

Spiritual Beings

Study Notes

Introduction

It's common for modern Bible readers to see God and humanity as the central characters of the biblical story. But what if we told you that spiritual beings are just as vital to the message of the Bible? They're not just mysterious or strange background characters. For the biblical authors, spiritual beings played a significant role in their conception of the world, to the point of influencing human behavior. If we are to read the biblical story with the authors' ancient worldview in mind, we can't ignore the presence of spiritual beings. Use these study notes to dig deeper into the ideas introduced in our video series Spiritual Beings.

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1. Intro to Spiritual Beings

An Ancient Worldview

Understanding spiritual beings in the Bible requires us to reorient ourselves to how the biblical authors saw the world, and to do that, we need to reconsider the story of Genesis chapter 1.

Genesis 1:1 is an introductory statement that (most likely) acts as a summary of all of God’s activity in Genesis 1:2-2:3, in which he organizes the Heavens and Earth into one harmonious whole.

Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning, God created the skies and the land.”

Genesis 1:2 describes the pre-created state of the cosmos—in Hebrew, *tohu va-vohu*. This dense and carefully worded phrase prepares us for the explanation of the six days to follow.

<i>Genesis 1:2</i> Now the land was wild and waste (Hebrew: <i>tohu va-vohu</i>), and darkness was over the face of the deep abyss, and the Spirit of God was fluttering over the waters.	
Tohu: lacking form and purpose, unordered, desolate	Va-vohu: empty, uninhabited, wasteland
Deuteronomy 32:10 [God] found Israel in a land of wilderness, and in a <i>tohu</i> howling wasteland. Psalm 107:40 [God] pours contempt upon princes, making them wander in a <i>tohu</i> with no path.	Isaiah 34:10-11 and Jeremiah 4:23-26 describe an empty (<i>vohu</i>) and desolate cities with no inhabitants.
Solution: Days 1-3 bring order to chaos.	Solution: Days 4-6 fill the created order with inhabitants.

The Literary Design of Genesis 1

Days one through three are designed in a sequence of ascending order, and days four through six go back and fill these realms with inhabitants.

- Day 1: The order of time (light and dark/day and night)
- Day 2: The order of space (the waters above and the waters below)
- Day 3: The order of dry land (dry land emerges from the waters, and vegetation and fruit trees emerge from the dry land)
- Day 4: The lights that rule the day and night on God’s behalf
- Day 5: The birds that fly in the waters above and the fish that swim in the waters below
- Day 6: The animals on the dry land and the human images of God that rule the sea, land, and sky creatures

The following chart shows the paired relationships between days one through three and four through six.

Wild (<i>tohu</i>) = unordered	Waste (<i>vohu</i>) = uninhabited
Day 1: "Let there be light" (1:3) God separates between light and dark Light and darkness Day and night	Day 4: "Let there be lights ..." (1:14) God creates the lights to separate between the day and night and to be "signs and appointed feasts, days, and years." The big light and the small light are appointed to rule the day and night (1:16)
Day 2: Waters above separated from waters below	Day 5: Creatures in waters below and creatures in waters above
Day 3: "Let the land bring forth (וַתוֹצֵא) plants and vegetation and seed producing plants and trees producing fruit." (1:12) Waters separated from dry land	Day 6: Creatures on the land "Let the land <i>bring forth</i> (וַתוֹצֵא) living beasts by their kinds." (1:25) "Let us <i>create the human (ha-adam)</i> in our image and as our likeness ..." (1:26a) "And God blessed them and said ... 'fill the land and subdue it, and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the beasts on the land.'" (1:26b-28)
Genesis 2:1: "And so were completed ... 1. the skies and the land (days 1-3) 2. and all their hosts (days 4-6)	

Observations

Days one and three show God delegating his authority to "separate between dark and light" (Gen 1:3) to the celestial lights, so that they now "separate between day and night" (Gen 1:14). God also tells the great and small lights to "rule the day and night" (Gen 1:16-18). Whatever these lights are, they are now God's delegated authorities in the sky-realm.

Days four and six begin and end the three days of God filling creation with inhabitants. Notice that only these two days show God appointing created beings to rule on his behalf.

- Day four: "And God made the two great lights, the great light for **ruling the day**, and the small light for **ruling the night**, and also the stars." (1:16)
- Day six: "And God blessed [humanity] and said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply and **fill the land and subdue it and rule the** fish of the sea and the birds of the skies and all the beasts that moves on the land.'" (1:28)

In the conclusion of Genesis 2:1, both the celestial and terrestrial rulers are called the "host of the heavens" and the "host of the land" as a matching pair.

Heavenly Rulers in the Bible

The Lights in the Sky

In Genesis 1:14, the lights in the sky are called “signs” (‘otot), which is the standard biblical word for “symbol.” A sign is some kind of physical entity that points to some greater, more important reality.

We see this again in the Exodus story. Moses standing on a mountain in the wilderness is a sign that all the Israelites will stand in this place to meet God on the same mountain (Exod. 3:10-12).

This is foundational for understanding spiritual beings in the Bible. The lights in the sky are portrayed here as heavenly rulers that govern with authority delegated from God. Their status and role are parallel to the human earthly rulers that govern over the land. The fact that the celestial rulers are called the host of the heavens (Gen. 2:1) should inform all of our understandings of this phrase in the rest of the Bible.

The stars are the primary biblical image for spiritual beings, creatures that share in God’s exalted status and authority over time and calendar. We see God’s transcendence illustrated through the biblical image of a heavenly throne room.

*The LORD is in his holy temple;
The LORD is on **his heavenly throne**.
He observes everyone on earth;
His eyes examine them.*

Psalms 11:4

*This is what the LORD says:
“**Heaven is my throne**,
And the earth is my footstool.
Where is the house you will build for me?
Where will my resting place be?
Has not my hand made all these things,
And so they came into being?”
Declares the LORD.*

Isaiah 66:1-2

The Host of Heaven

The host of heaven, which are set in the “sky dome” (Gen 1:14-18), are the inhabitants of the divine throne room above the heavens.

This helps us understand why the biblical authors consistently used the language of stars to describe the spiritual beings. They are creatures that inhabit the heavenly realm and have authority under God.

The phrase “host of heaven” is used throughout the Bible to refer to God’s heavenly throne room staff team.

*The LORD has established his **throne in heaven**,
and his Kingdom rules over all.
Praise the LORD, you his **angels**,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
who obey his word.
Praise the LORD, all his **hosts of heaven**,
you his servants who do his will.*

Psalms 103:19-21

*Praise the LORD **from the heavens**;
praise him **in the heights above**.
Praise him, all his **angels**;
praise him, all his **heavenly hosts**.
Praise him, **sun and moon**;
praise him, all you **shining stars**.*

Psalms 148:1b-3

*Micaiah said, “Therefore, hear the word of the LORD. I
saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the **host of
heaven** standing by him on his right and on his left.*

1 Kings 22:19

*And **an angel of the Lord** suddenly stood before
them, and the glory of the Lord shone around
them; and they were terribly frightened ... And
suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude
of **the host of the heavens** praising God.*

Luke 2:9, 13

The lists of heavenly creatures in Psalms 103 and 148 are in the literary form of Hebrew parallelism so that paired lines describe the same thing from different points of view. The heavenly hosts are the sun, moon, and stars.

Notice how in Luke 2 the angel is associated with the light of God's glory, and these two are associated with the host of heavens, who are depicted as God's heavenly choir (as they are in Job 38:6-7 and Isa. 6:1-3).

The Sons of God

The "sons of God" is another term in the Bible that references heavenly rulers, but it has caused confusion for Bible readers for generations. Is this a reference to angelic beings or heavenly rulers? A close look at the literary design in Job gives us insight to its meaning.

*Where were you when I laid the foundations of the land?
Tell me if you have understanding.
Who set its measurements, since you know.
Or who stretched a measuring line over it?
... when the **stars of the morning** sang together,
and all **the sons of God** shouted aloud.*

Job 38:4-5, 7

The last two lines of the above passage are parallel lines in Hebrew. This structure draws a direct association between "stars of the morning" and "the sons of God." The stars and the sons of God are not separate entities but the same creature described from two perspectives.

Eden as the Union of Heaven and Earth

In Genesis 2, Eden is depicted as a cosmic mountain where God's heavenly space and humanity's earthly space overlap in unity.

Genesis 2:10-14 depicts Eden as the highest place on the dry land with a single river flowing out of it to water all the land. The imagery of Eden as a mountain is assumed because rivers flow downhill.

Later Biblical References to Eden

*Now a river flowed out of Eden to water
the garden; and from there it divided
and became four headwaters.*

Genesis 2:10

Later recollections of Eden in the Bible compare it to other high temple mountains.

*Blow the trumpet in **Zion**, sound the alarm
on **my holy mountain** ... before them [the
army] the land is like the **garden of Eden**;
behind them, a desert wasteland.*

Joel 2:1-3

*You were in **Eden**, the **garden of God** ...
you were on **the holy mountain of God**.*

Ezekiel 28:13-14

The later depictions of the restored Jerusalem use the ancient Eden garden as the archetype of the new creation, always situated on a high mountain.

*In the last days, **the mountain of Yahweh's temple** will be established as the **highest of the mountains; it will be exalted** above the hills, and all nations will stream into it.*

Isaiah 2:2

*And he carried me away in the Spirit to **a mountain great and high**, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.*

Revelation 21:10

*In visions of God he took me to the land of Israel and set me on a **very high mountain**, on whose south side were buildings that looked like a city.*

Ezekiel 40:2

*Then he showed me a **river of the water of life**, clear as crystal coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb.*

Revelation 22:1

This idea is foundational for understanding the biblical storyline. Eden was God's plan for humanity before they rebelled, and a future garden-temple mountain full of Eden imagery is God's plan for restoration. God's ultimate goal is for humans to live and rule the world alongside him in the Heaven and Earth place.

Humanity's Ruling Purpose

Psalms 8 shows us how later biblical authors understood God's purposes in placing humanity in the high Eden temple. They saw humanity as being made to rule as God's image over all creation, including over the other spiritual beings.

*O LORD, our Lord,
How majestic is your name in all the earth,
Who has displayed your **splendor** above the heavens!
From the mouth of infants and nursing babes
You have established strength
Because of your adversaries,
To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.
When I consider your heavens, **the work of your fingers**,
The moon and the stars, which you have ordained;
What is human that you take thought of him,
And the son of human that you care for him?
Yet you have made him a little lower than *elohim* [spiritual beings], And you crown him with **glory and majesty**!
You make him **to rule over the works of your hands**;
You have put **all things under his feet**,
All sheep and oxen,
And also the beasts of the field,
The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.
O LORD, our Lord,
How **majestic** is your name in all the earth!*

Psalms 8:1-9

This poem is a meditation on the creation story of Genesis 1:1-2:3. Notice how it depicts humans as being "lower" than *elohim*. Some translations render this word "God." This is certainly possible, but given that verses three and four contrast humans made of dust with the "skies, the work of your fingers ... the moon and stars," it makes much more sense to see the word "*elohim*" as referring to the host of heaven, that is, the spiritual beings appointed to rule.

Notice here that humans are appointed to rule "over the works of your hands," which in verses 6 through 8 refer to the animals. But also notice that this same phrase in verse 3, "the works of your fingers," refers to the host of heaven. When we come to verse 6, "you make him to rule over the works of your hands, you have put all things under his feet," we are meant to understand "all things" to refer not only to the following list of animals but also to the preceding list of the heavenly host.

In Psalm 8, God (remarkably!) appoints humans to rule over all of Heaven and Earth. Because the garden of Eden is a place where Heaven and Earth overlap, it is no surprise that we find humans in the presence of God and the heavenly beings, like the cherubim (Gen. 3:22-24).

The Snake in the Garden

This gives us a greater perspective on the snake introduced in Genesis 3:1. It is called a “beast of the field,” but it strikes the readers as possessed of powers greater than that of a normal animal. It can talk (not normal!), and it claims to have some kind of knowledge of God’s heavenly decisions. “For God knows that in the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like *elohim*, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5).

These narrative hints that the snake is a spiritual being are confirmed by the choice of the Hebrew word for "snake." The Hebrew word "*nakhash*" is one of many available words for snake. The author could have used many other words (*seraph*, *peten*, *tsipho*), but instead they chose this one, likely for the following symbolic associations.

<i>Nakhash</i> rhymes with the Hebrew words meaning “to practice divination, sorcery” (<i>nikhesh</i>, see Deut. 18:10). These rituals were often associated with astrology, child sacrifice, and the worship of stars and heavenly bodies (2 Kgs.).	<i>Nakhash</i> also rhymes with the Hebrew word for “bronze” (<i>nekhoshet</i>), the main precious metal used for shiny reflections. Spiritual beings are often described as shining like bronze, like the cherubim (Ezek. 1:7) and angels (Ezek. 40:3, Dan. 10:6).
<i>There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination (<i>nikhesh</i>), one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer ...</i> Deuteronomy 18:10	<i>Within it there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form. Each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight and their feet were like a calf's hoof, and they gleamed like burnished bronze.</i> Ezekiel 1:5-7
<i>They forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God and made for themselves molten images, even two calves, and made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. Then they made their sons and their daughters pass through the fire, and practiced divination and enchantments (<i>nakhash</i>), and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him.</i> 2 Kings 17:16-17	<i>So he brought me there; and behold, there was a man whose appearance was like the appearance of bronze, with a line of flax and a measuring rod in his hand; and he was standing in the gateway.</i> Ezekiel 40:3 <i>His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult.</i> Daniel 10:6

As the biblical story develops, we will discover that this snake is connected to a rebel spiritual being whose downfall is discussed cryptically in later biblical texts (Isa. 14 and Ezek. 28).

