

Spiritual Warfare and the Paganizing of Christianity?

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In these days where theological pendulums swing wildly, I've been giving special attention to errors – sometimes grave – that occur through over-corrections. As people of faith, I'm well aware of how Christian doctrine and practice has frequently steered wildly out of one ditch, only to veer across the road and plunge into another gully on the opposite side. Sometimes we oppose something toxic, only to poison ourselves with a corresponding error from the opposite extreme. Or in retrieving something we had previously lost, we swallow the bathwater with the long lost baby.

With that in mind, I want to reconsider how my very necessary rediscovery of spiritual reality may have also opened the door to ill-advised ancient mythologies—errors that Judaism had already expunged thousands of years ago. Herein, I will lay out my concern in stages for the reader to weigh, test and fact-check. I'm claiming nothing definitive here ... I am not teaching so much as raising the question for further examination.

In his classic work, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, the Hebrew scholar Yechezkel Kaufmann lays out the superiority and genius of Judaism vis-à-vis the pagan worldviews of the day. He treats the Jewish conception of the universe as a radical departure and contesting revelation—rather than a mere evolution from—ancient polytheistic conceptions.¹ Points 1-3 below are Kaufmann's claims, which he may overstate, but should be attended to by Christian scholars.

1. Generally speaking, the ancient pagan worldview saw reality as a cosmic war between gods and demons, resulting in material creation and the introduction of evil into the world. Pagan religions attempted to address and engage these powers through divination and ritual manipulation of the primordial powers that created the gods. Magic was about harnessing those powers to bypass, coerce and/or appease the evil gods and cast out the demons and invoke blessing and protection from the good gods, etc. In that pagan worldview, which permeated the whole world, there was an essential dualism between good and evil, blessing and curses and we as humans are caught up in it. Think of this as 'mythology' -- i.e. the backstory and theogony (birthing) of the gods.

2. The Israelite worldview says no. This was an earthshaking revelation / revolution. From the first chapter of Genesis, there is one God and *no* other gods. Worshiping Yahweh as God isn't best because he's stronger or kinder than the other Gods. We worship our Yahweh because, to the Jews, the others don't even really exist. Isaiah

¹ I was introduced to Kaufmann's work through Dr. Christine Hayes' course, "Introduction to the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible)," lecture 2, which is entitled "The Hebrew Bible in Its Ancient Near Eastern Setting: Biblical Religion in Context." Cf. <http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-2>.

mocks the vacuous nature of these false gods. The idols are nothing but chunks of stone and blocks of wood. So accessing their power isn't regarded as a sin because these gods are evil but rather, because their power is non-existent, pointless, useless and delusional.

3. So the Israelite revelation demythologizes evil beings and puts responsibility for evil on us--on people. Who introduced evil into the world? We did. They tell stories describing this, not as mythologies but as *myth*. *Myths* are different because these are profound, symbolic stories describing our reality here and now (versus the *mythological* tales of the gods). Furthermore, the Jewish revelation demythologizes the afterlife and it's focus on sin's destructive power in this life and this world. While the Babylonians, Egyptians and Greeks conceived intricate stories about an afterlife, underworld or *hades*, the Old Testament describes the real-life demolition of Jerusalem (sometimes using cosmic imagery) and the actual Valley of *Gehenna*. And they demythologize the world, driving out the very notion of gods, making God the only supreme spiritual Being. Even those rare texts mentioning angels only describe them as messengers from God or worshippers of God. All told, in this world, Judaism was the most 'secular' religion available.

Now there's a lot of 'what about this?' questions, but if you go with just OT, there's a deliberate repudiation, not just of pagan practice, but of the whole pagan worldview.

4. As best I can tell, the mythology begins to creep back into Judaism while under the influence of Babylonian religion during the exile. Books like Enoch borrow liberally from the pagan worldview and begin to *populate* Jewish theology with all sorts of imported mythologies ... including intricate hierarchies of demons and angels, and elaborate descriptions of afterlife conditions.

