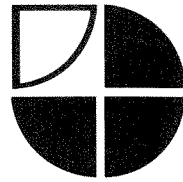


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Spiritual Warfare: Biblical Perspectives

PAUL G. HIEBERT

Ancient myths¹ die hard. They continue in disguise in popular culture long after they are rejected in orthodox religious thought. It is important, therefore, that we carefully examine our understanding of cosmic history.

One such story receiving considerable attention in North American Protestant churches today is "spiritual warfare" (Peretti 1986, 1989; Wagner and Pennoyer 1990; Warner 1991). This coincides with the decline of the modern era with its faith in secular materialism, and the emergence of the post-modern era with its emphasis on various types of "spirituality" (Chandler 1988). It also coincides with a loss of confidence in human efforts to solve the world's problems and a widespread fear concerning the future.

Interest in spiritual matters must be both welcomed and tested. It must be welcomed because the church too often has bought into the worldview of a secular science that denies the reality of sin and spiritual realities. It must be tested because we are in danger of returning to the views of our pagan past.

As we will see, the pagan Indo-European myth of our ancestors is still alive in our North American fables, sports, movies, politics, and business. The question must be asked, to what extent our renewed interest in spiritual warfare is drawn from Indo-European mythology, and to what extent from the Bible?

The Indo-European myth

Central to the Indo-European worldview was the myth of a cosmic spiritual war between good and evil (Larson 1974; Puhvel 1970). With the spread of the Indo-Europeans from inner Asia to Europe, Mesopotamia, and South Asia, this myth in its various forms became the basis for the religions of Babylon, Sumer, Canaan, Greece, India, and Germany, to name a few (Wakeman 1973).

What worldview sustained this myth? Unfortunately, worldviews are largely implicit and difficult to examine. They are made up of the categories, values, and assumptions we use to examine our world, the cultural lenses that shape the way we see the world. Worldviews assure us that this is the way things really are.

A careful study of root myths and metaphors of Indo-European religions suggests the following worldview themes.

The eternal coexistence of good and evil

Fundamental to the Indo-European myth is the belief that

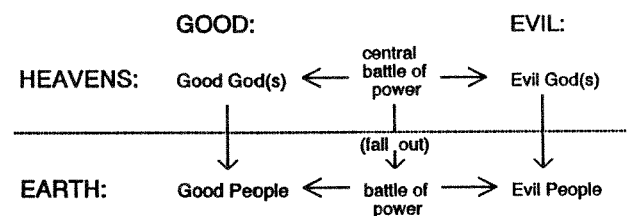
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good and evil are two independent entities in coexistence from eternity. In this dualism, good and evil come from two different and opposing superhuman agencies. The classical example is found in ancient Persia in the battle between Ahura Mazda, the good divine being, and Ahriman, the equally eternal and powerful personification of evil. Human beings are nothing but puppets or pawns in their hands. As David Bosch (1987:38) points out, it is hardly coincidence that the game of chess was developed in Persia, and reflects the fundamental Indo-European view of reality. Omar Khayyam aptly expresses (Bosch 1987:38),

'Tis all a chequer-board of nights and days
Where destiny with men for pieces plays;
Hither and thither moves and mates and slays,
And one by one back in the closet lays.

In this battle, the ultimate good is order and freedom, and to achieve this one side or the other must gain control. The ultimate evil is chaos and enslavement (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
The Indo-European View of Good and Evil



The evil god (Asag, Vritra, Tiamat, Ravana, and others) is an autonomous being in constant battle with the good god (Ninurta, Indra, Marduk, Rama, and others) for the control of the world. Applied to the biblical narrative, this view sees Satan and the demons as autonomous beings. They may have been created by God in the beginning, but now they no longer depend on God for their continued existence. Creation was an act completed in the distant past.

Given this dualism, all reality is divided into two camps: God and Satan, angels and demons, good nations and evil ones, good humans and wicked ones. The good may be deceived or forced into doing bad things but, at heart, they are good. The evil have no redeeming qualities. They must be destroyed so that good may reign.

