to the New Testament demons³⁵ play only a minor role in the OT. There are two aspects connected with them: On the one hand the word “shedim” (translated in LXX as “demons”) is used as a *derogatory term for foreign gods*, to whom Israel horrifyingly sacrificed children.³⁶ On the other hand demons are *spirits of the wild*, so called “goat spirits”. But even here the term is mostly used to decry foreign gods that were worshipped in Israel.³⁷ – “Pestilence” and „Plague“, are regarded as demons in later Jewish traditions, but not yet in the OT.³⁸

3. THE POWERS OF HEAVEN: SERVANTS OF GOD OR FALSE GODS

Although we are not used to it, we need to make a sharp distinction between the destructive powers “from below” and the ambivalent powers “from above”. Among them are the so-called “gods or “sons of God”, the “host of heaven” (often synonymous with the stars), and the “principalities and powers” in general. The “sub-natural” powers are always *Powers of Disintegration*: forces of sickness, decay, and death. The “super-natural” powers, however, are *Powers of Domination*, i.e. of integration into a system of authority (a “dominion”). They structure and shape earthly existence and especially the life of man.³⁹ Negatively, they *dominate and subjugate* man and claim God’s role and place in his life.

³⁴ Cf. Num 21, where Moses uses it as a symbol of healing. In Ex 7:12 the Egyptian staffs turn into snakes as a symbol of magic, whereas Aaron’s staff/snake is a sign of (greater) power bringing death.

³⁵ In the Ancient Near East *demons* are destructive beings that bring sickness, calamities and death. They are not worshipped like the gods, but held in check through amulets and exorcised through magic.

³⁶ *Shedim* are only mentioned in Dt 32:17; Ps 106:37. In the Ancient Near East they are personal „(protective) *spirits*“, which received sacrifices (since they could also harm people), but were not regarded as gods. Therefore they had neither statues (idols) nor temples.

³⁷ „Goat demons“ (*seirim*): Lev 17:7; 2Chr 11:15; Is 13:21; 34:14. We also find spirits in desolated or devastated places (*iyjim* and *tsijjim*, as well as *lilith*, Is 34:14f; Jer 50:39). Those places are the borderline between the inhabited world and the chaotic fringes that surround it.

³⁸ *Dever* and *qetev* or *reshef*: e.g. Ps 91:6; Hab 3:5.

³⁹ Other terms used for the supranatural are “supernal”, “heavenly”, “in the heavenlies”; for the sub-natural: “subterrestrial/subterranean”, “infernal” or “chthonic” (Greek for earth-bound, subterranean).



3.1. THE “DIVINE COUNCIL”

There is a conspicuous phenomenon in the OT: On the one hand the OT proclaims YHWH alone to be God and does so emphatically in many places. On the other hand there are accounts of a “heavenly assembly” or a “divine council”,⁴⁰ whose members are called “the holy ones”, “sons of the Most High”, “sons of God”⁴¹ and in some places even “gods”.⁴²

Originally this is a reflection of the common worldview of the Ancient Near East: The highest god “El” (“God” – the Semitic root word for deity) has a number of “sons” (and daughters), which are responsible for managing certain aspects of reality, like weather, crops or war, but who occupy a lesser place in the heavenly hierarchy. Together they form the “council” or the “assembly” of the gods / sons of God.⁴³

Furthermore sometimes the OT gives hints that each nation is assigned to one of these “sons of God” as his area of authority,⁴⁴ and, vice versa, the gods represent their respective nations. This means that in a war of nations also their heavenly representatives, the gods, are at war with each other and gain victory or suffer defeat.⁴⁵

The Ambivalence of the Heavenly Powers

In the OT, however, the sons of God are not only *not* “gods” in the real sense of the word, but belong to an ambivalent class of beings:⁴⁶ Some of them *praise God* in his power and majesty in the “council of the Holy Ones” and act as his *counselors*.⁴⁷ Others are decried as *morally bad*; they are blamed to abuse their power and further injustice on the earth instead of prohibiting it in their role as judges. Here Psalm 82 makes a spectacular statement: Because of their injustice God *reduces the status of the “gods” to that of mortal beings* – he downgrades them so to speak!⁴⁸

There are other phenomena for which the situation of the heavenly council of God, the *sod* YHWH,⁴⁹ gives an explanation. On the one hand, as we have already mentioned, we find a kind of heavenly *chief-prosecutor*, „*the accuser*“ (Hebrew: *ha-satan*).⁵⁰ It is part of his job description to bring all kinds of injustice

⁴⁰ The OT uses different terms: “(divine) council” (*sod*), the “assembly of the Holy Ones” (*qahal qedoshim*) or the “council of the Holy Ones”, or the “assembly of God/El” (*adat El*); Ps 89:5-8; 29:1; 82:1; 29:1.

⁴¹ Literally: “sons of God/El”, *bene El*; “sons of gods”, *bene elim*; sons of (the) God, *bene (ha-) Elohim*, or “sons of the Most High”, *bene Elyon*.

⁴² E.g., Ps 82:1,6: *elohim* with a plural meaning. The same word is used (with a singular meaning) in verse 1 for “God”. Note the beginning of Ps 81: “*God (Elohim) stands in the assembly of God (El); in the midst of the gods (elohim) he renders judgment.*”

⁴³ Beneath them is sometimes a still lesser rank: the heavenly craftsman deities and messengers.