The story of humanity’s exile from the garden-temple is a descent from their intended home in a united Heaven and Earth. Genesis 3-11 depicts an increasingly corrupted world that results from the combined rebellion of human and spiritual beings. We will explore this in episodes three and six of our Spiritual Beings series, The Divine Council and The Satan and Demons.

2. Elohim

The Hebrew word “*elohim*” and the Greek word “*theos*” are often translated as “God” in the Bible. Many modern Bible readers think of *elohim* as another divine title for the God of the Bible, which is true, but it’s not that simple. These words have different nuances than our modern vocabulary for God/god. *Elohim* refers to a class of spiritual beings, rather than specifically to Yahweh. We lose this nuance in our English translations, and in turn we misunderstand what the Bible is telling us about spiritual beings. The second video in our Spiritual Beings series, *Elohim*, serves as a word study about the biblical vocabulary for god/God. These notes will help you dig deeper into how the Bible talks about the many *elohim* present in the Bible.

Forms of the Hebrew Word

Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning *Elohim* created the skies and the land.”

The Hebrew word “*elohim*” is the most common Hebrew term for god/deity, but it is not the only word. Rather, it is a lengthened, plural form of the ancient semitic word for deity, which is “*el*.” This Semitic word is not a name but a title that describes a type of being, namely, an inhabitant of the spiritual realm. The word occurs in multiple forms in biblical Hebrew.

El

This Hebrew word “*El*” (אל) is a title meaning deity or divine being, and it occurs 235 times in the Hebrew Bible. The noun likely derives from a protosemitic verb ‘*uwl*’ (אוּל), meaning “to be strong” (see Koehler-Baumgartner, *Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*).

Canaanite texts use the word *el* to refer to a distinct deity who resides on the sacred mountain north of Canaan and is the chief of the other gods and master of the pantheon. He also bears the title *malk* or king. In the Ugaritic texts (northern Canaanite), *el* is depicted as an aged deity with a gray beard and called “father of humanity” (*‘ab ‘adam*).

This short form can also have the plural ending *elim*, meaning deities. This form can be found in the Hebrew Bible. “Sons of *elim*” refers to members of the gods/pantheon. See Psalm 29:1 and 89:7, which refers to the divine council.

The word *el* referred to a chief deity in Canaanite religion. It seems that the Israelites adopted this term to describe Yahweh, the *el* they came to know in the story of Abraham, the Exodus, and at Mount Sinai. This idea is attested in numerous phrases that preserve an old use of ‘*el*’ as a proper name.

- *El, elohe Israel*: El, the god of Israel (Gen. 33:20)
- *Ha’el elohe abika*: El, the god of your father (Gen. 46:3)
- *‘El olam*: El of eternity (Gen. 21:33)
- *‘El elyon*: El most high (Gen. 14:18-22)
- *Yahweh eloheka ‘el qanna’*: Yahweh your God is *El* of passion (Exod. 20:5)

Eloah

Eloah (אלה) is an alternate short form of *el*. It is used 57 times in the Hebrew Bible and means deity or divine being. This is a composite word made up of two syllables, *el* and *ah*, which passed into Arabic as *Allah*.

Eloah is a title for Yahweh, used most frequently in Job (41 times), along with *El* (55 times) and *Shadday*, “powerful one” (31 times).

Eloah is synonymous with *elohim* and other divine titles in the Hebrew Bible. They all refer to Yahweh most often.

- Notice the parallel between Psalm 18:32, “Who is *eloah* but Yahweh,” and 2 Samuel 22:32, “Who is *el* but Yahweh.”

Elohim

Elohim is the word “*eloah*” with the plural ending *im*, and it’s used around 2,750 times in the Hebrew Bible. This is by far the most common term for Yahweh in the Old Testament.

The form *elohim* is technically plural (the ending *im* is the normal plural ending for nouns) and can be used (1) in the plural sense for “gods” and also (2) to refer to the one God of Israel.

The word’s plural meaning refers to the deities worshiped by the nations around Israel.

- “You shall have no other *elohim* before me.” (Exod. 20:3)
- “The *elohim* of Egypt.” (Exod. 12:12)
- Foreign *elohim* = gods of other nations (2 Chron. 33:15, “Manasseh removed the foreign *elohim*”)
- “The Israelites sacrificed to **demons** that are not *eloah*, *elohim* that they had not previously known.” (Deut. 32:17)

The plural noun *elohim* can also have a singular meaning, referring to a single deity worshiped by Israel’s neighbors.

- “Chemosh the *elohim* of Moab.” (1 Kgs. 11:33)

But it usually refers to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

- “*Elohim* created” (Gen. 1:1).

The “plural of majesty” is a grammatical term used by Hebrew scholars to describe how a singular entity that is intense or large can be referred to with a plural noun. See Paul Jouon & T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, section 136d.

- Example: “Wisdom [תִּוְּמָכָה = literally “wisdoms”] calls out [singular verb] in the streets.” (Prov. 1:20) And “Wisdom(s) builds her house.” (Prov. 9:1)
- This use of the plural *elohim* to refer to one particular deity is also found in other Canaanite and Mesopotamian texts, as in the Amarna letters, where Pharaoh is addressed by his Canaanite subjects as “my gods.” See the *Dictionary of Demons and Deities in the Bible*, entry “*elohim*” for references.

In 1 Samuel 28:12-13, Saul has a spirit-medium conjure up the presence of the deceased Samuel. “And the woman saw Samuel, and she cried out ... and said, ‘I see a *elohim* rising up from the ground.’”

- This refers to a *human* who exists apart from their body. This is not saying Samuel is “God” or a “god.” Rather, the word *elohim* apparently refers to the mode of existence: *a member of the non-physical spirit realm*.
- The later biblical authors developed more specific vocabulary to talk about these beings to more clearly distinguish between them as *elohim* and the one *elohim*: Angel, demon, spirits, etc. ...

Many Elohim, One God

Yahweh is an *elohim*, but not the only *elohim* (spiritual being). He is the most powerful and authoritative, and he alone is the creator of all things, including the other *elohim*.

“Yahweh is an *elohim*, but no other *elohim* is Yahweh. *Elohim* is a place-of-residence term. The word tells you what the proper domain is for that being. By nature, the God of Israel, the many *elohim* of God’s council, demons, angels, the departed human dead like Samuel, they are part of a spiritual domain that’s related to, but distinct from the physical, embodied domain. An *elohim* is by definition and by nature a disembodied entity, so the word can refer to many different beings who inhabit that realm.”

Michael Heiser, Logos Mobile-Ed class, “*The Jewish Trinity: How the Old Testament Reveals the Godhead.*”

For Yahweh your Elohim, he is the Elohim of elohim, and the Lord of lords, the great and mighty and awesome.

Deuteronomy 10:17

They [the Israelites] sacrificed to demons **that are not eloah**, elohim that they had not previously known.

Deuteronomy 32:17

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that **there is no such thing as an idol in the world**, and that **there is no God but one**. For even if **there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords**, yet **for us there is but one God**, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through him.

1 Corinthians 8:4-6

When Paul says that there “is no such thing as an idol,” he is saying that the statue itself is not an *elohim* (or in Greek, a *theos*). But he is not denying that there are in fact other spiritual beings that people worship, and to describe them he uses the term *theos*, or gods.

Monotheism and Polytheism

This biblical portrait of a populated spiritual universe is sometimes thought to contradict the concept of monotheism, the belief that there is only one God. This problem is caused by our English word G/god, which has two meanings.

- **God** with a capital “G” refers to the one all-powerful creator deity referred to in the Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).
- **god** with a lowercase “g” refers to a deity of lesser status or power.

The real problem is that English speakers use one word (G/god) to refer to both of these spiritual beings. While the distinction between the creator God and all other gods is maintained by the spelling convention of using capital or lowercase letters, it can still cause confusion.

For the biblical authors, there is no tension in calling Yahweh the creator an *elohim* while also using that word to describe the spiritual beings that were created by Yahweh. They are all *elohim*, that is, inhabitants of the spiritual realm.

Some people mistake the biblical idea that there are many *elohim* with the concept of polytheism. This is an easy mistake, but it's incorrect. In academic religious studies, polytheism refers to religious worldviews that believe that the spiritual realm of many deities rival one another for status and power (think of the classic pantheon of Greek gods on Mount Olympus). This is not at all the same as biblical monotheism, which claims that only Yahweh is creator and ruler of all things, including the other *elohim*.

*You, Yahweh, are most high (elyon) over all the land,
You are exalted above all elohim.*

Psalms 97:9

What About the “No Other God” Passages in the Bible?

There is a common phrase in the Hebrew Bible where God says “there is none besides me,” or “no God but me.” But how do these words reconcile with the fact that the Bible speaks often of other *elohim*?

In these passages, *elohim* has the Hebrew word “the” attached (*ha-elohim*), which means the claim being made is that Yahweh alone is **the chief God**, not that Yahweh is the **only** *elohim* that exists.

NIV	Literal Hebrew
Deuteronomy 4:35 You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other.	... know that Yahweh, he is the elohim, there is not another except for him.
Deuteronomy 4:39 Know and take to heart today, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on earth below. There is no other.	... Yahweh is the elohim in heaven above and on earth below, not another.

All of these “no other god” passages are found in contexts that explicitly assert the existence of other spiritual beings.

*And not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all **the host of heaven**, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, **those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.***

Deuteronomy 4:19

The phrases “no other” or “there is no other” are not referring to existence but to comparability within a category. For an example of this type of language in reference to rulers, we can look to Isaiah 47. In this passage, the identical phrase is used to describe the arrogance of the leaders of Babylon.

You [Babylon] say to yourself: “I am, and there is no one besides me.”

Isaiah 47:8

The claim here is not that no other ancient cities exist. Rather it is that no other ancient cities compare with the status and power of Babylon.

A close reading of these passages in Deuteronomy and Isaiah shows ... that the denials are not claiming that other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) do not exist, but that Yahweh has unique and incomparable qualities in relation to other gods: Yahweh's pre-existence, his role as creator of all things, including other *elohim*, his ability to save, and national deliverance. The focus is on Yahweh's incomparable status and the impotence of the other gods. It would be empty praise to compare Yahweh to beings that did not exist. The biblical authors assume they do exist, but that they are "nothing" compared to Yahweh.

Michael Heiser, "The Divine Council," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*

What About Idol-Gods?

There are many biblical texts that mock the ancient practice of worshiping gods that are represented by idols. In these texts, the authors claim that these statues are "nothing."

*Our Elohim is in the heavens;
he does whatever he pleases.
Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of man's hands.
They have mouths, but they cannot speak;
they have eyes, but they cannot see.
They have ears, but they cannot hear;
they have noses, but they cannot smell.
They have hands, but they cannot feel;
they have feet, but they cannot walk.
They cannot make a sound with their throat.
Those who make them will become like them,
everyone who trusts in them.*

Psalm 115:3-8

For similar texts see Psalm 135:15-18, Jeremiah 10:1-6, and Isaiah 44:9-20. These passages are sarcastically lampooning idol statues as such. They're mocking the concept that an inanimate statue could be confused for a spiritual being that is very real. These texts are not an argument about the non-existence of other spiritual beings.

The distinction between idol-gods and spiritual beings is made explicit in Paul's warnings to the Corinthians that they stop attending ritual meals at idol temples. Paul's claim here is that idol-statues are not spiritual beings (he uses the term *theos*, the Greek word for "deity"). But he quickly qualifies what he means, by saying that, of course, there are many spiritual beings.

*Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that **an idol is nothing in the world**, and that there is no God but one. For **even if there are gods** spoken of, whether in heaven or on earth, as **indeed there are many gods and many lords**, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through him.*

1 Corinthians 8:4-6

Paul's concern is that in going to the local idol temples, the people will unwittingly end up under the influence of corrupt spiritual powers, as he says later in 1 Corinthians 10.

*Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to **demons, not to God**, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.*

1 Corinthians 10:19-20

Paul uses the Greek word “*daimonion*” to refer to evil spiritual beings. This word was a normal term to refer to lower-level deities and spiritual beings. Paul is very clear that to deny the reality of idol-gods is not the same as denying the existence of other gods, that is other spiritual beings.

Conclusions

The words for “deity” in the Bible (Hebrew: *elohim* / Greek: *theos*) are category titles that can refer to any being that exists in the spiritual realm. This is why they can be used to refer to the one God of Israel (God) and also the deities worshiped by other nations (gods).

The biblical authors do, however, use this title in ways similar to how we use proper names. Just as siblings can use the title Mom to refer to their particular mom, the biblical authors will often use the word *elohim* to refer to Yahweh. They can do so because the biblical texts were written by, to, and for tight-knit religious communities that shared a common understanding of who these words referred to.

The biblical authors do believe that there is only one chief *elohim/theos* who is revealed in the story of Israel's Scriptures and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And that *elohim* is named Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible and called Father in the New Testament.