One of my WTC students noted in his research:

As DeSilva notes, there is evidence in second temple Jewish apocalypticism of the significant 'development of angelology and demonology'.² Enoch is a key pseudepigraphical text, giving compelling insights into ancient Jewish cosmology, and could therefore be seen as a foundation for early Christian eschatology (1 Enoch 7-8).³ Its portrayal of rebellious angels and their influence on the earth, where they are described as 'oppressors', charged with corrupting humanity by mating with them, and teaching them warfare, sorcery, and astrology, is particularly relevant.

These influences become very pervasive among the Jews through returning Pharisees but also infest and infect Christianity. The point is that intertestamental

² Desilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 50.

³ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Vol 1, Apocalyptic literature and testaments*, (Massachusetts, USA, Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC: 2011), *The Book of Enoch* 6:8-53:7.

angelology and demonology may be more Babylonian than Israelite, and in fact, may represent an intensified version of syncretism.

5. Then why did this become popular, even among Christians? Because in addition to the eschatological hope of apocalyptic books like Enoch being such an encouragement of victory to otherwise defeated people, it also became a very rich source of hope beyond the grave for one's departed loved ones and oneself in the face of martyrdom. If there's a heaven and hell where justice is finally served, so much the better. And more than that, Enoch et al offer up some beautiful Messianic promises. Considering that these books really exalt the coming Messiah / Son of David / Son of Man ... and since they were so popular among Jews, Enoch and the rest made for a great prophetic foreshadowing of Jesus. Back to my student, with this insight:

What is most extraordinary about 1 Enoch is its detailed description of the 'Son of Man', as 'the One who was born of human beings', 'given a name ... before the creation of the stars', 'the light of the gentiles', who will be 'saved in his name', as 'Messiah' who will cause all oppression to 'vanish' by casting rebellious angels into the 'furnace of fire' on the 'great day of judgment' (1 Enoch 46:1-8, 48:1-10, 49:1-4, 53:1-7, 54:1-6). The broader New Testament canon certainly seems to be replete with evidence of an operative cosmology very similar to this in early Christian thinking.⁴ Viewed from this perspective, Jesus as the 'son of David' came to wage war against the Devil and his angels, thus heralding the end of the present evil age.

Furthermore, Jesus' own teaching on the final judgment and the resurrection has strong parallels to Enoch--he doesn't simply dismiss it as ludicrous --so it would be very attractive material (indeed, the epistle of St Jude quotes Enoch in his brief letter). BUT there was also a cost. You also seem to have the introduction of pagan worldviews with its cosmic, dualistic conflicts, godlike beings and a proliferation of demons, etc.

6. Does Jesus' buy in? I don't think so. Yes, the gospels acknowledge the reality of demons and angels. Yes, Jesus does see the need for deliverance ministry. BUT he doesn't affirm any kind of cosmic dualism or magical interaction with it. That means he's not worried about people sending demons, casting curses; he doesn't train his

⁴ Matt 4:1-17, 8:16, 28-34, 9:32-34, 10:8-9, 12:22-31, 43-45, 17:14-22, Mark 1:21-39, 5:1-20, 9:14-29, Luke 4:1-12, 31-37, 41, 8:2-3, 11-12, 26-39, 9:37-43, 49, 10:17-20, 11:14-26, 13:10-16, 22:3-6, John 8:44-45, 14:27-28, 17:15, Acts 8:4-7, 16:16-18, 19:11-20, 1 Cor 10:19-22, 2 Cor 4:3-5, 6:14-16, 11:14-15, Gal 1:8-9, Eph 1:21-22, 6:10-20, Col 1:13-14, 16-18, 2:15-18, 1 Thess 4:16, 2 Thess 1:7-10, 2:9-10, 3:3-4, 1 Tim 3:6-7, 4:1-3, 5:15, Heb 1:5-14, 2:2, 12:22, Jas 4:7-8, 1 Pe 3:22-23, 5:8-10, 2:4-6, 11-12, 1 Jn 2:13, 3:8-9, 4:1-3, 5:18, Jude 5-8, 9-10, 14-17, Rev 2:1, 8-9, 12-14, 18, 24, 3:1, 7, 9, 14, 8:6-8, 9:9-12, 10:1, 12:7-10, 13:1-5, 11-12, 14:6, 8-10, 17, 15:1-3, 16:1-21, 17:1-2, 18:1-2, 21, 20:1-3, 7, 13-15.