⁴⁴ Dtn 32:8 states according to the Hebrew version of Qumran and the Greek versions: „When the Most High divided the nations ... he set the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the sons of God/ God’s angels“ (see Act 17:26). Israel, of course, was God’s nation. A similar view lies behind Dtn 4:9,19-20 (the host of heaven), Is 24:21 and the “princes of nations” in Dan 10:13,20; 11:36; 12:1 (here Israel is entrusted to Michael, the “Great Prince”).

⁴⁵ Vgl. 2. Kön 19,10-13; Dan 10,12-13.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Job 4,18; 15,15; (cf. 25,5).

⁴⁷ E.g. praise: Ps 29,1f; 89:5-8; 97,7,9; consultation: 1.Kin 22:19-23; Job 15:8.

⁴⁸ See Ps 82:6-7! – According to the general view in the Ancient Near East it was the responsibility of the gods to *watch over* justice and enforce obedience to the laws that had been promulgated by *human lawgivers*, i.e. the kings. In the OT, however, God himself is the Lawgiver, and both the people and the earthly king are held responsible for keeping his laws. In Ps 82 there is a hint that also heavenly beings are somehow involved in the process of justice without spelling out their role clearly. This ties in with the role of the heavenly “accuser”, *ha-satan*.

⁴⁹ Jer 23:18.

⁵⁰ The term „*the satan*“ (*ha-satan*) is a description of his function, not a name!



and unrighteousness before the throne of God to get a verdict.⁵¹ In later passages of the OT we see a new trait of this „accuser“: he also acts as a *tempter and seducer*.⁵²

The heavenly council is also the framework for the phenomenon that an „evil spirit“⁵³ can step forward and be sent from YHWH to harden people's hearts in their obstinacy towards God. It is important to notice that this refers only to people who consciously and repeatedly chose to oppose God.⁵⁴

Furthermore we find statements the even the heavenly „Holy Ones“ (the powers represented in the heavenly council) and „angels“ can err in the face of a sovereign God.⁵⁵

In some places we hear that the *prophets* get a vision of God surrounded by his heavenly council. In other places they receive a commissioning from the throne of God (apparently surrounded by the council).⁵⁶ But never a human being participates or steps into it – with one crucial exception: the „Son of Man“ in Dan 7:13 (cf. ↪) – and it is Jesus who in the NT identifies himself with him. Apart from that prophets sometimes get a „glimpse“ of the heavenly council, but never step into it: they receive a vision or a message from God but they do not become active in the council themselves.⁵⁷ In the so called „Apocalyptic“ books and passages⁵⁸ the seer meets an angel who explain the visions to him (the so-called „angelic in-

⁵¹ See e.g. Zec 3.

⁵² This process begins already in Job 1–2, where he is still acting as a prosecutor.

In 1.Chr 21:1 many interpreters assume „satan“ to be the name of a superhuman figure (i.e. „Satan“). But it could also be translated „an adversary/accuser“ and refer to a human agent as it does in 1Kings 11:14. The Greek translation of the OT (LXX) translates *diabolos*, „an adversary/accuser“.

In the NT, however, „Satan“ consistently is the personal name for the highest power of evil. The only exception could be Mk 8:33/Mt 16:23 where (human) „adversary“ would fit the context better (Jesus denouncing „human“ thinking).

⁵³ The idea is not that the spirit in itself is evil, but that he brings about evil at the command of God, as shown in 1Kings 22,21f.

⁵⁴ Usually people in authority. The most tragic case is king Saul (1.Sam 16:14ff; 18:10ff), the most obvious king Ahab (1.Kings 22). A similar story, but without mentioning a „spirit“, is the hardening of the Pharaoh of Egypt in Ex 7–14.

⁵⁵ Job 4:18; 15:15.

⁵⁶ Cf. the visions of Zec 3:1–7 and Dan 7:9–14, a vision that is central for the NT: the *inauguration of the „Son of Man“* (↪). The most dramatic description is found in the vision of 1.Kings 22:19–23 (= 2.Chr 18:18–22). Statements about the involvement of prophets are made in Am 3:17 and Jer 23:18,21–22. The two *prophetic commissionings* in the book of Isaiah could have the heavenly council as a backdrop (Isa 6:1–11; 40:1–8). The same could be assumed for the commissioning of the individual „*Servant of God*“ in Isaiah (Isa 42:1–7; 49:1–9a). One could also consider the idea that the words of the prophets against the nations presuppose their proclamation in the council against the heavenly representatives of these nations. In the OT we only rarely hear of prophets declaring judgement to the nations themselves. In the present context the point is that the *people of Israel* heard those words.

This brings us to an important observation: Those texts explicitly avoid any mention of the council, or, if there was one in the original prophecy, deleted it thoroughly, and probably for good reasons. That means: The idea of the council is irrelevant for these passages and only used as a mythopoetic illustration, if at all. The NT changed this perspective, too, see below (↪).