The line between the two camps is sharp. There are no shades between them. The result is a bounded set view of reality (Hiebert 1983:421-27). We see this in our desire for order based on sharply defined categories. We set walls and floors off from each other by moldings. We edge our lawns, use precise times to begin our services, and use curbs, center dividers, and lanes to organize our roads.

Our dualism is seen in our American tendency to categorize in opposites: good-bad, big-small, sweet-sour, success-failure, and truth-falsehood (Arensberg and Niehoff 1971:207-231). This duality colors our political views. Other nations are either capitalist or communist; for us, or against us.

The central issues are order and control

In dualism the central issue is order. With two competing parties, the fundamental danger is chaos. Only when order is established can we speak of building a just society. Peace, love, righteousness, and harmonious relationships are secondary values.

To establish order, someone must be in control. Hierarchy, therefore, is essential to prevent the rise of chaos. In Indo-European mythology, the gods and demons live on one plane, and rule over humans who live on another plane (Figure 1). The latter are hapless victims of cosmic affairs. The old adage says, "When the elephants fight, the mice are trampled." Humans, therefore, live in fear of the spirits, good and evil, for these control their destiny. Humans, on their part, seek to manipulate the gods to do their bidding. Magic and manipulation become the means.

The question remains, who is Lord in the heavens? "Lord" here means one who controls the others and establishes order, by force if need be. It is the king who rules by might, and commands the obedience of his vassals. Such a king should be strong, aloof, and proud.

The outcome is determined by battle

The question of cosmic control is determined in Indo-European mythology by a battle between a good party and an evil one, in which power determines the outcome. The highest value is success. If good wins, righteousness, peace, and love can rule. If evil wins, then evil reigns. To win, therefore, is everything.

Morality in these power encounters is based on the notion of fairness and equal opportunity. To be "fair" the conflict must be between those thought to be more or less equal in might. In other words, the outcome of the battle must be uncertain. It is "unfair" to pit a seasoned gunman against a youngster, or the Los Angeles Rams against a high school football team. "Equal opportunity" means that both sides must be able to use the same means to gain victory. The good side cannot use evil means first, but if the evil side does, the good side can, too. In westerns, the sheriff cannot draw first, but when the outlaw does, the sheriff can gun him down without a trial. In Indo-European battles, the good become like their enemies: they end up using violence, entering without warrants, lying, committing adultery, and killing without due process. All

of this is justified in the name of victory. Righteousness and love reign only after victory is won.

In Indo-European mythology, land is important. Gods and humans battle for and rule different territories. Lesser spirits control the mountains, the rivers, the plains, and the seas. Earthly kings turn to their gods to give them victory in wars against their enemies and their enemies' gods. If they lose, it is because their god is defeated. In this worldview, it is unthinkable that a god would let

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MISSION FOCUS (ISSN 0164-4696) is published quarterly at 500 S. Main St., Elkhart, Indiana, by Mennonite Board of Missions. Single copies available without charge. Send correspondence to Box 370, Elkhart, IN 46515-0370. Second-class postage paid at Elkhart, Indiana, and at additional mailing offices. Lithographed in USA. Copyright 1992 by Mennonite Board of Missions. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to MISSION FOCUS, Box 370, Elkhart, IN 46515-0370.

enemies win to bring judgment on the people because they have sinned. Loyalty in battle is more important than righteousness.

Underlying the Indo-European worldview is the deep belief that relationships in the cosmos are based on competition, that competition is good, and that good will ultimately win. Success is proof that one is right. Consequently, warriors are the second class of society. They are considered "noble" and rank only below the priests (Lincoln 1986).

After victory comes righteousness

After victory, the gods can inaugurate a kingdom of justice and peace. Righteousness and relationships are secondary to order. Two dilemmas remain. First, if the gods use wicked means to win the battle, have they not become a party to evil? One answer, found in Hinduism and the New Age, is that good and evil are ultimately one: two sides of the same coin. Dualism is reduced to monism. A second answer, found in Zoroastrianism, is that both coexist in an eternal cosmic struggle.