The biblical authors do not portray the other spiritual beings as rivals to the one creator God. Rather, they exist in a realm that is parallel to the earthly realm, where some are loyal and others have become rebels. We will explore the concept of spiritual rebels later in our Spiritual Beings series, in episodes four and six, The Divine Council and The Satan and Demons.

3. The Divine Council

When many people think of spiritual beings in the Bible, it's usually God and angels or Satan and demons that come to mind. The biblical authors, however, have a much more nuanced conception of the spiritual realm, which is matched by a wide vocabulary for talking about spiritual beings. In the study notes for episode two of the Spiritual Beings series, Elohim, we discovered that the biblical words “*elohim*” and “*theos*” can refer to spiritual beings that are not the one creator God. But who are these other *elohim*, and what role do they play in the biblical story? That's what we'll discover as we look at the divine council.

The Divine Council in Scripture

The biblical authors believed that Heaven and Earth are parallel realities, each inhabited by creatures that have been delegated with God's blessing to rule and oversee that realm. These creatures are called “the host of heaven” and “the host of the land” (Gen. 2:1), or spiritual beings and humans. In the heavens, the celestial lights are appointed to rule day and night, that is, the order of time (Gen. 1:14-18). On the land, humans are appointed as God's images to rule over land, sea, and air creatures (Gen. 1:26-30).

This portrait of the ordered world is fundamental to understanding the biblical storyline, and it prepares us for an entire tier of creatures in the spiritual realm that we will meet at many points in the Bible. This group of spiritual beings goes by many titles, but in every appearance, their role in the heavenly realm is similar. They are God's staff team, his agents of delegated authority who mirror God's earthly staff team, the humans. These spiritual beings are portrayed as honoring the one who created and rules them, and they also are invited by God to participate in making decisions and carrying them out.

Titles for the Divine Council

We see God's heavenly rulers referenced often throughout the Bible, but different titles are used for them. Psalm 89 contains the most diverse collection of titles.

*The heavens will praise your wonders, Yahweh;
your faithfulness also in the assembly of **the holy ones**.
For who in the skies is comparable to Yahweh?
Who among **the sons of God** is like Yahweh,
A God greatly feared in **the council of the holy ones**,
and awesome above all those who are around him?
Yahweh God **of hosts**, who is like you, mighty Yahweh?
Your faithfulness also surrounds you.*

Psalm 89:5-7

These various titles are used throughout much of Scripture. In both of the following Jeremiah and Job passages, the focus is on humans who occasionally get glimpses into God's heavenly throne room to overhear what God is discussing with his council. In the book of Job, these words are ironic because while Job of course does not have access to the divine council to know why he is suffering, the reader actually does because of Job chapters 1-2.

The Sons of God	The Host of Heaven	The Council
Psalms 29:1-2 Sons of God, give to Yahweh, give to Yahweh honor and power. Give to Yahweh the honor due his name, worship Yahweh in the splendor of holiness.	1 Kings 22:19-22 Micaiah said, “Therefore, hear the word of the LORD. I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right and on his left. The LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said this while another said that. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said, ‘I will entice him.’ The LORD said to him, ‘How?’ And he said, ‘I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then he said, ‘You are to entice him and also prevail. Go and do so.’”	Psalms 82:1 God takes his stand in the divine council, In the midst of elohim he renders justice.
Job 38:4-5, 7 Where were you when I laid the foundations of the land? Tell me if you have understanding. Who set its measurements, since you know. Or who stretched a measuring line over it? ... when the stars of the morning sang together, and all the sons of God shouted aloud.		Jeremiah 23:18, 21-22 But who has stood in the council of Yahweh, that he should see and hear his word? Who has given heed to his word and listened? I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have announced my words to my people, and would have turned them back from their evil way and from the evil of their deeds.
Job 1:6-7 Now, one day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and the Satan also came among them. The LORD said to the Satan, “From where do you come?” Then the Satan answered the LORD and said, “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.”		Job 15:7-8 Were you the first man to be born, or were you brought forth before the hills? Have you listened in the divine council? And do you limit wisdom to yourself?

When all of these texts are read together, a fairly clear picture emerges. God is consistently depicted on his heavenly throne, surrounded by his staff team who participate in discussing and then carrying out God’s plans. The divine throne room is the place from which Yahweh governs the world with his heavenly council, the place where “Yahweh’s decrees directing the human community and the divine world are set forth and through whom they are communicated or enacted.”

Michael Heiser, “Divine Council,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 163

The Role of the Divine Council

This concept helps us to make sense of one popular and puzzling passage in Isaiah 6.

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of his robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said,

*"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts,
the whole earth is the fullness of his glory."*

*And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. ...
Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for **us**?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

Isaiah 6:1-4, 8

Notice that Isaiah is having a vision of the divine throne room and sees Yahweh exalted, surrounded by spiritual beings. Then in verse 8, Yahweh speaks to represent both himself ("whom shall I send?") and the divine council ("who will go for **us**?").

In all of these texts, we see a positive portrayal of the divine council functioning in their ideal role. And notice how their role is parallel to the role of humans. God's representatives honor their creator and King and carry out his purposes in Heaven and Earth. But the biblical story is driven by a plot conflict about a rebellion against God in both the heavenly and earthly realms.

The Heavenly and Earthly Rebellions of Genesis 1-11

There are actually three significant waves to the rebellion explored in Genesis chapters 1-11.

- A rebel divine council member lures God's images into a rebellion (Gen. 3).
- More divine council members rebel and try to restore eternal life to humans by impregnating women (Gen. 6).
- More divine council members rebel and lure the empire of Babylon into a rebellion, giving birth to the scattered nations who worship idol-gods (Gen. 10-11).

For most modern Bible readers, the least familiar of these rebellions is the one in Genesis 10-11. We will focus on that rebellion here, highlighting Genesis chapters 3 and 6 in a later video in the Spiritual Beings series.

The Third Rebellion of the Divine Council: Genesis 10-11

After Noah's sons and their wives get off the ark, we're told that they disperse and go their own ways, each becoming a network of people groups that develop their own language.

Genesis 10:1	<i>These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Sons were born to them after the flood.</i>
Genesis 10:2, 5	<i>The sons of Japheth ... From these the coastland peoples spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations.</i>
Genesis 10:6, 20	<i>The sons of Ham ... These are the sons of Ham, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations.</i>
Genesis 10:21-31	<i>To Shem also, the father of all the children of Eber, the elder brother of Japheth, children were born. The sons of Shem. To Eber were born two sons: the name of the one was Peleg, for in his days the land was divided (Hebrew: palegu) and his brother's name was Joktan. These are the sons of Shem, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations.</i>

The three sons of Noah are listed along with their many descendants who make up the 70 nations in this list. But notice that each list ends with the phrase “each with their own language” (verses 5, 20, 31). This story assumes that the nations are already divided up with their own languages. However, this story has not been told yet because it is found in the next chapter, Genesis 11.

The division of the descendants of Noah is connected to the obscure comment in Genesis 10:25 that in the days of Peleg “the land was divided.” Whatever it was that separated the nations into languages is called a division in this passage. The division happened in the days of Peleg (which means “division” in Hebrew). The reader is left to ponder this until one discovers the backstory in Genesis 11, which is about this very thing—the scattering and division of the nations.

This leads to the obvious conclusion that Genesis chapters 10-11 are not arranged in chronological order. Instead they have been placed in reverse order for a thematic reason. The author wants to present the rebellion at Babylon.

*Now the whole land used the same language and the same words. It came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.” And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. They said, “Come, **let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into the heavens**, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”*

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. The LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”

So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.

Genesis 11:1-9

After being exiled from Eden, humanity was forced to go to the east (Gen. 3:24), and so too Cain was exiled further east after murdering his brother (Gen. 4:16). So too here, after surviving the flood, humanity journeys east and does the opposite of what God told Noah after the flood, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land” (Gen. 9:1). Instead of spreading out and filling the land, Noah’s descendants do the opposite. They band together in an effort to avoid dispersing.

The city and tower that they are building is not an average building project. The ancient Israelites knew exactly what Babylonian towers were all about. They were ziggurat temples, which were symbolic buildings designed to be man-made cosmic mountains. Temples were the place where the divine and human realms overlapped. This is why they say “Let its top be in the heavens.”

This story presents Babylon as a human attempt to reverse humanity’s exile from Eden. Babylon is an anti-Eden where humans try to ascend to the skies and assert themselves over God’s wisdom and authority. This is why God scatters them, resulting in the diverse languages and 70 scattered nations of Genesis 10. This story is clearly focused on the human actors in this story, but the drama of Babylon’s rebellion does not end there.

The Significance of the Scattering of Babylon

Prophets and leaders throughout the Old Testament continually refer to the rebellion in Genesis 10-11. They compare the past actions of humans in the biblical story to current events, and it is often in connection with the worshiping of spiritual beings or the actions of spiritual forces. For the biblical authors, rebellious behavior outside of God’s purpose could often be seen in both the heavenly and earthly realms, drawn in comparison with the initial rebellions in the book of Genesis.

Moses References the Babylon Rebellion

Moses recalls the scattering of Babylon as a spiritual rebellion alongside the human rebellion in Deuteronomy 4 and 32. Deuteronomy 32 recalls the rebellion in Genesis 10-11 and invites us to link these two stories together and view the rebellion and scattering at Babylon as a joint human and spiritual rebellion. Humans wanted to build their own pseudo-Eden mountain where they’d have access to eternal life, and now we learn that there were some sons of God involved as well, who, according to Deuteronomy 4, are now being worshiped by the nations.

*Don’t act corruptly and make an image for yourselves in the form of any figure ... And don’t lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the **host of heaven**, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, **those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. But the LORD has taken you ... to be a people for his own possession, as today.***

Deuteronomy 4:16-20

*Remember the days of old,
consider the years of all generations.
Ask your father, and he will inform you,
your elders, and they will tell you.
When the **Most High (Yahweh) allotted the nations**,
and set the divisions for the sons of humanity,
He fixed the territories of peoples
according to the number of **sons of God** (sons of Elohim).
For **Yahweh’s portion is his people;**
Jacob his own allotment.*

Deuteronomy 32:8-9

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses warns the Israelites who are going into the land of Canaan that the nations around them worship animal-gods as well as the host of heaven. And notice his remark. God has “allotted” these spiritual beings to the nations, so that the nations worship and serve them, not the creator God. In contrast to the nations is Israel, whom Yahweh redeemed in the Exodus story. This raises the question: when did the nations get handed over to spiritual beings to worship them? Welcome to Deuteronomy 32!

In Deuteronomy 32, Moses recalls an event from the distant past when Yahweh allotted the nations. This is a clear reference to Genesis 10-11, the list of 70 nations, and the scattering of Babylon. Moses says that this is when Yahweh allotted the 70 nations “according to the number of the sons of God,” while he kept Israel for himself as his own special portion.

This portrait of the scattered nations serving other gods and rebel spiritual beings is introduced here in Deuteronomy 4 and 32, and it forms the basis for a whole network of passages in the prophets and Psalms that develop all of these ideas further.

The Prophets Reference the Babylon Rebellion

When the prophets after Moses looked back to Babylon, they also saw more to Genesis 11 than just human rebellion. They compare this rebellion of human empires to a more ancient spiritual rebellion linked with rebel spiritual beings.

Isaiah chapters 13-14 contain oracles against Babylon that transcend the horizon of Isaiah’s own day, when Babylon was greatly reduced in size and influence. That’s because Isaiah is looking at the bigger Babylon of biblical imagery, which is an image for any and all violent nations that don’t acknowledge Yahweh. When Isaiah addresses the king of this Babylon, he uses cosmic poetry to describe his arrogance and presumption.

*Your pomp and the music of your harps
have been brought down to Sheol;
maggots are spread out as your bed beneath you
and worms are your covering.
How you have fallen from the heavens,
O star of the morning, son of the dawn!
You have been cut down to the earth,
you who have weakened the nations!
But you said in your heart,
“I will ascend to heaven;
I will **raise my throne above the stars of God,**
and I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far reaches of the north.
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.”
Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol,
to the recesses of the pit.*

Isaiah 14:11-15

Behind the earthly empire of Babylon, Isaiah discerns a darker and more mysterious spiritual rebel that animates the earthly kingdom. This spiritual rebel wanted to ascend to God’s status and authority instead of living under it.

Notice that this poetic description of a creature attempting to ascend to the heavens and usurp God’s authority (“sit on the mount of assembly”) maps precisely onto the story of the tower of Babylon that was made to “have its head in the heavens” (Gen. 11:4). This poem is portraying the spiritual dimension of the human-focused story in Genesis 11. It’s about one of the sons of God who rebels, tries to usurp God’s authority, and is cast down. While this sounds a lot like Genesis 3, notice that this story is clearly recalling Genesis 11.

God's Response to the Rebellion

Psalms 82 is addressing the spiritual rebels whose story is told in Genesis 3, 6, and 11. For the moment, let's simply notice that the scene depicts God confronting rebel *elohim* who are responsible for injustice toward the poor and vulnerable. This is a classic prophetic accusation, that the worship of idol-gods leads to injustice, because these gods don't demand justice or holiness from their worshipers (see Amos 1-6).