The same is true for the famous plural for God in Gen 1:26–27 („let us make man“), which also historically could have referred to a divine council. But exactly this perspective is completely missing! Just the opposite is the case: The text portrays the celestial bodies, that are deified in all surrounding cultures, as mere „lights“ and excels in describing the incomparability of the Creator God. The play on singular/plural for God is to mirror the description of humanity which also oscillates between singular („created him“) and plural („created them“; cf. ESV!): even here man is the „image of God“!

This leads to a conclusion that seems inescapable: Since all these theologically important texts (deliberately) avoid any mention of the divine council, the council itself is of no lasting importance.

⁵⁷ In Isa 6 the prophet answers God who asks, in Isa 40:1–8 the prophet (over-)hears a call to comfort; the plural verb there could be addressed to the Council. Afterwards there is an anonymous voice calling out.

⁵⁸ E.g. Zechariah 1–6; Daniel 7–12; Revelation.



terpreter”), but he has no influence on the process, not even through intercession.⁵⁹ Even in Revelation, by far the most comprehensive insight into the “heavenlies”, John the seer is taken up into heaven but only interacts with an angelic interpreter or with an elder who takes over this role. The same book also envisions a most radical change in heaven due to the Christ event (cf. ↪).

3.2. ANGELS: THE MESSENGERS OF GOD

There are two other categories of heavenly beings that need to be distinguished from the sons of God in the OT: the “messengers of God” and the “host of heaven”.

The “messenger / envoy of YHWH” (“the angel of the LORD”)⁶⁰ is in some places a visible *embodiment of* YHWH himself on earth to deliver his message.⁶¹ But the envoy can also be someone clearly distinguished from YHWH, like a genuine herald or the “commander of the army of YHWH”.⁶²

Furthermore, the “host” or “army of heaven” (or of YHWH)⁶³ can be (a) a term for the *stars in the sky*, that are regarded as supernatural beings, or (b) for more *abstract supernatural powers* that execute God’s will in the earthly realm.⁶⁴

So we have in some parts of the OT an at least three-tiered hierarchy of heavenly beings: *God himself* at the highest level, secondly the *Heavenly Council*, made of the “Holy Ones” / the “sons of God”, thirdly the level of more general *messengers* / “angels”. The “*host of heaven*” seems to be non-specific: it can either include other beings alongside levels 2 and/or 3, or be a yet different fourth level.

Later parts of the OT emphasize monotheism and the sole efficacy of YHWH much more clearly: YHWH alone is God and there is no other god besides him; all the other “gods” are mere idols, powerless constructs of men. As a consequence both the “sons of God” and the heavenly messengers are regarded more and more as a part of God’s heavenly entourage or his heavenly host. Now there is *only one category of beings* that surround the throne of God: the “angels”, which can be messengers or part of the host of heaven. This is also the perspective of the New Testament. Therefore the ambivalence of the former “sons of God” is transferred to “the angels” – now there are good ones and evil ones.⁶⁵

3.3. “PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS”: INSTITUTIONS AND STRUCTURES

Although the summarizing term “principalities and powers” is only found in the NT – there is no equivalent terminology in the OT –, yet several aspects of this concept are there in the OT and have been described already. They have been generally overlooked, but are important for a view of evil in the Scriptures.

⁵⁹ Any interaction on the part of the prophet, like intercession, is always directed to God and does not take place in the heavenly council, but on earth. The most famous intercessions in the OT are Gen 18:17-33 (Abraham); Ex 32:11-14; 33:31-34 (Moses), Am 7:1-9 (Amos), Dan 9 (Daniel).

⁶⁰ The term “angel” means “messenger” both in Hebrew and Greek (*mal’ak/angelos*).

⁶¹ See e.g. Gen 18:1ff; Ex 2:4; Jdg 6:11-25 etc. The background is the specific role of a messenger in the OT. The principle is: “The envoy/messenger is like the sender”, i.e. he impersonates the sender and is to be treated like him. This is also the background of the concept of Jesus as the “envoy” of God in the Gospel of John. – Another aspect of this concept is that many ancient church fathers equated the “angel of the Lord” with Jesus, the visible presence of the invisible God on the earth.

⁶² Messenger: e.g. Jdg 13; 2.Sam 24:16. The commander of the army: Jos 5:13-15; cf. Rev 12:7. In Rev 19:11-16 it is Jesus himself.

⁶³ E. g. in the term “YHWH Zebaot”, which means “YHWH of hosts/armies”.

⁶⁴ E.g. Jdg 5:20; Ps 103:20-21. Originally – and still in many places – it is a military term; cf. Rev 19:11-16.

⁶⁵ E.g. Job 4:18; see Rev 12:7-9.



The City as Archetype and Basis of Civilisation

The “fall” of man from the presence of God does not end with his expulsion from paradise. The next step is homicide: Cain murders his brother Abel in Genesis 4. Therefore God sentences him to a life of restless wandering without a home.

In the wake of this story we find a short comment with enormous consequences: Cain, the prototype of fallen man, does not yield to his God-ordained fate. Instead *he builds the first “city”*, thereby creating a shelter and protection against the ramifications of his crime. At the same time he also cuts himself off from God and creates a world of his own: He literally walls himself in.

It is not by accident that right at this point the city is mentioned for the first time in the Bible. The “City” is – both in Biblical perspective and in history – the beginning of civilisation and culture.⁶⁶ Only in the city higher forms of culture can develop. Only the city enables division of labour, specialisation and an increase of competence in all areas of life.