In both views, no victory is final. Evil is never fully defeated. It rises again to challenge the good. Good must constantly be on guard against future attacks.

In the Indo-European worldview, the battle is the center of the story. When it is over, the story is done. The final words are "and they won (or were married) and lived happily ever after." But there is no story worth telling about the "happily ever after." The adventure and thrill is in the battle, and it is to this that we return again and again.

This fascination with battle is evident in our modern sports. People pay to see a football game. When the battle is over, everyone goes home and waits for the next battle. We see it in the reactions to the end of the Cold War. Francis Fukuyama, a policy planner in the U.S. State Department, perceives the end of the Cold War as "the end of history," leaving the world with no master plot, only "centuries of boredom" stretching ahead like a superhighway to nowhere (Maddocks 1990:16). We need an enemy to give meaning to our lives.

The Indo-European religions have died in the West, but as Walter Wink points out (1989), the Indo-European cosmic myth dominates modern American thought. It is the basis for our westerns, detective stories, murder mysteries, and science fiction. It is told in Superman, Spiderman, Super Chicken, Underdog, and most of our cartoons. It is reenacted in Star Wars, dramatized in our video games, and taught in the New Age Movement. It is played out in football, basketball, and tennis. It is affirmed in our theories of evolution and capitalism.

An evaluation

The Scriptures speak of spiritual warfare (cf. Eph. 6:10-20; Rev. 19:19-20), but that warfare does not fit the Indo-European myth. In the first place, the central issue in biblical warfare is not power. For example, in the Old Testament both Israel's victories and defeats are attributed to God.

Their victory is due to their faithfulness to God and his laws, their defeat is God's punishment for their forsaking him (Judg. 4:1-2; 6:1; 10:7; 1 Sam. 28; 1 Kings 16:3, 20:28; 2 Kings 17:7-23). In no instance is their loss blamed on Yahweh's defeat at the hands of other gods. In fact, the prophets declare that there are no other gods to even challenge him (Isa. 37:19; Jer. 2:11; 5:7). To put any other on the same level with God is itself idolatry (Exod. 20:4-5). The central issue is not power, but shalom. It is the relationship between people and God. This view of Israel's defeat stands in sharp contrast to the views of the peoples around Israel (2 Kings 20:23). They attributed their defeat to the power of Yahweh, and their victories to the power of their gods.

Second, in contrast to the Indo-European myths in which humans are hapless victims of the cosmic battles of the gods, the Bible places the blame for suffering on humans themselves. They are sinners, conspirators with Satan and his host in rebellion against God. They turn from God. In contrast to Indo-European myths which are full of the activities of angels and demons, the Scriptures speak surprisingly little about them. The central story is the story of humans and their acts, and of God's acts.

Third, the Scriptures are clear that the cross is the ultimate victory. This makes no sense in Indo-European terms. Christ should have taken up the challenge of his tormentors and come down from the cross with his angelic hosts. He should have defeated Satan when he met him in the desert. Scriptures make it clear that the cross itself was Satan's defeat (1 Cor. 1:18-25). It was not an apparent loss saved at the last moment by the resurrection.

Fourth, it is in the *fallen* world that the lion eats the lamb (Isa. 11:6), and competition, not cooperation, works as a way of organizing society. This, however, is not God's way, which is the way of caring for one another, loving one's enemy, and seeking reconciliation and peace.

If this is not the biblical image of spiritual warfare, what is?

Biblical images of spiritual warfare

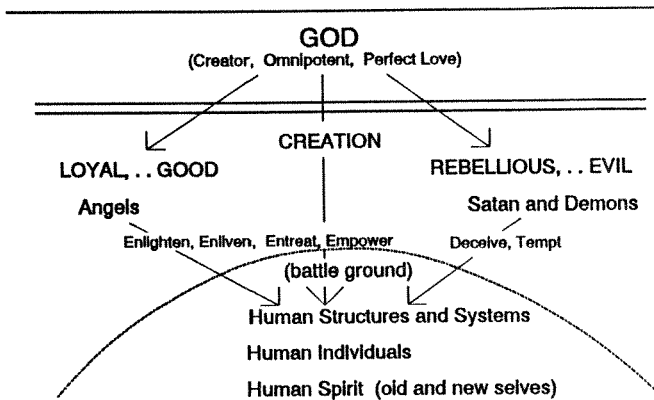
The biblical images of spiritual realities differ radically from Indo-European mythology at several key points, and give us a very different view of the cosmic spiritual warfare in which we are engaged.