*God takes his stand **in the divine council**;
in the midst of elohim he renders judgment.
"How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?
Vindicate the weak and fatherless;
do justice to the afflicted and destitute.
Rescue the weak and needy;
deliver them out of the hand of the wicked."
They do not know nor do they understand;
they walk about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
I said, "You are elohim,
and all of you are **sons of the Most High**.
"Nevertheless you will die like humans
and fall like one of the princes."
Arise, O God, judge the earth!
For it is you who possesses all the nations.*

Psalms 82:1-8

This poem depicts Yahweh as confronting the rebel spiritual beings and assigning them to destruction and death: "You will die like humans." This is like a hyperlink to Genesis 6:3, where God assigns the sons of God to a mortal fate. "And fall like one of the princes" is a hyperlink to Genesis 3:14-15 and the humiliation and exile of the snake to dust and death.

Notice how verse 8 provides a climactic resolution to Genesis 11. The scattering of Babylon is when God handed over the nations to worship other *elohim*. In Psalm 82, we learn that these *elohim* led the nations into injustice and death, and so now the solution is for God to do for all nations what he did for Israel: to rescue them from slavery to human and earthly rebels and "possess all the nations."

Note: Jesus refers to Psalm 82 in John 10:34-36 in a way that has led some people to think that the *elohim* in Psalm 82 are human leaders of Israel. But Jesus uses Psalm 82 to make the opposite point. He has just claimed that he and his heavenly Father are one (John 10:30), which angers the Jewish leaders who want to kill him for blasphemy. Jesus responds by saying that in their own Scriptures in Psalm 82, God refers to members of the divine council as sons of God and as *elohim*, that is, spiritual beings. Jesus then says, "If he called them gods (Greek: *theos*), what about the one whom the Father set apart and sent into the world? Do you say, 'he blasphemes' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'" (John 10:34-36).

Jesus' point is that he shares in the very identity and status of the one God who is above the divine council. This idea isn't blasphemous for readers of the Bible. The very existence of the divine council as sons of *Elohim* make it reasonable that there would be one particular Son of God who is set apart from them and who rules as God's ultimate Son. So then, Jesus' use of Psalm 82 affirms that this poem is about the divine council who rebelled.

The Downfall of Human and Spiritual Rebels

There are numerous texts in the Old Testament prophets that view the conflict among empires in the human realm as a mirror of conflict among their heavenly counterparts. Daniel 10 and Isaiah 24 are great examples.

After Daniel has prayed for God's mercy upon the remnant of Israel, Daniel is visited by an angelic messenger in a dream/vision.

I lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, there was a certain man dressed in linen, whose waist was girded with a belt of pure gold of Uphaz. His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult.

Daniel 10:5-6

*Then he said, "Do you understand why I came to you? But I shall now return to fight against **the prince of Persia**; so I am going forth, and behold, **the prince of Greece** is about to come. However, I will tell you what is inscribed in the writing of truth. Yet there is no one who stands firmly with me against these forces except **Michael your prince**."*

Daniel 10:20-21

*He said to me, "O Daniel, man of high esteem, understand the words that I am about to tell you and stand upright, for I have now been sent to you." And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. Then he said to me, "Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to your words. But **the prince of the kingdom of Persia** was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, **Michael, one of the chief princes**, came to help me, for I had been left there with **the kings of Persia**."*

Daniel 10:11-13

The message given to Daniel reveals the biblical Heaven and Earth worldview, where the empires of our world are each given over to the authority of a spiritual rebel who can be called the "prince" of that nation. When God is at work to redeem and rescue his people from among these nations, the earthly conflict is a mirror of a heavenly one as well.

The empire of Babylon lay in ruins by this point in Daniel, so that the empires of Persia and Greece are ruling in the present and near future. In the larger scope of the entire book of Daniel, chapter 7 depicted these empires and their heavenly representatives as mutant beasts that will be toppled when God's Kingdom is established forever.

This poem in Isaiah 24 is a depiction of the culmination of history, the great Day of the Lord. Notice that God's justice will confront both earthly and heavenly rebels and that the spiritual powers are called the host of heaven. Notice also that in 24:23, we see the sun and moon being ashamed in comparison to the light and glory of Yahweh that will pervade the new creation.

*So it will happen in that day,
that the LORD will punish **the host of heaven on high**,
and **the kings of the earth on earth**. They will be gathered together
like prisoners in the dungeon,
and will be confined in prison;
and after many days they will be punished.
Then the **moon** will be abashed and the **sun** ashamed,
for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and his glory will be before his elders.*

Isaiah 24:21-23

The Rebels of the Divine Council

When looking at these passages from Daniel and Isaiah, we can see a picture of spiritual evil that resembles what we find in the New Testament as well. The biblical authors are aware of powers of evil that work on the corporate levels of human societies and nations. They foster idolatry that distorts humans and ruins social institutions when they don't acknowledge the one true God.

Notice how frequently the images of power, the skies, and royal rule are used: princes and kingdoms (Dan. 10), the host of the heavens (Deut. 4; Isa. 14, 24), the rulers of the sky (Gen. 1). Human kingdoms are portrayed as enslaved to the worship of these powers in and through their idolatrous worship of the forces of nature and the stars.

Jesus and the Forces of Darkness

When God's Kingdom comes in power, the dark spiritual powers need to be confronted and dethroned. This is precisely the mission Jesus saw himself fulfilling, and he continually describes his treatment on earth by corrupt humans as orchestrated by dark spiritual forces.

Jesus' Temptation and Arrest

After Jesus was baptized, he went immediately into the wilderness and was tested by the ultimate spiritual rebel, who has authority over the kingdoms of the world.

*Again, the slanderer took him to a **very high mountain** and showed him **all the kingdoms of the world** and their glory; and he said to him, "**All these things I will give you**, if you fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Go away, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the slanderer left him; and behold, angels came and began to serve him.*

Matthew 4:8-11

After Jesus' initial resistance against the spiritual power at work behind the corruption of human kingdoms, Jesus launches his announcement of God's Kingdom. And it all leads up to his conflict with these same human and spiritual powers in Jerusalem and his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane.

*Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders, who had come out against him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as you would against a robber? While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on me; but this hour belongs to you **and to the power of darkness**."*

Luke 22:52-53

Notice that when Jesus views the Jerusalem temple establishment coming to arrest him, he sees a spiritual dimension of evil at work in and through these human authorities. He calls it "the power of darkness." This is the same view we encountered in Deuteronomy 32, Isaiah 13-14, 24, and Daniel 10. Corrupt human kingdoms have been hijacked as expressions of cosmic spiritual evil.

Jesus' Death

Later, the apostles viewed Jesus' crucifixion as primarily the result of spiritual evil powers that had enslaved humans through idolatry of power.

*We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the **rulers of this age**, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of **the rulers of this age** understood it, **for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory**.*

1 Corinthians 2:6-8

In this passage, Paul has fused the spiritual and human power structures together in their guilt and accountability for the death of Jesus. It is precisely human institutions that worshiped the idols of religious tradition and national security (the temple establishment and the Roman governor) that crucified Jesus. But the ultimate fault lay with the “rulers of the age” to whom the human rulers give their allegiance.

The apostles describe Jesus’ death as a victory over these powers. The crucifixion of Jesus was actually his victory over the human and spiritual power structures who killed him. Jesus didn’t exert his power based on the idolatrous value systems that enslave our earthly power structures. Rather, he allowed the rebellious powers to kill him so that he could expose their ultimate weakness and powerlessness in comparison to the life-creating power of the creator.

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Colossians 2:15

Jesus’ Victory

God’s love and power to generate life out of death is real power, which was demonstrated when Jesus was raised from the dead.

***All authority in heaven and on earth** has been given to me.
Therefore go and make disciples of **all nations** ...*

Matthew 28:18-19

Notice that the risen Jesus’ authority is over Heaven and Earth together. This is precisely the rule that humanity was destined for according to Genesis 1 and Psalm 8. Now that Jesus has been exalted to that place of divine rule, his authority over the spiritual and human powers is shown by going to all nations.

Remember in Genesis 11 (and Deut. 32), God handed the nations over to rebellious spiritual powers. Here in Matthew 28, Jesus is announcing that *he* is the one who will repossess the nations to become part of God’s Kingdom. The resurrection and exaltation of Jesus is the ultimate reversal of Genesis 11.

*That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand **in the heavenly realms**, far above all **rule and authority, power and dominion**, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.*

Ephesians 1:20-21

The Powers and Authorities in Paul's Writing

In the mind of the apostle Paul, the ultimate opposition that followers of Jesus face is the spiritual powers and authorities.

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the schemes of the slanderer. For our **struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.** Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

Ephesians 6:10-17

When Paul imagines the real enemy facing Jesus' people, he speaks of the same rebels of the divine council portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The idolatrous powers that animate the kingdoms of this world are the real culprit, not the humans who are enslaved to their ideologies and values.

This is why the type of resistance Paul advocates for is a subversion of normal warfare. He commends the nonviolent resistance that imitates the character traits of the messianic king from Isaiah. The divine armor listed here is all adapted from various texts in Isaiah that describe the rule of the Messiah (Isa. 11:5; 59:16-17).

The Defeat of the Powers When God's Kingdom Comes

Paul describes the transition of our world into a new creation, marked by the defeat of the cosmic powers that have enslaved our world to violence and death.

*For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. **Then the end will come, when he hands over the Kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power.** For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet."*

1 Corinthians 15:22-27

Paul envisions the day when the new creation will come under the direct rule of its creator and the new humanity he has appointed to reign over it, namely Christ and his people. This means that the rebels of the divine council, the powers and authorities, must be dethroned and removed to open the way for a new future in a re-created Heaven and Earth.

4. Angels and Cherubim

Angels are some of the most-well known characters in the story of the Bible. They are also, perhaps, the most misunderstood. Alongside them are the fascinating creatures called cherubim. They both play important roles in the Bible's depiction of the spiritual realm, but this biblical portrait is quite different from what most modern people imagine when they think of angels and cherubim. In essence, biblical angels are the spiritual counterparts to the human prophets in the Bible. Both function as messengers of God and his divine council. Dig deeper into the ideas presented in the fourth video of our Spiritual Beings series, Angels and Cherubim, with these study notes.

The Use of "Angel" in the Bible

Angels are spiritual messengers, and like prophets, their earthly counterparts, they bring the power and life of God's heavenly realm to Earth in the form of signs and wonders (think of Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kgs. 17-2 Kgs. 7). So to really understand angels in the Bible, we need to sort out the vocabulary and relationships between the spiritual and human figures referred to by the word "angel."

Hebrew: *Mal'ak* - מלאך

The Hebrew word "*mal'ak*" means "messenger," and it can refer to anyone (human or spiritual being) sent with a message.

*So Saul sent **messengers** to Jesse and said,
"Send me your son David who is with the flock."*

1 Samuel 16:19

*Now Jephthah sent **messengers** to the king of the sons
of Ammon, saying, "What is between you and me, that
you have come to me to fight against my land?"*

Judges 11:12

However, when the same Hebrew word "*mal'ak*" refers to a spiritual being sent by God with a message, our translations choose a different word: "angel."

*Now the two **angels** came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was
sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to
meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground.*

Genesis 19:1

Our English translations even use different words for *mal'ak* in the same passage to distinguish between human and heavenly messengers.

*Now as Jacob went on his way, the **angels** (Heb. *mal'ak*)
of God met him. Jacob said when he saw them, "This is
God's camp." So he named that place Mahanaim. Then
Jacob sent **messengers** (Heb. *mal'ak*) before him to his
brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.*

Genesis 32:1-3

Greek: *Angelos* - ἄγγελος

The New Testament Greek word “*angelos*” functions in a similar way. It can refer to human messengers and also spiritual messengers sent by God.

*And Jesus sent **messengers** on ahead of him,
and they went and entered a village of the
Samaritans to make arrangements for him.*

Luke 9:52

*And Jesus was in the wilderness forty days being
tempted by the Satan; and he was with the wild
beasts, and the **angels** were ministering to him.*

Mark 1:13

The Connection Between Heavenly and Earthly Messengers

This practice of using different translation words (“messenger” versus “angel”) is helpful from one perspective, as it clearly distinguishes between human and spiritual messengers. But it also hides the important common connection between God, his divine council, and the role of messengers sent by God.

In the Hebrew Bible, God’s heavenly realm is depicted as a throne room, and he is surrounded by a staff team called the divine council (see Ps. 82:1 and our Divine Council study notes). But there are more spiritual beings than just the council. Numerous times we hear of a larger group who are called by many titles.

*The heavens will praise your wonders, O LORD;
your faithfulness also in **the**
assembly of the holy ones.*

Psalm 89:5

*O Yahweh, God of **the hosts**.*

Psalm 89:8

*Bless the LORD, O you his **angels**,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!
Bless the LORD, all his **hosts**,
his **ministers**, who do his will!*

Psalm 103:20-21

Just as human kings and queens have a large staff team that consists of council advisors, attendants, and messengers, the biblical authors envision God’s Kingdom in a similar way. There are council members to whom God has delegated authority, and there are distinct beings who serve a different purpose.

However, it’s important to notice that God and the divine council often send messengers/angels that are human. This is the role of Israel’s prophets, to bring to Israel’s leaders messages from God and his council.