The city is both the beginning and the *archetype of all human institutions*: an association of men who no longer are bound together by “organic” ties like a clan or a tribe, but by an *artificial order* – an “organization”. This leads to enormous *social stratification*, from the slave at the bottom to the god-king at the top. A functional *hierarchy of power* comes into existence. As we have already seen in Genesis 11, the strife for power and glory culminates in the effort of a *collective self-deification*. So the terrible bottom line of the story of the “city of man” is: *Human institutions inherently tend to put themselves in the place of God. For it is all about power*, both internally and externally. Internally it creates an – oftentimes sacred – *hierarchy* to control society both on a religious and a political level; externally it initiates *organized warfare* against any rivals from outside.⁶⁷ With the city comes the beginning of systematic warfare.

Many times in its history Israel has experienced this dynamic in both its aspects. On the one hand there are the rich and powerful empires and their megacities like Egypt, Babylon, Assyria/Nineveh or the trade metropolis of Tyre, that divinize themselves and whose rulers see themselves as gods.⁶⁸ This is in itself an assault on the true God. But then they also wreak havoc on his people. So in the end God topples them and casts them into the abyss.⁶⁹

On the other hand there is *Jerusalem, the “city of God”*: in its temple God had made his dwelling. But at the same time *Jerusalem is also a human institution* and commits all the sins of a human institution, especially idolatry and exploitation. And her sins are even worse – precisely because she is God's city! For this reason God inflicts stronger and stronger judgements on her until finally he leaves the temple and the city.⁷⁰ Then both city and temple are utterly destroyed. Israel had put her whole trust in its *spiritual institutions* – the temple and the city of God –, instead in God himself!

The World Powers and the Son of Man

In chapter 7 of Daniel we find a groundbreaking vision that opens a whole new perspective. The seer watches four predatory animals rising from “the Sea”. They turn out to be successive empires that devour

⁶⁶ See the small annotation in Gen 4:21f following the founding of the first city: Cain's descendants invent musical instruments and metal-working, i.e. culture.

⁶⁷ This is evident, e.g., in the developing city-culture of Mesopotamia in the 4th–3rd millennium.

⁶⁸ Extensively described in e.g. Is 14; Ez 28.

⁶⁹ See e.g. Ninive (Assyria): Is 36:18–21; Nah 1:1; 2,14. Babylon: Is 14:4ff; 47:7–8. Tyre: Is 23; Ez 28.

⁷⁰ The dramatic vision is reported in Ez 10.



the earth and subjugate the people of God. After that a “son of man” appears who is being brought “on the clouds of heaven” to God and receives from him all power and authority.

This vision blends the pictures of the primeval chaos with the historical dynamics of Israel and the world. The “Sea”, out of which the earthly empires rise, symbolized by predatory animals, are, of course, the floods of the primeval Chaos. They just take a historical form: Mankind is not only threatened by an impersonal, primeval but “natural” chaos, but even more so by its manifestations in history: the brutal power of the different empires with two different but related dynamics: They conquer the world – and they assault the people of God.

But then suddenly a new dynamic emerges: The dominion of these empires is being replaced by the coming of a human (and humane!) “son of man”, who is brought to God. From him he receives all dominion and establishes the kingdom of God permanently. With his inauguration the powers of the world incur their ultimate judgement.

This eschatological perspective finds its fulfillment in the New Testament: Jesus claims to be the “Son of Man” himself.⁷¹ He establishes the incipient “Kingdom of God”; at his ascension he is taken “on a cloud” to heaven, sits on the throne and will come again to bring the fullness of the kingdom and its judgement. To him is given “all authority in heaven and on earth”. Through him, the Messiah of God, the power of chaos is overcome in all its manifestations and the reign of God established forever.

4. NEW TESTAMENT, NEW PERSPECTIVES

While the New Testament is predominantly based on the Old, it also integrates perspectives and experiences of later Jewish thought. Furthermore it contains new insights of its own. So we see different dynamics at work: *integration, differentiation, modification, new revelation and consummation*.

In this process the NT evaluates the different elements of the OT world view in a new way. In short, the aspect of the “natural” chaos is being eclipsed by the personal and institutional elements; they play a much greater role.

4.1. FORCES OF CHAOS

The elements of “chaos” only appear in two closely related miracles of Jesus: the *calming of the storm* and *Jesus' walking on the water*. Again we meet the “Sea”⁷² as the power of the all-devouring abyss. But Jesus is Lord over it: one word subjugates it to his will. And the walking on the waters of the sea is directly linked to an OT theophany, an appearance of God in his glory. In the book of Job it is God himself, the creator, “who alone stretched out the sky and walks on the sea as on dry ground ... when he passes by me, I do not know him.” The creator God alone has the power to do that, thereby demonstrating his authority over Chaos itself. The walking on the waters of the Sea of Galilee thus reveals something of the mystery of Je-

⁷¹ The most important of Matthew's 30 references: Mt 8:20; 9:6; 12:8,32,40; 16:13,27; 17:9,22; 19:28; 20:28; 24; 24:27-44; 26:64;. Cf. Mt 28:18-20; Lk 24:50f; Act 1:9f.