Good is eternal and evil is contingent

The Bible is clear: God and Satan, good and evil, are not eternal and coexistent. In the beginning was God, and God was good. Satan, sinners, and sin appear in creation. Moreover, God's creation is an ongoing process. God did not, at some point in the past, create a universe independent of God. Satan and sinners, like all creation, are contingent on God's continuing creation. Their very existence is testimony to God's mercy and love (Figure 2).

The central issue, therefore, is not one of brute power. God's omnipotence is never questioned in Scripture. Even Satan and his hosts acknowledge this. The issue is holiness and evil, righteousness and sin. God is holy, light, love,

Figure 2.
The Biblical View of Good and Evil



life, and truth. Evil does not exist independently. It is the perversion of good. It is darkness, and deceitfulness, and the source of death. It is broken relationships, idolatry and rebellion against God, alienation, and the worship of the self.

The central issues are shalom and holiness

At the heart of the gospel is shalom. This begins with right relationship between people and God: with worship, holiness, and obedience. Prayer in Indo-European thought is a means to control the gods; in biblical thought it is submission to God. In prayer we give God permission to use us and our resources to answer our prayer. It can, therefore, be costly.

Shalom is also right relationships between humans. These are not characterized by hierarchy and exploitation, as in the Indo-European world, in which the strong lord it over the weak. Right relationships are expressed in love and care for one another as people fully created in the image of God, no matter how broken or flawed. Shalom is to be for the other rather than for one's self, and to commit one's self to the other regardless of the other's response.

Shalom gives priority to building community over completing tasks. This demands that we give up our Western need to control people and situations around us. It means we accept corporate decision making and accountability to the community.

How do love and shalom fit with images such as king, reign, and kingdom? In the Indo-European worldview these are antithetical. A king cannot show love to his enemy and destroy him. He cannot show intimacy with his subjects and rule them. In contrast, Scripture indicates that the ruler is to be a servant of the people, not to lord it over them (Luke 22:25-27; John 13:1-16), and all are to love, not hate, their enemies.

In the biblical worldview, not all chaos is evil. Evil chaos results in destruction and death. Creative chaos is the unformed potential from which spring creation and life. It is the unformed material out of which God created the

universe (Gen. 1:2). It is the infant not yet grown to adulthood.

Creative chaos is inherent in genuine relationships. The birth of a child introduces turmoil into the routines of the home. Friendships and intimate marriages mean letting go of power and sharing decisions. Our Western need for order and control works against true communication and fellowship because it is the passage through chaos that forms the basis for real communication and community.

The image of God as king is free of the Indo-European connotations of territorialism. Unlike the gods of the Canaanites who are identified with a particular people, their lands, and their successes in battle, Jehovah is the God of the whole world and of all peoples. Moreover, he is responsible for the defeats of Israel as well as their victories. Israel's losses are not due to the triumphs of the gods of their enemies. The prophets make it clear there is no real battle between the gods. Israel's defeats are due to the anger and discipline of their own god! He not only heals (Luke 4:40), he punishes (Acts 5).

Where does power fit into this picture? Clearly, godly might in the Scriptures refers to the power of authority (Matt. 28:18) and rule (Rev. 6:4). Here might does not make right, nor does battle make the victor legitimate. Rather, with legitimacy comes authority, and with authority comes power.