Thus says **Yahweh of hosts**,
 "Do not listen to the words of **the prophets** who are
 prophesying to you.
 They are leading you into futility;
 They speak a vision of their own imagination,
Not from the mouth of Yahweh.
 They keep saying to those who despise me,
 'Yahweh has said, "You will have peace";
 And as for everyone who walks in the stubbornness of his own
 heart,
 They say, 'Calamity will not come upon you.'
But who has stood in the council of Yahweh,
 That he should see and hear his word?
 Who has given heed to his word and listened? ...
 I did not send these prophets,
 But they ran.
 I did not speak to them,
 But they prophesied.
 But **if they had stood in my council,**
Then they would have announced my words to my people."

Jeremiah 23:16-18, 21-22

Jeremiah is confronting Israel's leaders for listening to prophets that are not sent by Yahweh, and so do not confront the greed, idolatry, and injustice of Israel's kings and priests. Notice Jeremiah's assumption in 23:21-22. True prophets are those who have had a vision of the divine council and who have been sent by God to speak his word as a messenger.

This passage in Jeremiah helps us understand why Israel's prophets are sometimes called *mal'ak*, or **messengers**, like we see in 2 Chronicles.

*The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again
 and again by his **messengers**, because he had compassion
 on his people and on his dwelling place; but they continually
 mocked the **messengers of God**, despised his words
 and scoffed at his **prophets**, until the wrath of the LORD
 arose against his people, until there was no remedy.*

2 Chronicles 36:15-16

Parallel to these human prophetic messengers sent by God and the divine council, spiritual beings are also sent. They perform similar roles to Israel's prophets.

They give messages on God's behalf	They perform wonders or acts of deliverance for God's people	They give comfort or provision
And an angel from the Lord appeared to Zacharias, standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard ..." Luke 1:11-13	This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and rescues them. Psalm 34:6-7	He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. 1 Kings 19:5-6
	On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. Acts 12:6-7	And Jesus was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to him. Mark 1:13

Appearance of Angels in the Bible

No angels in the Bible are ever depicted with wings. We know that may be surprising to read since angel wings are a fixed image in the modern mind. But this is not found anywhere in the Bible. The cherubim do have wings, but as we will see below, these creatures are very different from angels, and they are never called by this word. Cherubim don't give messages or perform missions for God; they remain in the heavenly realm, unlike angels who can cross the boundary between Heaven and Earth.

Angels in the Bible appear as humans. There are numerous stories where angels appear but are merely called men because they look like people. In this text from Genesis, Yahweh appears with two angels who then go to Sodom while he talks with Abraham. But notice, the men are not called angels.

Now **Yahweh appeared to him** by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, **three men were standing opposite him**; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth ...
 ... Then **the men turned away** from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before **Yahweh**.

Genesis 18:1-2, 22

Angels appear as superhuman when people encounter them in dreams and visions. When angels appear in the day-to-day world of people, they are often unrecognizable. But when they appear in visions and dreams, they dazzle and frighten people.

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, while I was by the bank of the great river, that is, the Tigris, I lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, there was a certain man dressed in linen, whose waist was girded with a belt of pure gold of Uphaz. His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult. Now I, Daniel, alone saw the vision ... Then behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. He said to me, "O Daniel, man of high esteem, understand the words that I am about to tell you and stand upright, for I have now been sent to you."

Daniel 10:4-7, 10-11

Gabriel and Michael

Two unique angels are named in the Bible, and they have some kind of exalted role or status. Both Gabriel and Michael are called princes in Daniel 8-10 and 12:1.

Michael is named again in the New Testament in Jude verse 9 and Revelation 12:7. And Gabriel appears in Luke 1:19, 26.

It's likely that Paul the apostle refers to one of these when he speaks of "the archangel" in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 (see also Jude verse 9). The word in Greek means "chief-angel" and assumes some kind of tiered-authority structure in the heavenly realm that is not spelled out in any detail in the Bible.

The New Testament Authors Speak About Angels

The apostles encouraged humble awareness of angels, but they discouraged unhealthy speculation about them.

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained **angels** without knowing it.*

Hebrews 13:2

*Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and **worship of angels**, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind ...*

Colossians 2:18

*Are [**angels**] not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*

Hebrews 1:14

This first passage from Hebrews was most likely referring to the story of Lot in Genesis 19, who wasn't at first aware of the identity of the angels who visited him. Only once they used their power did he understand who they were.

In the Colossians passage, Paul is describing some kind of religious cult that has influenced some members of the church in Colossae. The people involved are practicing some kind of connection to angels that involves either venerating them in honor and worship or joining them in the worship of God. Either way, Paul discourages this practice, and in the broader context (Col. 2:6-23), points them to the risen Jesus as the one to whom all of our honor and attention should be given.

Hebrews chapters 1 and 2 are focused on showing people that angels play an important role in God's purposes, but followers of Jesus should not elevate their importance or cultivate an unhealthy fascination with them. Rather, angels should be regarded as fellow servants of God who appear at surprising moments to serve followers of Jesus in moments of need. In that sense, they should be treated as fellow members of God's family to be welcomed and honored.

The Cherubim in the Bible

Cherubim are multiform animal creatures who are portrayed in the Bible as guardians of God's throne room. No one in the Bible ever meets cherubim in day-to-day life, and they are not the same as angels who can cross between the spiritual and human realms. Cherubim are only ever seen by prophets who have dreams or visions of the heavenly throne room of God.

Cherubim are first mentioned in the Bible as guardians of God's space in Eden where Heaven and Earth overlap.

*He drove out the human, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed **the cherubim** and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.*

Genesis 3:24

Notice that the biblical author simply assumes the readers know what the cherubim are and what they do. This is characteristic of biblical meditation literature, which assumes that you are constantly re-reading the Scriptures and will bring later texts to mind to help you understand earlier texts.

One simple takeaway from Genesis 3:24, however, is the role of the cherubim. They stand at the boundary of Heaven and Earth, and they guard sacred space. This is exactly the symbolic role they play in Israel's tabernacle and temple later in the biblical narrative.

Symbolism of the Cherubim

Symbolic cherubim were placed all over Israel's tabernacle and temple, which were miniature representations of the garden of Eden, the place where God's space meets with human space.

- Cherubim were embroidered into the curtains of the tabernacle (Exod. 26:1) and on the veil that marked off the holy of holies (Exod. 26:31).
- Two cherubim were sculpted of gold and placed on top of the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:17-22). This was the focus spot of God's presence.
- Two large cherubim were made for the holy of holies in Israel's temple that overshadowed the ark of the covenant (1 Kgs. 6:23-28).
- Cherubim were engraved all over the inner wall of the temple (1 Kgs. 6:29).

***There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim** which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel.*

Exodus 25:22

These carved cherubim on the ark of the covenant and surrounding the priests in the temple were physical representations of their heavenly counterparts, the cherubim who surround God's heavenly throne. This symbolism is made clear in the phrase, "[God] sits above the cherubim."

*So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of Yahweh of hosts, **who is enthroned on the cherubim.***

1 Samuel 4:4 and 2 Samuel 6:2

*Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
**You who sit enthroned
between the cherubim ...***

Psalms 80:1

*The LORD reigns,
Let the nations tremble;
**He sits enthroned between
the cherubim.***

Psalms 99:1

Descriptions of the Cherubim

The cherubim are described as multiform animal figures. **Their appearance is different every time they show up in the Bible.** This should lead us to conclude that the visual descriptions are symbolic and are meant to point our imaginations toward the **meaning and significance** of their appearance.

The only common feature to all descriptions of the cherubim is that they have wings.

- Two wings: Exodus 25:20 and 1 Kings 6:27
- Four wings: Ezekiel 1:6

Their faces appear differently as well.

- One face (likely human): Exodus 25 and 1 Kings 8:6-7
- Two faces: Ezekiel 41:18
- Four faces (lion, human, ox, and eagle): Ezekiel 10:14

In Isaiah's vision, he sees into the heavenly throne room and describes creatures with six wings, and he calls them seraphim (*seraph/seraphim* = Heb. שרפים). This is one of the main Hebrew words for snake, particularly venomous ones (see Num. 21:6, Deut. 8:15, and Isa. 14:29).

In Ezekiel's visions, they are called cherubim (Ezek. 10:14) and "the living creatures" (Ezek. 1:5, 13-15).

In the Revelation, John the visionary has taken the visions of both Isaiah and Ezekiel and merged the living creatures, cherubim, and seraphim into one hybrid creature.

*... and around the throne, **four living creatures** full of eyes in front and behind. The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them **having six wings**, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say,*

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."

And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne, to him who lives forever and ever ...

Revelation 4:6-9

The Role of the Cherubim

As can be seen from the above passages, the cherubim play the role of throne room guardians, the choir praising the King, and the supporters or carriers of the divine throne. Their multiform animal character is a clue to their symbolic meaning, along with the song they sing in Isaiah 6:3.

*Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts,
the fullness of all earth is his glory!*

Isaiah 6:3

The seraphim and cherubim are symbolic representations of the creatures of the land who offer their praise to the creator. The sheer diversity of the animal kingdom is a sign of God's creativity and power. Just as the host of heaven declares the glory of God (see Ps. 19), here we see that these creatures channel all of the birdsong, barks, and bear growls into a chorus of honor and praise to the creator.

What about the Seraphim?

Who or what are the seraphim in Isaiah chapter 6, and how do they relate to the cherubim?

While our video introduced the basics, as always the rabbit hole is much deeper!

Let's recall that the cherubim function as guardians at the boundary between Heaven and Earth (as in Gen. 3:24). They support Yahweh's throne in the heavenly temple (Ps. 99:1), or carry his mobile throne-chariot that appears to prophets on Earth (as in Ezek. 9:3 and 10:1). Of great importance is the fact that each time they appear, they look slightly different and are called by different titles. They're "living creatures" (Ezek. 1) or "cherubim" (Ezek. 10). They have two wings (Exod. 25:20) or four (Ezek. 1:6), with one face (1 Kgs. 8:6-7), or two (Ezek. 41:18), or four (Ezek. 10:14)!

This variety points to their symbolic nature. The diversity of their appearance mirrors the diversity of the Earth's creatures whom they represent in the heavenly realm, channeling creation's beauty into praise to the creator.

Symbolism in Isaiah's Vision

These various titles and depictions help us understand what the prophet Isaiah (chapter 6) sees in his vision of the same heavenly throne room. He describes hybrid creatures who perform a similar role to the cherubim, but with some variations. They have six wings (instead of two or four), and they guard the divine throne with their choir song: "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts, that which fills the land is his glory" (Isa. 6:3). In addition, they are called seraphim only here in the Hebrew Scriptures.

This uniqueness has led some people to think that seraphim are a species of spiritual being different from the cherubim, but this is unlikely. Isaiah's vision fits the same pattern of heavenly throne guardians who have different appearances and titles when they show up. But why are they called seraphim in Isaiah chapter 6?

The Hebrew word "*seraphim*" is one of the common Hebrew words for "snake." And if the image of winged snakes sounds crazy to you, notice that Isaiah uses the same word two other times where its meaning is very clear: "flying snakes" (Isa. 14:29 and 30:6). And in Isaiah 14 it's a metaphor for the "ruler of Babylon" who has attempted to ascend into the heavens and usurp God's throne (14:12-15)! Does that sound familiar? Isaiah's seraphim are hyperlinked to the rebel cherub in Ezekiel 28:14 and to that clever snake in Genesis 3!

This is why we omitted discussion of the seraphim in our Angels and Cherubim video.

We'll focus more on them in a later video in this series, The Satan and Demons.

John's Apocalyptic Vision

If you're still not sure if the cherubim and seraphim are the same creature, check out Revelation 4:5-9, where John's vision of the divine throne room merges imagery from all over the Hebrew Bible. He sees a crystal sky platform (from Exod. 24:10) with "living creatures" (from Ezek. 1) that have eyes all over (from the cherubim in Ezek. 10), but they have six wings and sing "Holy, holy, holy!" (from the seraphim of Isa. 6). In John's apocalyptic imagination, all of these diverse heavenly creatures are one, transforming the noise and beauty of creation into one song that honors the creator and King of all.

There are many mysteries about angels and cherubim left unexplained in the Bible, but what is revealed is awe-inspiring and beautiful. What is revealed reminds us that the universe is a larger and more mysterious place than we can imagine, inviting us to channel our grateful praise as we honor the creator and King of all things.

5. The Angel of the Lord

Among all of the spiritual beings in the Bible, one of the most puzzling is the angel of the Lord, or more literally, the messenger of Yahweh. Is this some sort of high-ranking angel? Is it Yahweh himself? Or some other class of spiritual being entirely? The answer isn't so simple, and there's a lot to discover as we track this fascinating character through the story of the Bible.

If you haven't checked out our study notes for the Angels and Cherubim video, we recommend looking over those before reading on this topic.

Yahweh's Presence in the Bible

In the Bible, Yahweh is portrayed as the transcendent creator who is other and above all, while also being present and accessible within every part of his creation.

There are some occasions where the biblical authors describe Yahweh's presence as a direct appearance in rather bold language.

*Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old,
Yahweh appeared to Abram and spoke to him ...*

Genesis 17:1

*And **Yahweh appeared** again at Shiloh,
because **Yahweh revealed himself** to Samuel
at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.*

1 Samuel 3:21-21

On other occasions, Yahweh will send a third-party messenger, who can be either human (that is, a prophet) or a spiritual being (what we call an angel).