⁷² The Greek name of the lake of Genezareth is the “Sea of Galilee” or “Sea of Tiberias”; *thalassa* (“sea”) refers also to the Mediterranean and to the ocean in general (the term already appears in the Greek of Gen 1:10).



sus, it is an “epiphany”, a flash of the revelation of the Godhead. The disciples' appropriate reaction therefore is *worship*: “You are truly the son of God!”⁷³

4.2. DEMONS

Coming from the OT perspective of evil and then opening the first three gospels, one is taken by surprise. At nearly every page we meet Jesus expelling demons that torment people. The very first of his “acts of power” narrated in the Gospel of Mark is a deliverance from demons.⁷⁴ Space does not allow us to address this aspect of the ministry of Jesus (and his disciples) in greater detail. But one aspect is important for our discussion. The demons are *neither* heavenly powers, “forces of evil in the heavenly places”,⁷⁵ *nor* earthly spirits (though they are most often active in the earthly realm looking for a “body” to inhabit), but they come from the “netherworld”, the place of the abyss (*abaddon*), the region of Sheol and *tehom*. Mark 5:12-13 makes this clear: When Jesus delivers the Gerasene demoniac, the “legion” of demons go into a herd of pigs – the epitome of the unclean in Jewish thought – and hurl themselves *down into the sea*.⁷⁶

In the New Testament we find two terms for these beings. The Greek word is “demons”, which we are familiar with; originally it only means spiritual beings of a lower category below the heavens. The Hebrew term “unclean spirits” is applied to the same class of beings but describes them as *powers of decay and collapse*, i.e. of *disintegration*.⁷⁷ They effect psychic breakdown, spiritual oppression, sickness and self-destructive behaviour.⁷⁸ For the affected person this often implies social isolation right up to complete exclusion from society, as can be seen in the case of the Gerasene demoniac.⁷⁹ Demons, therefore, are *infra-* or *sub-personal forces* of decay and decadence. As shapeless beings⁸⁰ they are looking for bodies to inhabit, even pigs, the epitome of everything “unclean” in Jewish sight.

In the New Testament Satan (sometimes called according to certain Jewish traditions “Beelzebul” or “Belial”) is seen as the ruler of the demonic realm, who stands behind all resistance to God, temptation and destruction.⁸¹

⁷³ Job 9:8,11 is referred to in Mk 6:48, explaining the otherwise mysterious “he wanted to pass by them”. In Mt 14:22-33 this leads to the recognition of Jesus' divine sonship.

⁷⁴ Mk 1:21-28. The so-called “acts of power” (*dynamais*) of Jesus include healings, deliverance (“exorcisms”) and raising the dead, as well as miracles related to creation: the feeding miracles, calming the storm and walking on the sea. Another term in the Gospels for “demons” is “evil spirits” or “unclean spirits”.

⁷⁵ Eph 6:12.

⁷⁶ Mk 5:13. Philippians 2:10 explicitly mentions beings “under the earth” (*kata-chthonic*). It can remain open if this means “spiritual powers” (angels in prison or demons), “the dead” or (probably) both.

⁷⁷ In the OT worldview there are the following basic categories: unclean – mundane/secular – clean – holy: Everything that is created by God is for the time being “mundane” (*chol*), i.e. fit for everyday use. If it is in any way flawed, deficient, broken or sinful, then it is “unclean” (*tame*), otherwise it is “clean” (*tahor*). Only what is clean can be dedicated to God. When this is done and God claims it for his service (“sets it apart”), it then becomes “holy” (*qadosh*), i.e. belonging exclusively to God. Therefore “holy” is the extreme opposite to “unclean”, which explains the outcry of the demons (the “unclean spirits”!) in Mk 1:23-24. In the OT the rather complex task of differentiating between these categories is entrusted to the priests (Lev 10:10).

⁷⁸ E.g. Mk 5:1-20; 9:17-29; Mt 12:22-30; 17:15; Act 16:16ff..

⁷⁹ Mk 5:2-3; In Mt 12,43-45 there is even a reference to the “desert”, the place of disintegration.

⁸⁰ This is parallel to the idea of the spirits of the *nefilim*, see above (↪).

⁸¹ Cf. e.g. Mt 4:1-11; 12:24-26; 16:23; Mk 4:15; Lk 10:18; 22:3.31. More cf. below, Revelation (↪).



4.3. SUPERHUMAN EVIL FORCES

The New Testament reinforces the monotheistic perspective of the OT considerably: Other gods are hardly mentioned, and if so, they are likened to comparatively weak demons.⁸² But the NT mentions evil supernatural agents “in” or “among” “the heavenlies” a few times when dealing with the cult-ridden society of Asia Minor.⁸³ The main emphasis, though, when it comes to supernatural evil is on the “principalities and powers”. To them we now must turn.

4.4. PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS

In the New Testament the OT aspects of both “city” and “empire” are fully developed by means of the concept of “principalities and powers” (*archai kai exousiai*). This is an umbrella term for mostly *supra-personal*, “super-human”, forces. They have some interesting features in common:

First of all we notice the “*structural powers*”, i.e. human systems and institutions like the state and its representatives.⁸⁴ Theirs is a kind of intermediate status: On the one hand they are *human* creation, from the smallest institution to the whole of society. On the other hand they become *super-human* powers that force people under their sway.