disciples to ward them off or do anything that smacks of talismans or incantations or divination to neutralize that realm. It's not he's just more powerful ... he doesn't treat these things as mini-gods at all. Every miracle he does reaffirms the Israelite worldview that God is the Creator of all, Judge of all, Saviour of all. Jesus doesn't have battles with demons or winds or waves. He simply issues commands from/as the One Player in the game over whatever created thing challenges his sovereignty. There's no ritual, no magic and especially no fear ... In other words, wherever the Gospel itself is preached, Jesus 'sees Satan fall like lightning from heaven,' – a metaphor for the defeat of the demonic powers, but perhaps also the demolition of a worldview chained to belief in such powers.

7. If that weren't enough during his ministry, we also see Jesus (in John's gospel) and Paul in his letter to the Colossians point to Christ's victory on the Cross as decisive. The Cross in John's gospel functions as the final judgment of the world, the casting out of 'the prince of this world,' and the utter disarmament of every rebellious power and authority. Nowhere does Paul suggest that such principalities and powers are mega-demons or mini-gods. Rather, whatever they are, the blood of Christ establishes the kingdom of God for the reconciliation of ALL things, visible and invisible. That is, salvation descends from Creator to created, and all things come under his feet. There's nothing horizontal happening here between parallel realms of spiritual power. I don't have this mystery figured out; I'm arguing that we've gone way beyond biblical revelation to create or adopt very complex mythologies with far too much certitude.

8. Moreover, Christ's descent into *hades* to empty the grave is not an affirmation of pagan notions of *hades* that had been enfolded into Judaism. Perhaps he also empties *hades* of all meaning, wherein the resurrection virtually debunks pagan mythologies surrounding the afterlife altogether ... I.e. death is not merely taken from the hands of some polytheistic god (whether you call him Hades or Satan), and it may not even be a place loaded with ghostly shades. Rather, the harrowing of *hades* reveals that death is a done deal because Jesus was dead and now he's alive and holds the keys. Jesus' victory is not only over the devil and hell, but in some way, over the mythological lies about the devil and hell. What I'm asking is whether Christ's defeats the devil and hell, not just as a 'being' and a place, but even as terrifying pagan ideas.

9. Here's the problem. In the late twentieth century, along with our rediscovery of the supernatural (including the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit), there was a great surge of popular books on spiritual warfare and the developing demonologies among Pentecostals, charismatics, third wave Evangelicals, and a host of renewal movements. We were taught (and I taught) that the problem was an "excluded middle" – a tragic ignorance of the 'second heaven' realm. I.e., We weren't cognizant of angels and demons, their active role in our lives, nor the ways in which to engage them. We were exhorted to study that (the dark arts?) ... often using information derived during conversations with demons and converted witches. We too readily adopted their cosmology and so repopulated the very space the Jews had depleted

and Jesus had defeated! We thought we were getting a handle on how to overcome the enemy -- but in reality, may have *lost* the spiritual battle precisely by assenting so easily to a pagan worldview, by re-engaging in pagan fears, and even employing pagan practices (divination, etc.) under the name 'Christian'?

10. When a witch is converted from a coven and becomes a Christian, then tells us about the rituals and curses and demons they invoked to attack us, IF we affirm that as REAL, hasn't the coven has already infected us with a 'demonic' worldview. We start trying to use prayers and scriptures (even counter-curses!) and crosses as incantations and magical amulets for protection. At that point, haven't we just become the new coven in practice?

Closing thoughts: Now this is very important – I am *not* suggesting we revert to the first ditch – the alter-ignorance of materialism – or deny the existence of angels and demons (however we approach that) or the need for deliverance from bondage and oppression . BUT I want to double-check my teaching on this for a functional polytheistic dualism and neo-pagan mythology. I also want to check my practices, wherever they have become Christian versions of white magic. This is especially true wherever we engage in fear of attack, when in fact we have not been given that spirit ... and where sometimes what we're actually dealing with is our own issues, passions and fears, not to mention the trials and evils of life in this world.