*The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word
to them again and again by his **messengers**,
because he had compassion on his people and on
his dwelling place; but they continually mocked
the **messengers of God**, despised his words and
scoffed at his **prophets**, until the wrath of the LORD
arose against his people, until there was no remedy.*

2 Chronicles 36:15-16

*Now the two **angels** came to Sodom in the
evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom.*

Genesis 19:1

There are many occasions, however, where a figure called the messenger/angel of Yahweh (Heb. מלאך יהוה) appears. And the stories that describe this being are packed with puzzling features that are not there by accident. All of these stories are coordinated and focused on a core paradox that can be summarized in this way: **The angel of Yahweh is both Yahweh and distinct from Yahweh at the same time.**

Appearances of the Angel of Yahweh

Here's the key list of appearances of the angel of Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Genesis 16:7-13	The angel of Yahweh appears to Hagar the Egyptian.
Genesis 22:11-18	The angel of Yahweh appears to Abraham and Isaac.
Exodus 3:1-9	The angel of Yahweh appears to Moses.
Numbers 22:22-35	The angel of Yahweh appears to Balaam.
Judges 2:1-5	The angel of Yahweh appears to the Israelites.
Judges 6:11-24	The angel of Yahweh appears to Gideon.
Judges 13:1-23	The angel of Yahweh appears to Samson's parents.
1 Kings 19:1-8	The angel of Yahweh appears to Elijah.
Zechariah 1:7-17	The angel of Yahweh appears to Zechariah.
1 Chronicles 21:14-27	The angel of Yahweh appears to David.

If you read these stories carefully, you will notice a pattern. The narrator switches back and forth between various divine titles in a way that blurs the identity of the speaker. Here's an example from the passage in Genesis.

*Now the **angel of Yahweh** found [Hagar] by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. **And he said**, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai." Then the **angel of Yahweh said** to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority." And **the angel of Yahweh said** to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count." And the angel of **Yahweh** said to her, "'Behold, you are with child, And you will bear a son; And you shall call his name Ishmael, Because Yahweh has given heed to your affliction. ...' Then **she called the name of Yahweh who spoke to her**, "You are God who sees"; for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing him?"*

Genesis 16:7-13

The narrator calls the figure the angel of Yahweh as though he's distinct from Yahweh. The angel can refer to Yahweh as a distinct being ("Yahweh has given heed ..."), but also as if he is Yahweh ("I will greatly multiply ..."). The narrator at the end tells us that it was Yahweh who spoke to Hagar, and in Hagar's speech she calls this being God (Heb. *elohim*).

If you examine only one of these stories, you might be tempted to think that this story is either confused or a patchwork of different sources that were not harmonized (both conclusions have been offered by scholars in the past). However, this same pattern appears in most stories when the angel of Yahweh shows up.

² The **angel of the LORD** appeared to Moses in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. ³ So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." ⁴ When **Yahweh** saw that he turned aside to look, **God** called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ And he said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "**I am the God** of your father, **the God** of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at **God**.

Exodus 3:2-6

¹¹ Then **the angel of Yahweh came and sat** under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. ¹² **The angel of Yahweh appeared to him** and said to him, "**Yahweh** is with you, O valiant warrior."

¹³ Then Gideon said to him, "O my lord, if **Yahweh** is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now **Yahweh** has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian."

¹⁴ **Yahweh looked at him** and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?"

¹⁵ He said to him, "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house."

¹⁶ But **Yahweh said** to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man."

¹⁷ So Gideon said to **him**, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. ¹⁸ Please do not depart from here, until I come back to you, and bring out my offering and lay it before you."

And he said, "I will remain until you return."

¹⁹ Then Gideon went in and prepared a young goat and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour; he put the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot, and brought them out to him under the oak and presented them.

²⁰ **The angel of God** said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so.

²¹ Then **the angel of Yahweh** put out the end of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. **Then the angel of the LORD vanished** from his sight.

²² When Gideon saw that he was **the angel of the LORD**, he said, "Alas, **O Yahweh God!** For now I **have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.**"

²³ **Yahweh** said to him, "Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die."

²⁴ Then Gideon built an altar there to **Yahweh** and named it "**Yahweh** is Peace."

Judges 6:11-24

In the Exodus passage, the narrator calls this figure the angel of Yahweh as though he is distinct from Yahweh, but then he's called Yahweh and then immediately called God. This figure speaks as though he is Yahweh God, and that is who Moses understands him to be.

The Judges passage is extremely sophisticated, as the narrator expects that the reader has been tracking in all of the previous stories of the angel of Yahweh's appearances. Here the blurring of identities is heightened to the extreme. The angel of Yahweh, Yahweh, and God are all interchanged in this story. This is especially noticeable in the final scene where the angel of Yahweh departs (Judg. 16:21), but then in 16:23, Yahweh is apparently still standing there talking to Gideon.

The Identity of Yahweh

The most reasonable conclusion to draw from all of these stories is that this blurring of identities between Yahweh and the angel of Yahweh is an intentional strategy aimed at making a profound theological claim about the identity of Yahweh:

The one God of Israel is a complex unity who is both transcendent and above all, yet simultaneously present and accessible within creation through a mediating person who is both Yahweh and distinct from Yahweh.

For more on this idea, check out our God video as well as our podcast episode about the angel of Yahweh.

The Identity of the Angel of Yahweh in Other Scriptural Texts

The stories we explored above are making this sophisticated claim about the God of the Bible through narrative exposition. This is typical for the Hebrew Scriptures. The biblical authors make their heavy-duty theological claims by means of narrative strategies, forcing readers to draw conclusions and explore the implications.

A perfect example is found throughout the book of Exodus. Here we find a clear set of hyperlinked stories that connect the angel of Yahweh in the burning bush with the pillar of cloud and fire that guarded the Israelites in the wilderness and with the glory of Yahweh that fills the tabernacle. Read the following texts in sequence, paying attention to all of the **titles** and **images** (cloud, fire, pillar, etc.) that are connected to the angel of Yahweh and to Yahweh himself.

*The **angel of Yahweh** appeared to [Moses] in a **blazing fire** from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with **fire**, yet the bush was not consumed.*

Exodus 3:2

*Then [the Israelites] set out from Succoth and camped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness. **Yahweh** was going before them in a **pillar of cloud** by day to lead them on the way, and in a **pillar of fire** by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.*

Exodus 13:20-21

***The angel of God**, who had been going before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the **pillar of cloud** moved from before them and stood behind them. And it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel; and there was **the cloud** along with the darkness, yet it gave **light** at night. Thus the one did not come near the other all night.*

Exodus 14:19-20

*Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, 'Come near before **Yahweh**, for he has heard your grumblings.'" It came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, **the glory of Yahweh** appeared in **the cloud**.*

Exodus 16:9-10

*Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because **Yahweh** descended upon it in **fire**; and its smoke ascended like the **smoke** of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. **Yahweh** came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and **Yahweh** called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.*

Exodus 19:18-20

*Behold, I am going to send **an angel** before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. "Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since **my name is in him**."*

Exodus 23:20-21

The **glory of Yahweh** rested on Mount Sinai, and **the cloud** covered it for six days; and on the seventh day he called to Moses from the midst of **the cloud**. And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of **the glory of Yahweh** was like a consuming **fire** on the mountain top. Moses entered the midst of **the cloud** as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Exodus 24:16-18

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and **the glory of Yahweh** filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because **the cloud** had settled on it, and **the glory of Yahweh** filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys whenever **the cloud** was taken up from over the tabernacle, the sons of Israel would set out; but if **the cloud** was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day when it was taken up. For throughout all their journeys, **the cloud of Yahweh** was on the tabernacle by day, and there was fire in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel.

Exodus 40:34-38

Notice how the collage of images associated with the divine presence develops and grows throughout the story of Exodus and how both are progressively associated with the angel of Yahweh and with Yahweh.

- Angel of Yahweh: fire (Exod. 3), cloud (Exod. 13), and guide for Israel (Exod. 23)
- Yahweh: pillar of cloud, fire, and glory (Exod. 14 and 16), fire (Exod. 19), glory of Yahweh as a cloud (Exod. 24), glory of Yahweh over the tabernacle that guides Israel (Exod. 40)

This network of images is crucially important because it fits the same pattern of ideas we saw in the angel of Yahweh stories above. There is a deliberate narrative strategy to portray Yahweh as a complex unity, so that the angel of Yahweh is both Yahweh and distinct from Yahweh at the same time.

The Divine Glory in the Tabernacle and Temple

The stories in Exodus listed above associate the angel of Yahweh with the glory fire-cloud of Yahweh that guided Israel in the wilderness, appeared on top of Mount Sinai, and then finally took up residence over the tabernacle.

We must connect these stories from Exodus with the later experiences of the biblical prophets who have visions and encounters with this same glorious presence. We explored some of these in our notes on the divine council, but here are a few examples.

Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and **they saw the God of Israel**; and **under his feet** there appeared to be a **pavement of blue-sapphire**, as clear as the sky itself. Yet he did not stretch out his hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and **they saw God**, and they ate and drank.

Exodus 24:9-11

In the year of King Uzziah's death **I saw Yahweh** sitting on a **throne**, lofty and exalted, with the train of his robe filling the temple. **Seraphim stood above him**, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with **smoke**.

Isaiah 6:1-4

Micaiah said, "Therefore, hear the word of the LORD. **I saw the LORD sitting on his throne**, and all the **host of heaven standing by him** on his right and on his left."

1 Kings 22:19

Now **above the pavement that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like blue-sapphire in appearance**; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with **the appearance of a human**. Then I noticed from the appearance of his loins and upward something like **glowing metal that looked like fire** all around within it, and from the appearance of his loins and downward I saw something like **fire**; and a **radiance** around him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of **the glory of Yahweh**.

Ezekiel 1:26-28

All of these throne visions of Yahweh surrounded by his heavenly hosts are coordinated and working off of the same basic set of ideas: Yahweh is King of all creation and rules from his heavenly temple, with the stars (hosts of heaven) as symbolic servants that reflect his glory. When it comes to the figure sitting on the throne, these visions are clear that it is Yahweh the God of Israel who is above all and truly other, the creator and sustainer of all reality.

However, remember all of the hyperlinks between the stories of the glory fire-cloud of Yahweh in Exodus and the angel of Yahweh. The whole point of those connections was to make clear that the human-looking angel of Yahweh is the glorious being that Moses and the prophets encountered in their visions of the heavenly temple. **The angel of Yahweh is both Yahweh and distinct from Yahweh, and it is this visible Yahweh sitting on a throne that the prophets are experiencing.**

So there you have it. If your mind is blown, so is mine! The glorious enthroned Yahweh is the angel of Yahweh, who is both Yahweh and distinct from Yahweh at the same time. This is the robust portrait of God that pervades the entire Hebrew Bible, and it provides the crucial key for understanding how the New Testament makes its claims about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

The New Testament's Portrayal of Jesus

These texts about the angel of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible are the key scriptural foundation for the New Testament's claims about Jesus as the human incarnation of the God of Israel. Consider the opening of the Gospel of John.

*In the beginning was **the Word**, and the Word was **with God**, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning **with God**. All things came into being **through him**, and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being.*

John 1:1-3

There are many things going on in this amazing text, but the relevant point for our discussion is the portrayal of the pre-human Jesus. He is described as a being who is both God and distinct from God at the same time. John is drawing upon the scriptural categories provided to him in the character of the angel of Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures. This also helps us make sense of an important text later in the Gospel of John.

So Jesus said to them, "For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light."

*These things Jesus spoke, and he went away and hid himself from them. But though he had performed so many signs before them, yet **they were not believing in him**. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: "LORD, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" [Isa. 53:1]*

*For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, "He has blinded their eyes and he hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them." [Isa. 6:10] **These things Isaiah said because he saw his glory, and he spoke of him.***

John 12:35-41

In this passage, John emphasizes that many leaders of Jerusalem rejected Jesus and did not believe in him, even though they saw his signs and wonders, specifically the raising of Lazarus from the dead in John chapter 11. But then John says that this rejection was not a surprise. It's actually what he expected based on the depiction of rebellious Israel found in the book of Isaiah, where Yahweh said that Israel was blind and deaf.

Notice what text John is quoting from. Isaiah chapter 6 is when Isaiah saw Yahweh elevated on his heavenly throne. When John (in 12:41) says that Isaiah saw "his glory," he is speaking about **Jesus as Yahweh**. His claim is bold and direct: Isaiah encountered the pre-incarnate Jesus as Yahweh.

Jesus' Connection to the Angel of Yahweh

The above examples make it clear that the apostles believed that Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible is the same being who they met in the person of Jesus. But if the Hebrew Bible portrays the angel of Yahweh as Yahweh, why didn't the apostles ever use the phrase "angel of Yahweh" to describe Jesus?

First, the apostles did use the imagery and conceptual categories of the angel of Yahweh to describe Jesus. John quotes Isaiah 6's vision of Yahweh's (and the angel of Yahweh's) enthroned glory in the temple and applies it to Jesus (John 14). And Mark uses Yahweh's enthroned, human-like appearance seen by Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24) to portray Jesus' transformation into a glowing royal king on a mountain (Mark 9:1-3).

Second, the apostles quoted from texts in the Hebrew Scriptures that are about the angel of Yahweh and applied them to Jesus.