Here the term “principalities and powers” oscillates between a human and a transcendent (“heavenly”) aspect; it displays *both an “exterior” and an “interior” side*. That is to say the term designates *both a human* “holder of power”, an “incumbent of an office”,⁸⁵ (as well as his office and authority)⁸⁶, but *also the transcendent dimension* of power behind it.⁸⁷ Principalities and powers, in short, are supernatural, “heavenly” powers with an earthly/human embodiment, e.g. the state and its office holders.⁸⁸

Those structural powers have *both positive and negative* aspects, because they share the *ambivalence* of human beings. On the one hand *they are good and helpful*, as long as they support the order of God.⁸⁹ On the other they also *share man’s fallenness and rebellion* against God.

Since “principalities and powers” has become a collective term, it can also include various other terms or forms of power.⁹⁰ Some are created by God through Christ as part of creation,⁹¹ others – or some aspects of them – are a human creation. The common denominator for all of them is that they exercise

⁸² Cf. 1 Cor 10:14-22. Cf the riot in Ephesus, Acts 19:23 -41, regarding the “Great Diana”; note that Luke does not link it to any influence of the goddess. The more pressing spiritual problem was involvement in magic and the occult, Act 19:19.

⁸³ There were a number of esoteric, pre-gnostic cults, i.e. predecessors of the great Gnostic systems of the 2nd to 5th centuries. In Eph 6:12 the first two terms refer to “principalities and powers”, the next two to evil supernatural spirits. The term “world-rulers of this darkness” and its parallel, the “spirit-beings of evil in the heavenly realms” (or “spirit-beings of evil among the heavenly powers”) seem to refer to superhuman spirit-agents (Level III in the abstract). Some pagan deities like Serapis were called “world ruler”.

⁸⁴ E.g. Rom 13:1-4

⁸⁵ E.g. Lk 12:11; 20:20; Tit 3:1. 1 Cor 2:6-8 uses the related term “rulers of this age” (*archontes tou aionos toutou*).

⁸⁶ See Joh 19:11.

⁸⁷ Eph 3:10; 6:12; Col 2:15. Both levels are in view in 1 Cor 15:24; Col 1:16; Eph 1:21.

⁸⁸ In a similar way we often perceive an “aura” of power when we personally meet high-ranking people who represent government authority or powerful companies.

⁸⁹ Rom 13:1.

⁹⁰ See words like “thrones”, “dominions”, „rulers“, „elemental principles of the world“ (that govern the physical world, either ‘spiritual’ dynamics or: ‘doctrinal systems’) etc.

⁹¹ Col 1:16.



“power and authority” over mankind; that is where they got their name from. Among them are *ideologies*, *world-views* and *philosophies*, as well as the *elemental principles* of the world and also *cosmic powers*.⁹² These powers can be evil, and so they are very often. But we need to notice: They are *not* forces of disintegration, destruction and decay (like demons), but they are *powers of integration* – i.e. of incorporation *into their coercive system of domination*.⁹³ That means they are not so much interested in individuals as such, as long as those individuals are a part of their system. If they willingly cooperate, they get promoted. But if they are “non-aligned”, or representatives of an alien power, they come under attack.

With regards to this kind of evil powers Scripture says that the followers of Jesus should “withstand” and “hold their ground” against their onslaught⁹⁴ – *but not to expel them* like demons! Confronting them is reserved for God and his heavenly angels alone.

Of course this inevitably raises the question: What about the structures, organisations and institutions that Christians establish, like churches and ministries? As institutions in a fallen world they share in the *tendency of self-divinization* (just as Christians still have the tendency to sin). Therefore the responsibility of believers is all the greater, since they follow a different Lord. The challenge is to bring these structural powers (that we are responsible for!) constantly and permanently under the “obedience of Christ”.⁹⁵

4.5. JESUS AS LORD OVER ALL THE POWERS

A closer look at Jesus' position in relation to all these different kinds of spiritual powers reveals the following aspects:

1. *Jesus – Lord over the demons*: We see that already the earthly Jesus has the full authority of expelling all kinds of *demons*. The first three gospels make this abundantly clear.⁹⁶ After his resurrection Jesus passes this authority permanently on to his disciples (Mark 16:17).⁹⁷
2. *Jesus – Lord over all the powers*: But the resurrection of Jesus has an even greater effect, as he tells his disciples in Matthew 28:18: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me!*” The New Testament unfolds this, e.g. in the theological perspective of Ephesians 1:20-23:

This power he exercised in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms *far above every rule and authority and power and dominion and every name* that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And God *put all things under Christ's feet*, and he gave him to the church as head over all things. Now the church is his body, the fullness of him who is filled in every respect.

So the resurrection of Jesus is at the same time his *exaltation to the throne of God*. Thereby *he has become the sovereign ruler over all the spiritual powers*: they all have to bow to him:

⁹² E.g. Gal 4:9; Rom 8:38f; Col 2:8,16-23.

⁹³ Since it is all about “power” they often fight each other, see Dan 8.

⁹⁴ This is the fourfold (!) summons in Eph 6:10-17! The description of the “spiritual armour” is meant to foster that (cf. its heavy emphasis on weapons of defence!).

⁹⁵ The letters to the churches in Rev 2-3 bear witness to that.