The battle is in human hearts

If the central message of the Bible is not about a cosmic struggle between God and Satan to determine who is more powerful, what is it about? The battle is that within the human heart which God and Satan are seeking to win. Here two metaphors emerge. The first is the wayward son. The father lavishes his love on his son, but the son rebels and turns on his father. The father is not interested in defeating his son but in winning him back, so he reaches out in unconditional love. The son wants to provoke the father into hating him, and so, by twisted logic, to justify his rebellion. But the father takes all the evil his son heaps on him and continues to love. Similarly, God is love, and loves no matter what his rebellious creations do (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35). If he does less, if he can be provoked to hate, he is less than the perfect God that he is.

It is clear that God continues to love sinful humans, but does that apply to Satan himself? Hard as this may seem, it is even harder to believe that God would hate his own creation. He hates Satan's rebellion and the destruction it has brought, but can he hate Satan who is his own creation? If he does, he is no longer the perfect God of love. And if he defeats Satan by brute force apart from righteousness, he himself becomes evil.

What then is the nature of spiritual warfare in the Bible? Compared to Indo-European myths, there are few references to cosmic battles. The central story is about the battle for the spirits of human beings. In this, humans are not passive victims of battles fought on a cosmic plane. They are the central actors and the locus of the action. They are the rebels, and ever since the temptation of

Adam, self-possession has been the basis of their idolatry.

Satan, too, is seeking their allegiances, but his methods are deceit and temptation. He and his demons possess those who yield themselves fully to him. For these, salvation must include deliverance from demonic dominance. Jesus cast out the demons of those who came to him, but this was not his central ministry. He did this in passing as he went about preaching the kingdom. In the end, it was not the demons that killed Jesus, it was humans and their institutions—the Sanhedrin and the Roman government—that did so. Today, opposition to God on earth is still centered in humans.

Our rebellion is both individual and corporate. As individuals we have turned against God. As groups we develop social and cultural systems that often keep people from coming to Christ. There is good in the cultures and societies humans create, but there is also evil. Individuals may want God, but often they are caught in the webs of family ties, religious structures, and sociocultural systems that prevent them from doing so on pain of persecution and death.

What about the battle in the heavens between God and Satan? Here a second metaphor found in Scriptures is helpful, namely that of king and rebellious vassals or stewards (Matt. 21:33-43; Gulick 1990). At first the stewards are faithful, and their appointment gives them legitimate authority over part of the kingdom. Later they rebel and persecute the righteous. In Indo-European mythology, the king must defeat the rebels by might and destroy them. In biblical cosmology, the king must first seek reconciliation and demonstrate that the stewards are unrepentant, or he can be accused of being selfish and arbitrary. He sends servants, who are mistreated. He sends his son, who is tried by the vassal's court, found guilty, and punished by death. The case is appealed to the supreme court in heaven. There the judgment of the lower court is found to be unjust, so the case is overturned. Moreover, the court itself is found to be evil so it is removed from power and sentenced to punishment. The central issue, then, is not one of power, but of legitimacy.

Given this imagery it is clear why the cross, not the resurrection, is the supreme victory, for there Satan and his supporters are shown to be evil. The resurrection is God overturning the judgment of the Jewish and Roman courts, and freeing the innocent victim. When the case was overturned, Satan had no more legitimate authority in heaven or on earth. He was, therefore, cast out.

The focus of the gospel is not battle but reconciliation. God judges those who reject him, but he reaches out to his enemies in love. He rejoices not in their defeat, but in their return. His justice and love cannot be separated as they are in Indo-European lore.

Shalom, not victory, is the ultimate goal

In Indo-European lore the thrill is in the battle and the chase. The standard ending of the romance is “and they were married and lived happily ever after.” In stories of battle it is “and the victor ruled righteously forever.” The

fact is, however, there is no story worth telling after the marriage or the victory. In variant endings the boredom of a peaceful marriage is shattered by the excitement of extramarital affairs, and victory is temporary, so we look forward to another battle. The outcome must at least appear to be in doubt. The victory is often anticlimactic and often temporary.

In Scripture the focus is on an eternity of fellowship with God and one another characterized by love, joy, and peace, not of battle and displays of power.