*For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny **Jesus Christ our only master and Lord**. Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that **the Lord** at one time delivered his people out of Egypt ...*

Jude 4-5

Notice that Jude calls Jesus "Lord" and then describes him as the Lord who delivered the Israelites out of Egypt. Recall that the Exodus story says that the God who rescued the Israelites was both Yahweh (Exod. 14) and the angel of Yahweh (Exod. 13).

Third, while the apostles used the biblical categories provided by the angel of Yahweh, they did not use the phrase "angel of the Lord" for two fairly obvious reasons. They wanted to avoid any idea that Jesus was merely an angel. Angels are remarkable beings, but they are creatures, that is, created beings whose existence is sustained by their creator. Also, it's clear that the apostles want to make a more exalted claim about Jesus. He isn't merely a high-ranking angelic being who came among us; rather, he is the one and only Yahweh **become** a human being.

*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by the Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. **The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.** After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became **as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.***

Hebrews 1:1-4

Remember Exodus 23:20-21. Yahweh sent “my messenger” because “my name is in him.” The angel of Yahweh is not an angel, but the very personal presence of the creator God in human appearance. The author of Hebrews is claiming that Jesus is that divine person, who is both God and distinct from God, and who has become human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Conclusion

The angel of Yahweh is God appearing as human, while Jesus is God become human. There are many mysteries that remain, but the above summary is a helpful way to put all of the pieces together. If you are interested in taking a deeper dive into all of these topics, check out these excellent books.

- Michael Heiser, *Angels: What the Bible Really Says about God's Heavenly Host*
- Scot McKnight, *The Hum of Angels: Listening for the Messengers of God Around Us*

6. The Satan and Demons

One of the most striking things about Jesus in the New Testament Gospels is his awareness of an ultimate enemy, and it was not human! Throughout our Spiritual Beings series, we've been talking about rebellious spiritual beings—forces of power referred to often by the biblical authors—that influence corrupted human behavior. We first meet one of these rebels in the garden in the opening pages of the Bible, and we see the influence of dark spiritual powers in the lives of humans throughout the entire biblical story. Jesus, too, is aware of these powers and confronts them by name. In this installment of our Spiritual Beings series, we take a closer look at the Satan and demons in the story of the Bible.

Spiritual Evil in the Hebrew Scriptures

When we read the New Testament, it is clear that Jesus and the apostles assume a general understanding of spiritual evil. That knowledge is provided in the Hebrew Scriptures. In order to understand how Jesus conceived of his mission and why he went to Jerusalem to die on behalf of his people, we have to study the robust story of God's mission to overcome the powers of darkness in his good world. So let's focus on the main themes about spiritual evil that we find in the first three-quarters of your Bible!

The portrayal of spiritual evil in the Hebrew Scriptures is fascinating and complex. The biblical authors never express the mysterious nature of evil by describing it directly. Rather, they give readers a mosaic of stories and images, showing how evil manifests itself in and through human behavior. Like evil itself, the powers of spiritual evil are elusive and hard to nail down, yet their presence is always felt in the biblical drama, as it is in our day-to-day lives, if we have eyes to see it. As with most important biblical themes, Genesis 1-11 offers us the crucial starting points for our reflections on spiritual evil in the biblical story.

The Creation Narrative

On day six of Genesis 1, God populates the dry land with creatures: first the animals, and after that, humanity.

*And God said, "Let the land bring forth **living creatures** after their kind: **cattle** and **creeping things** and **beasts** of the land after their kind"; and it was so. God made the **beasts** of the land after their kind, and the **cattle** after their kind, and everything that **creeps on the ground** after its kind; and God saw that it was good. And God said, "Let us make **human** in our image, according to our likeness; and **let them rule over** the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the **cattle** and over all the earth, and over **every creeping thing** that creeps on the earth."*

Genesis 1:24-26

Notice that the animals are called "the living creatures" (Heb. *khayyot*, חיות), and then specified by rough categories: domesticated animals, creepers (the wild ones that run and hide), and the wild beasts.

Notice also that humans are the last to be created in Genesis 1, yet they are the ones elevated to rule over all creation, the sea and sky **and land creatures**. This establishes a major design pattern in the biblical story: God's elevation of the late-comer to a role of honor above the early-comers.

In the book of Genesis, the theme of the late-comer's elevation often focuses on the jealousy and anger of the early-comer. Think of Cain and Abel, or Jacob and Esau ("the older will serve the younger" in Gen. 25:23), or of Joseph's older brothers who hate him because of his dreams of ruling over them (Gen. 37:1-11). Or later in the Bible, think of David's jealous older brothers who were not chosen to be king (1 Sam. 16-17). And so on.

The Garden

When coming to Genesis 3 after considering this pattern throughout the Hebrew Bible, you're prompted to notice the beasts of day six, who are created first and yet summoned to come under the rule of humans who came second. Will any of them be like Cain or Esau or Joseph's brothers and resent being ruled by a creature who has come to the dry land after them?

The garden of Eden is a high mountain garden-temple where Heaven and its creatures overlap with the Earth and its creatures. The garden is the source of a single river that leaves the garden and divides into four rivers that water the main regions of the biblical world (see Gen. 2:8-14). This has a fairly obvious implication; the garden of Eden is portrayed as the highest place on the dry land.

Eden is described as the host land of the ultimate garden temple. It's a land of gold, fruit trees, precious gems, and abundance (Gen. 2:9-14). These are precisely the images and materials used in the construction of the tabernacle (Exod. 25-31) and the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs. 6-7).

The Heaven and Earth Eden temple is the same place Israel's prophets saw in their visions (Isa. 6, 1 Kgs. 22, Ezek. 1), a place where God's heavenly presence overlaps with Earth. We're told that there are cherubim in this garden (Gen. 3:22-24), just as they populate God's throne room (see Ezek. 10:1-15).

All of this leads the reader to expect that Adam and Eve live together in the garden with spiritual beings of the hybrid-animal variety! So when a talking snake appears in Genesis 3, we have a category for this kind of creature.

The Snake

The identity of the talking snake in Genesis 3 is developed as you read throughout the Hebrew Bible. The snake of Genesis 3 is introduced with a dense and important statement.

Now the snake (Heb. nakhsh, נחש) was more shrewd than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?"

Genesis 3:1

This comment invites us to consider that there is more to this snake than just an animal. For starters, it can talk! The phrase "more shrewd than any beast of the field" could mean that the snake belongs to the beasts of the field and is more sly than the rest. Or it could also mean that it isn't technically a beast of the field. Rather, it's a different kind of creature that is simply more shrewd than any kind of beast. In either interpretation, the comment means this is not your average snake!

The snake also appears to have knowledge of God's decisions and purposes when he says, "God knows that in the day you eat [the fruit] you will be like divine beings, knowing good and bad" (Gen. 3:5). Notice that when God curses the snake in Genesis 3:14, he says something that has puzzled readers across the centuries.

*Because you have done this,
Cursed are you more than all cattle,
And more than every beast of the field;
**On your belly you will go,
And dust you will eat**
All the days of your life ...*

Genesis 3:14

If it was a normal snake, didn't it already crawl in the dust on its belly? Why does God say the snake's **future state** will be to go in the dust if it already crawls on the ground? This statement assumes that the snake that approached the humans **wasn't on the ground**.

Isaiah's Vision

This puzzling image of a snake that doesn't crawl on the ground finds its confirmation much later in the biblical story. When the prophet Isaiah has a vision of God's heavenly throne room, he sees heavenly creatures surrounding God's throne. In Ezekiel's visions of the same space, these beings are called "cherubim" and "living creatures," but Isaiah calls them "seraphim" (Heb. שרפים).

*In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of his robe filling the temple. **Seraphim** stood above him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said,
"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts,
The whole earth is full of his glory!"*

Isaiah 6:1-3

This is the only place in the entire Bible where the heavenly throne room creatures are called in Hebrew *seraphim*. All modern English translations leave this word untranslated, which is strange, because it is a normal Hebrew word for (get ready for it) “venomous snake” (Heb. *seraph*, singular noun / *seraphim*, plural noun)!

Yahweh sent snakes (Heb. *nakhash*),
venomous snakes (Heb. *seraphim*) among
the people, and they bit the people.

Numbers 21:6

Yahweh led you in the great and terrifying wilderness,
of the snake, **the venomous snake** (Heb. *seraph*).

Deuteronomy 8:15

Later in the book of Isaiah, the prophet describes the ruler of Babylon as a “snake” (Heb. *nakhash*) and a “flying snake” (Heb. *saraph me’opheph*). This appears in the same section as Isaiah’s accusation against the ruler of Babylon, which refers both to the human king of Babylon and the spiritual power that lurks behind Babylon.

Do not rejoice, O Philistia, all of you,
Because the rod that struck you is broken;
For from the **snake** (Heb. *nakhash*) root a viper will come out,
And its fruit will be a **flying snake** (Heb. *saraph*).

Isaiah 14:29

Flying snakes were a common religious icon in the ancient Near East, and images of them have even been found in ancient Israelite art. (See below: images from Othmar Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst*, 1977; and Robert Deutsch, “Six Hebrew Fiscal Bullae from the Time of Hezekiah,” 2012.)



Ezekiel's Portrayal of Spiritual Evil

Also important is the prophet Ezekiel, who looks out at Tyre (a powerful seaside kingdom of his day) and accuses its leader of acting like an ancient spiritual rebel. Ezekiel first accuses Tyre's king of claiming to be a deity.

*Therefore thus says the LORD God,
"Because **you have made your heart
like the heart of God,**
therefore, behold, I will bring strangers upon you,
the most ruthless of the nations.
And they will draw their swords
against the beauty of your wisdom
and defile your splendor.
They will bring you down to the pit,
and you will die the death of those who are slain
In the heart of the seas.
Will you still say, 'I am a god,'
in the presence of your slayer,
though you are a man and not God,
in the hands of those who wound you?"*

Ezekiel 28:6-9

Ezekiel then likens the king of Tyre to an ancient spiritual rebel **who inhabited Eden**.

*Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and
say to him:
"This is what the Sovereign LORD says:
'You were the seal of perfection,
full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
**You were in Eden,
the garden of God;**
every precious stone adorned you:
carnelian, chrysolite and emerald,
topaz, onyx and jasper,
lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl.
Your settings and mountings were made of gold;
on the day you were created they were prepared.
You were anointed as a covering cherub,
for so I ordained you.
You were on **the holy mount of God;**
you walked among the fiery stones.
You were blameless in your ways
from the day you were created
till wickedness was found in you.
Through your widespread trade
you were filled with violence, and you sinned.
**So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God,
and I expelled you, guardian cherub,**
from among the fiery stones.
Your heart became proud
on account of your beauty,
and you **corrupted your wisdom**
because of your splendor.'"*

Ezekiel 28:12-17

Isaiah and Ezekiel provide us with the earliest interpretation of the Genesis 3 snake within the Bible itself. These authors understood the snake to be a spiritual being, one of the winged throne guardians, a “living creature” (cherubim) in the garden-temple. But as we learned from the late-comer design pattern in Genesis, it seems that we’re meant to infer that this snake resented coming under the authority of the human creatures whose origins were in the dirt. And so this glorious creature misused its honored place of God-given authority and rebelled by seducing the humans into misusing their authority in the same way. In this way, the snake represents a spiritual rebellion that **coincides** with the earthly rebellion of the humans. Genesis 3 portrays the fall of humanity **and the fall of the spiritual rebel**.

For more discussion of Genesis 3 as the fall narrative of humanity and the snake, check out Seth Postell's book, *Adam as Israel: Genesis 1-3 as the Introduction to the Torah and Tanakh*, chapter six.

The Implied Presence of Spiritual Evil

After the garden of Eden, this spiritual rebel is almost never directly described. Rather, his presence is hinted at when biblical characters face a moment of decision or a great moral test. Cain is tempted to murder his brother by “sin,” which is depicted as a hungry animal.

*Isn't it the case that if you do good, you will be accepted? But if you do not do good, at the door is **sin, lurking**, and its desire is for you.*

Genesis 4:7

This story is important because it sets the paradigm for how the snake operates outside of the garden of Eden. This evil becomes present in moments of sinful desire that test a human's moral character, and it plays the same animal-like role as the snake in the garden. It twists words and tells deceptive lies and half-truths that justify inappropriate behavior. When humans give into these lies, they embrace their own self-destruction.

Genesis 3 and 4 set the template for how spiritual evil works in and through human decisions. Evil is not something God created. Rather, it is the sad corruption of what was intended for good. Although evil is always a possibility in a world where God grants true dignity and moral responsibility to his creation, it is God's creatures who choose to give into evil, resulting in self-ruin.

In many Christian traditions, Genesis 3 is the primary fall narrative. However, Genesis 3 does not stand in isolation. This story is woven into a tight narrative pattern that unites all of Genesis 1-11, which offers multiple fall stories. The spiritual rebellion that began in Genesis 3 is intensified in chapter 4 in the story of Cain, and then again in Genesis 6.

The Sons of Elohim in Genesis 6

Genesis 6 presents modern readers with one of the strangest stories in the Bible.

Now, when humanity began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of humanity were good; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose.

Then Yahweh said, “My Spirit shall not reside with humanity forever, because that one is also flesh; so his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.”

The Nephilim were in the land in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown.

Genesis 6:1-4

While modern readers struggle to understand what’s happening here, the biblical authors were drawing upon a shared understanding that provides the background for this story. Because most modern readers don’t share that ancient context, it’s difficult for us to track. Here are some helpful questions to ask when interpreting this passage.