⁹⁶ It is the Gospel of Mark that portrays Jesus here in the most vivid colours. The very first miracle that he does is a dramatic exorcism (Mk 1:21-28); Lk follows him here (Lk 4:31-37). The ratio of exorcisms and healings is 3 to 10 in Mark, and 4 to ten in Matthew. But since Mark is a lot shorter, exorcisms play a much bigger role in his gospel.

⁹⁷ It remains unclear, if *all* disciples are *always* authorized to do that, or if Mk 16:17 is understood collectively, i.e. looking at the body of Christ in its entirety. This would mean that there are special gifts or callings of exorcism, as is the case with other gifts. In 1Cor 12:4-6,10,29 and Rom 12:6ff Paul takes the latter position.



Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.. (Philippians 2:9-11 NIV).

So he became as much superior to the angels
as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Hebrews 1:4)

3. *Jesus – source and purpose of the powers*: This status of the risen and exalted Jesus leads to an even deeper insight. He is not only – through his death, resurrection and exaltation – *the victor* over all the powers in all realms that are hostile to God. At the same time he is *the origin and source* of every power and authority, right from the beginning of creation. What a thought! And not all of these powers are inherently evil – some will even be redeemed, together with fallen humanity. This perspective is taken by Colossians:

*For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions,
whether principalities or powers –
all things were created through him and for him ...
For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in the Son
and through him to reconcile all things to himself
by making peace through the blood of his cross –
through him, whether things on earth or things in heaven.* (Colossians 1:16,19-20)

No wonder that the New Testament celebrates this revelation of the absolute sovereignty of Jesus first and foremost in worship songs, the so-called “hymns of Christ”.⁹⁸

4. *Jesus - God from God*: The climax of all these hymns is John 1:1-18. This song not only describes that everything has been created by and through “the Word”, i.e. Christ. It goes far beyond that: Jesus is not only the “mediator of creation”, he is himself *God from God*: “The only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known ...” (John 1:18). This shows his infinite superiority over everything that has been created – including all the powers: Nothing can even come close to his status; there is a difference in category. The hymn in Philippians had already stated in 2:6: “Who, *being in very nature God*, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage ...” And the hymns in the book of Revelation, e.g. in the vision in chapter 4 and 5, worship both God and the Lamb of God in the same way – and in Jewish theology worship is due to God only.

4.6. THE CLIMAX OF REVELATION

The Book of Revelation sees itself as the *goal, climax and consummation* of prophecy and the OT scriptures in general. This is made clear by the more than 600 quotations, allusions and echoes of the OT.⁹⁹ At the same time it provides the most extensive perspectives of the heavenly realm that can be found in the Bible.

⁹⁸ As in Phil 2: 6-11; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:1-4 and as culmination Joh 1:1-18 (see below). Add to that the numerous hymns and exclamations in Revelation, e.g. in Rev 4-5; 7; 12; 19. In many places in the letters of the NT phrases and formulas are being used that originated in the worship of Christ.

⁹⁹ According to a different count even up to 1.000.



We often overlook the fact that Revelation reports the most dramatic *changes in the heavenlies*, that have been effected through the “Christ-event”—the incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection and enthronement of the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel and Saviour of the world.

Now heaven stands wide open. Therefore it is no wonder, that the visions and insights of the OT are *modified, corrected and taken further*. For our topic two aspects are especially relevant: the change in the vision of the *Heavenly Council* and the merging and *deepening of the view of evil* in the Scriptures.

The Modification of the Heavenly Council

When one comes from the OT it is interesting to see how Revelation describes the throne of God and its immediate environment.¹⁰⁰ Not only that different elements of the heavenly temple become visible;¹⁰¹ at the same time the temple is the throne room of God.¹⁰² The great vision of Revelation chapter 4 and 5 significantly changes the picture that we have seen in the OT. The throne of God is surrounded by the four “Living Beings”, that Ezekiel had already seen as the throne-bearers, though slightly modified and blended with the six-winged seraphim of Isaiah's vision of the throne of God.¹⁰³

But the most important change occurs with regards to the divine council: Instead of a council made up of the “sons of God” or angels – ambivalent supernatural beings – we find a *council of twenty-four priestly elders, the heavenly representatives of the People of God* from Jews and Non-Jews alike!¹⁰⁴ Together with the four Living Beings they form the innermost circle around the throne of God and sit themselves on twenty-four thrones.¹⁰⁵

To that another observation needs to be added: In the chapter that envisions the incarnation of Christ (Revelation 12) we see how *Satan and his host are forever thrown out of heaven*. There is no place for any of those destructive powers anymore: *they have no longer access to God!*

So Revelation makes it pretty obvious: Since the coming of Jesus the environment in the “throne room” of God has been changed forever: It is now *the Church that is closest to God* and surrounds him in the form of her heavenly representatives. In fact, she literally is closer to him than all of the angelic host of heaven!¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Throne visions are found in Rev 4-5; 7:9-17; possibly also 20:11-15.

¹⁰¹ The seer beholds the heavenly *temple*, where God is enthroned, with the *menorah* (the seven-flamed candelabrum), the sacrificial altar, the altar of incense, the ark of the covenant etc. (Rev 4:5; 6:9; 7:15; 8:3; 9:13; 11:19). This is the “archetype” or model (*tabnit*, Ex 25:9,40) for the sanctuary (“tabernacle”, “tent of meeting”) at Sinai and the later temple in Jerusalem, cf. Ex 25–27; 30; 35–40.