Implications

What implications does the renewed emphasis on spiritual warfare have for us as Western Christians in the twentieth century? On one hand, it is an important reminder that we are involved in a spiritual battle against evil. The secularism of our surrounding culture too often blinds us to the realities of wickedness, or leads us to reduce evil to an illness that requires therapy (Bellah 1985). We need to recover a sense of the awfulness of evil and oppression in our world, both spiritual and human.

On the other hand, a wrong view of the nature of the warfare in which we are involved can lead us to set our watch on the wrong hill or fight the wrong battles. Satan would like us to ignore him, for then he can carry out his work unseen. Or he would like us to fear him unduly, for then we take our eyes off Christ, our strength.

Several principles need to guide our understanding of spiritual warfare. First there is a spiritual battle. It is for the hearts and souls of humans. The focus in Scripture is not on the battle between God and Satan. That has already been won (2 Tim. 1:7). What is central is that God is seeking to win humans who joined Satan in his rebellion back to himself. He does so by love, truth, and the assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation. Satan is trying to keep them by deceit (Rev. 12:9), intimidation, temptation (1 Thess. 3:5), and condemnation (1 Tim. 3:6). He appears, not as a dark angel, but as an angel of light, counterfeiting all that God does.

Second, Satan has no power over God's people other than what God permits him to do by way of testing their faith. Moreover, in every temptation God gives us the power to resist (1 Cor. 10:13). This does not mean that new converts may not be oppressed by Satan. Those who are need to be freed from such oppression by ministries of deliverance.

Third, Satan and his hosts can and do demonize people, but they are to be pitied more than feared. The church needs teams of pastors, doctors, psychologists, and those with the gift of exorcism to minister to them. The real danger is people who coolly and rationally reject Christ and his rule in their lives, lead others astray (Eph. 4:14, 5:6; 2 Thess. 2:3), and build human societies and cultures that oppress people and keep them from coming to Christ. Idolatry and self-possession, not spirit possession, is still at the heart of human rebellion.

Fourth, our focus as Christians should be on love, reconciliation, peace, and justice. If we focus too strongly

on a war metaphor, we are in danger of applying it in our relationship to the world, and to our brothers and sisters in faith. Satan likes nothing better than to have us fight among ourselves or to feel superior to non-Christians.

Fifth, the supreme event in spiritual warfare is the cross. There Christ died, even though he had but to utter one command and ten thousands of angels would have come to his rescue. If our understanding of spiritual warfare does not make sense of the cross, it is wrong.

Finally, there are two dangers. One is to deny the reality of Satan and the spiritual battle within and around us in which we are engaged. The other is to have an undue fascination with, and fear of Satan and his hosts. Our central focus is on Christ, not on Satan. We should see God's angels at work more than we see demons. Our message is one of victory, hope, joy, and freedom, for we have the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome evil. The cosmic battle is over. We are messengers to declare to the world that Christ is indeed the Lord of everything in the heavens and on earth.

Our hidden myths profoundly affect the way we live our everyday lives: how we treat our spouses, organize our society, and fight our wars. We underestimate the extent to which enemies, battles, competition, self-interest, and greed are essential to our North American understanding of reality. We ignore the fact that these values have their roots in ancient Indo-European beliefs and form the dominant religion of our society.

Our conversion from our pagan past is not yet complete. We need to read the gospel again, this time with an awareness of our own worldview and how it shapes our interpretations of the Scriptures. In particular, we need to test current teachings about cosmic spiritual warfare to see whether they fit biblical teachings or reinforce a pagan religious worldview. Too often they seem to reflect the fascination with battle that dominates our society and not the love of holiness and shalom that fills the gospel. If we are not careful, we may become more involved in spiritual warfare and live less holy lives.

Notes

1. I use the term "myth" here in its technical, not popular sense. In popular parlance, myth means fiction. In the social sciences, it means the big true story by which all other stories can be understood. In this sense, the Exodus in the Old Testament is both true history and the story by which Israel was to interpret their tribulations. Whenever they were in trouble, they reminded themselves that just as God had delivered them from Egypt, so he would deliver them from their present troubles.

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