¹⁰² In the OT the same Hebrew word *hekhal* refers to a royal palace and the main hall of the temple. Note that it is a *holy temple*, not a judgement court! The court opens only in Rev 20:4 – with the resurrected martyrs as judges. The final judgement of God takes place from a white throne mentioned for the first time in Rev 20:11-15.

¹⁰³ Ez 1; 10; Is 6:1-3.

¹⁰⁴ That seems to be the meaning of the figure “24”: it is two times “12”, the number of the tribes of Israel; in the OT the number of the classes of priests was also 24 (cf 1. Ch 24–25). The New Jerusalem in Rev 21 is also characterised by the figure 24: it has 12 gates with the names of the tribes of Israel and 12 foundation stones with the names of the “apostles of the Lamb”.

¹⁰⁵ The background could be the vision of Dan 7. The 24 priestly elders on their thrones in Revelation correspond to the „Holy Ones of the Most High“ and their thrones in Dan 7:9,18,26f; see also Rev 20:4.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Rev 4,3-4; 7,11



A Deeper View of Evil

The central focus of the Book of Revelation is the *final and definite establishment of the kingdom of God*, the central theme of the OT. The kingdom of God on earth has been inaugurated with the coming of the Messiah. Since evil is the major opponent of his Kingdom, we find in Revelation also the deepest, most comprehensive and crucial statements about evil in all of the Scriptures.

1. The *demons* are mentioned only in passing as one of the many-faceted forms of evil; they torment humans.¹⁰⁷ Additionally the term “demon” is also applied to spiritual powers.¹⁰⁸
2. Much more prominent in Revelation are the *structural powers*. The vision of the city “Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes”, the “great city” is the *epitome of a hyper-institution*: the rich and powerful, anti-godly world-society that oppresses man and persecutes the people of God. In the end she will be judged by God himself.¹⁰⁹
3. But the deepest insights of Revelation pertain to the *essence of evil*. Its core mystery is revealed as a kind of “*Satanic trinity*” which is the fountainhead of all the diverse forms of evil in all dimensions of creation: (a) the “dragon” *from heaven* who then is thrown to the *earth*, (b) the “predatory beast” arising *from the bottom of the sea*, and (c) the lamb-like chthonic beast rising from the subterranean *depths of the earth*.¹¹⁰ All realms are represented and involved; all dimensions of creation are summoned by evil – the heavenlies, the abyss of chaos and the forces of decay.
 - a) Most interesting is the dragon himself. Originally a being in heaven he integrates the Old Testament traditions of the primeval force of the abyss (“dragon” is a translation for tannin), of the “snake” in the garden of Eden, as well as the figure of Satan, the accuser and tempter, and the “devil”.¹¹¹ In the vision of Revelation 12–13 he is the author who conjures up the other two figures from the sea and the netherworld: the predator-chaos and the chthonic seducer beast.¹¹²
 - b) The *Power of Chaos arising from the Sea*, “the Beast”, is comprised of all the predators in Daniel's vision. As a kind of “hyper-power” in its imperial incarnations it determines *the course of human history*. At the same time it is the *background dynamics behind the world-society* of the “Great City”, her “bearer”.
 - c) The sub-terrestrial “*beast of the underground*”, by contrast, seduces mankind to worship exactly those historical incarnations of the “Beast”. For that reason it inspires a community of worshippers as an antithesis to the church of the Messiah.

In this way the threefold expression of evil explicitly becomes both an *imitation* and an *antagonist* of the triune God: The Dragon imitates the creator, “who sits on the throne”. The Power of Chaos, made in his image, becomes the direct antagonist of the Messiah/Christ, in whom, according to NT theology, everything is established. And the subterranean beast is the adversary of the Spirit and the church of God.

¹⁰⁷ Rev 9; 16:12–16.

¹⁰⁸ E.g. Rev 9:20; 16:14. This is similar to Paul, who, following OT precedent and the Jewish custom of his time, calls the gods of the nations with the derogatory term “demons” (1.Cor 10:19–21). Theologically they are regarded as powers of decay.

¹⁰⁹ Rev 17–18.

¹¹⁰ Rev 12–13.

¹¹¹ “Devil” comes from the Greek word *diabolos*. The underlying verb *diaballo* means to “to bring apart, to slander”, In the Jewish-Greek translation of the OT, *diabolos* is used to translate *satan* and has the meaning “accuser, adversary”.

¹¹² The gospels see him already as the lord of the demons, cf. Mt 12:25–29.



So Revelation combines all the different dimensions of evil that we found in the Old Testament and links them to a single, yet multiform, and at the same time personal, origin.¹¹³ Here the "satan" of the Old Testament becomes the "Devil" of Christian theology, who wants to usurp the place of God, destroys his creation, seduces humanity and persecutes his church. God alone will overcome him at the end of time in the final consummation of his kingdom.

¹¹³ "Personal" here means "characterized by will and intelligence". That is the highest form of being in creation. It is definitely not a matter of a primitive "personification", but a highly reflective theological perspective.