Who are the sons of Elohim?

“The sons of *Elohim*” is the standard Hebrew phrase for spiritual beings who surround Yahweh’s heavenly throne in the Eden mountain-temple. The same phrase is used elsewhere for the same beings (Job 1:6; 2:1), who are the same as “the host of heaven” (1 Kgs. 22:19). These are members of the divine council whom God invites to participate in his heavenly rule (see the section on The Divine Council in these study notes). Just as angels can take human appearance and interact with humans (see the section on Angels and Cherubim in these study notes), so too (apparently!) can the divine council. This story, then, represents a second heavenly rebellion alongside the snake-seraphim’s rebellion in Genesis 3.

Did they actually have sex with human women?

The plain meaning of this story is fairly clear. Yes, these spiritual beings crossed the Heaven and Earth boundary and had sex with women. The author presents this story as another fall narrative, using the same narrative design pattern in analogy with Genesis 3.

Genesis 2-3: the snake and the woman	Genesis 6:1-4: the sons of God and human women
Genesis 2:24-25 <i>Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they will become one flesh (רֶשֶׁב).</i>	Genesis 6:1-2 <i>And it came about when humanity began to multiply on the face of the land ... and the sons of God saw (הָאֵל) the daughters of humanity (בְּנוֹת תְּוֹנִי) that (כִּי) they were good (טוֹב), and they took (חָקְלוּ) for themselves wives from all which they chose.</i>
Genesis 3:6 <i>And the woman saw (הָאֵל) that (כִּי) the tree was good (טוֹב) for eating and that (כִּי) it was enticing to the eyes and it was desirable for gaining wisdom and she took (חָקְלוּ) its fruit and she ate and she gave to her husband with her and he ate.</i>	Genesis 6:3 <i>And Yahweh said, “My Spirit will not dwell with humanity forever, in as much as he also is flesh (רֶשֶׁב), and his days will be one hundred and twenty years.”</i>

The act of the sons of God is portrayed as an inverted replay of the garden story, but intensified. Instead of the woman taking what is good in her own eyes because of the lies of a spiritual being, in Genesis 6 it is the spiritual beings who take women who are good in their eyes.

The analogy, which is intended by the author, also prompts us to consider the motive of the sons of God in light of the woman’s motive. The woman desired to have wisdom and life in the garden on her own terms instead of honoring the creator’s command. This illuminates the unstated motive of the sons of God. Taking these women was a move to restore the life of Eden to humanity against God’s command, since they had been exiled from access to the tree of life.

Later in Genesis 19, we find a narrative designed to invert this story about spiritual beings having sex with women. In the story of Lot hosting the two angels in Sodom, the men of Sodom come to Lot’s house in order to gang rape the “men” (the angels). And Lot, in a horrifying act of betrayal, offers his two daughters to the crowd of men instead of the angels. The angels intervene and strike all the men with blindness, but this story is patterned after Genesis 6:1-2. It shows just how corrupt humanity has become once again, presenting Lot as the opposite of Abraham and Noah.

Genesis 6:1-4	Genesis 19
The sons of God visit human daughters. The sons of God have sex with them. God rescues Noah and his sons. The land is purified by the flood.	The men of Sodom want to have sex with the angelic men who visit the city. Lot offers his daughters. Angels rescue Lot and his daughters. The city is destroyed.

The reference to 120 years is most likely a narrative countdown to the beginning of the flood (see Gen. 6:13).

What were the children of these distorted Heaven and Earth unions?

In addition to spiritual beings having sex with women, the second strangest part of the story in Genesis 6 is the introduction of the Nephilim.

The Nephilim

*The **Nephilim** were in the land in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humanity, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty warriors of ancient time, men of renown.*

Genesis 6:4

This passage tells us that a group called the Nephilim lived in the land in those days. This word appears only one other time in the Hebrew Bible, and it helps us understand what's happening here in Genesis 6.

*So [the spies] gave the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are **men of great size**. There also **we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are from the Nephilim)**; and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."*

Numbers 13:32-33

The Nephilim are giant warriors from ancient times. This is why the first translation of the Hebrew Bible into ancient Greek (produced around 300-100 B.C.) translated the Hebrew word **Nephilim** with the Greek word γίγαντες / *gigantes* / giants!

These giant warriors have a prominent role in the biblical stories about Israel's entry into the land promised to Abraham. Many of the cities and kings that attacked the Israelites when they entered the land were among the offspring of these giant warriors whose origin stems back to the Nephilim.

Hear, Israel: You are now about to cross the Jordan to go in and dispossess nations greater and stronger than you, with large cities that have walls up to the sky. The people are **strong and tall—Anakites!** You know about them and have heard it said: “Who can stand up against the Anakites?”

Deuteronomy 9:1-2

We took all the towns on the plateau, and all Gilead, and all Bashan as far as Salekah and Edrei, towns of Og’s kingdom in Bashan. (**Og king of Bashan was the last of the Rephaim. His bed was decorated with iron and was more than nine cubits long and four cubits wide.** It is still in Rabbah of the Ammonites.)

Deuteronomy 3:10-11

A champion named **Goliath, who was from Gath**, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span.

1 Samuel 17:4

The Emites used to live there—a **people strong and numerous**, and as **tall as the Anakites**. Like the **Anakites**, they too were thought of as the **Rephaim**, but the Moabites called them Emites.

Deuteronomy 2:10-11

At that time Joshua went and destroyed the **Anakites** from the hill country: from Hebron, Debir and Anab, from all the hill country of Judah, and from all the hill country of Israel. Joshua totally destroyed them and their towns. **No Anakites were left in Israelite territory;** only in Gaza, in **Gath**, and Ashdod **did any survive**.

Joshua 11:21-22

What do the Nephilim warrior giants have to do with spiritual evil?

Genesis 6 is telling us that all of these violent and very tall warrior kings who spread death and terror throughout the ancient world had their origin in a spiritual rebellion. The concept of human-divine warriors was common in the culture of the ancient Near East, where the kings of Egypt and Babylon claimed that their empires were founded by giant warriors who were half human and half deity.

For example, the ancient Sumerian king Gilgamesh was portrayed in Sumerian mythology as part human, part god, and really tall! (See this depiction of Gilgamesh from the late Assyrian period, 8th century B.C.) He is depicted with a lion and snake in his hands, a hunter-giant. Gilgamesh's legacy is likely behind the portrait of Nimrod in Genesis 10:9-10, who built Babylon and **Erek**, which is the Hebrew spelling of Uruk, Gilgamesh's city.

Genesis 6:1-4 is the introduction to the story of the flood, which begins in Genesis 6:5. In other words, the flood of divine justice is God's response not just to human wickedness in general, but specifically to the outbreak of violence and war perpetrated by the warrior giants. The flood is God's attempt to purify the land from the violence and innocent blood shed by the Nephilim. We are meant to see that many of the Nephilim perish in the flood. But in the Hebrew Bible, that doesn't mean the end of their threat. As Genesis 6:4 notes, they are still around after the flood!



The Rephaim

Recall in the list of passages about the biblical giants above that these warriors went by many names: Emim, Anakim, and **Rephaim**. This last title is fascinating because it is most often used in the Bible to refer to the **spirits of dead warrior kings**.

*LORD our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us,
but your name alone do we honor.
They are now dead, they live no more;
the Rephaim do not rise.
You punished them and brought them to ruin;
you wiped out all memory of them.*

Isaiah 26:13-14

*The realm of the dead below is all astir
to meet you at your coming;
it rouses **the Rephaim** to greet you—all those who
were leaders in the world; it makes them rise from their
thrones—all those who were kings over the nations.*

Isaiah 14:9

*I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit;
I have become like a man without strength,
forsaken among the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
and they are cut off from your hand ...
Will you perform wonders for the dead?
Will **the Rephaim** rise and praise you?*

Psalms 88:4-5, 10

These **Rephaim**, the surviving spirits in the realm of the dead, are associated with the Nephilim and the giant warrior kings whose origins all go back to the spiritual rebellion of the sons of God in Genesis 6.

That these Nephilim/Rephaim are corrupted spiritual beings is confirmed later in the Bible, when Peter and Jude refer back to them.

*For if God did not spare **angels when they sinned**, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly ...*

2 Peter 2:4-5

*And **angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode**, he has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day, just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and **went after strange flesh**, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.*

Jude 6-7

Peter and Jude are here reflecting on Genesis 6:1-4 and merging its ideas with the depictions of the **Rephaim** as spirits of the dead. Notice how Jude verse 7 has connected the two stories of the sons of God in Genesis 6 and the men of Sodom in Genesis 19.

But why does all of this matter? These giant warrior kings play a key role in the final human and spiritual rebellion narrative in Genesis 1-11: the founding of Babylon.

The Founding of Babylon

Consider the two stories about the foundation of the Babylonian Empire in Genesis 10-11.

*The sons of **Ham** were **Cush** and Mizraim and Put and Canaan. The sons of **Cush** were Seba and Havilah and Sabtah and Raamah and Sabteca; and the sons of Raamah were Sheba and Dedan.*

*Now **Cush** became the father of Nimrod; he became a **mighty warrior** on the earth.*

*He was a **mighty warrior**, a hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod a mighty warrior hunter before the LORD."*

*The **beginning of his kingdom was Babylon and Erech** and Accad and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.*

Genesis 10:6-10

Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words.

It came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly." And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar.

*They said, "Come, **let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into the heavens**, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."*

Genesis 11:1-4

These two stories provide multiple links back to Genesis 3 and 6.

Nimrod is the grandson of Ham, Noah's son, and he is called a "mighty warrior" (Heb. *gibbor*), which is the same word used to describe the offspring of the sons of God and human women in Genesis 6:4! We are meant to see the rebel sons of God behind the founding of Babylon, just as they were behind the story of Genesis 6.

Nimrod, who is identified with the giants of Genesis 6, builds the kingdom of Babylon and Erech (Heb. אֶרֶךְ), which is the same as the ancient city of Uruk, where Gilgamesh, the original giant king, lived!

Genesis 11 gives us a complementary story of Babylon's origins. We're told the city and its temple-tower were built in order to "have a top in the heavens." In other words, the temple-tower of Babylon is portrayed as a human-made attempt to recreate Eden, the original temple mountain where Heaven and Earth overlapped.

The idea that the foundation of Babylon was a joint human-spiritual rebellion is also made clear by the portrayal of the ruler of Babylon in Isaiah 14, which looks back at Genesis 10-11.

*You all will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon, and say,
 how the oppressor has ceased,
 and how fury has ceased!
 The LORD has broken the staff of the wicked
 the scepter of rulers ...
 How you have fallen from heaven,
 O star of the morning, son of the dawn!
 you have been cut down to the earth,
 you who have weakened the nations!
 But you said in your heart,
 "I will ascend to the heavens;
 I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
 and I will sit on the mount of assembly
 in the recesses of the north.
 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
 I will make myself like the Most High."
 Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol,
 to the recesses of the pit.*

Isaiah 14:4-5, 12-15

In this poem, Isaiah depicts the king of Babylon as a human rebel who is embodying the career of the spiritual rebel behind the origins of Babylon. The fact that Babylon was founded by Nimrod, a warrior-giant associated with the Nephilim, and then built up as an anti-Eden in Genesis 11 shows the author of Isaiah thinks Babylon is more than just a human enterprise. It is an icon of the human and spiritual rebellion.

Conclusions About Spiritual Evil in the Hebrew Scriptures

Genesis 1-11

As we walk away from Genesis 1-11, we've encountered multiple spiritual and human rebellions that are all intertwined.

In Genesis 3-4, the original spiritual rebel is a former exalted throne guardian of God's heavenly temple who resents being subservient to exalted humans. So he lures them into the same temptation he succumbed to, seizing authority by his own wisdom and abusing it for selfish purposes. We then watch humans replay this rebellion, first with Adam and Eve, and then with Cain's murder of his brother.

In Genesis 6 and 11, even more members of the divine council rebel, making for an intensification of the Genesis 3 rebellion. This results in the spread of creatures who are part-spiritual being/part human and who spread violence through their empires, beginning with Babylon. As many of these beings die in the flood, their spirits live on in the underworld as terrifying monsters.

These narratives provide three categories of spiritual evil.

- An arch-rebel, depicted by the imagery of the snake (Gen. 3) and "sin" (Gen. 4).
- Lower-level spiritual rebels who deceive humans into exalting their empires to divine status (Gen. 11).
- Deceased spirits of the Nephilim who endure a shadowy existence in the underworld (Isa. 14 and 26, Ps. 88, 2 Pet. 2).

The Storyline of the Hebrew Bible

These categories of spiritual rebels are developed throughout the storyline of the Hebrew Bible. The arch-rebel can be depicted as a sea dragon (Isa. 27:1), a dangerous desert creature (Ps. 91:13), a *Molekh*, a spirit-king of the grave (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5), or as an accusing lawyer in the divine court (Job 1-2).

Notice that this mosaic-style portrayal of the arch-rebel continues into the New Testament and is well illustrated by his description in Revelation 12:9.

*And the great **dragon** was thrown down, the **snake** of old who is called **the devil** and **the Satan, the deceiver** of the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*

Revelation 12:9

The rebel divine council members deceive the nations into worshiping them, resulting in injustice and violence (Ps. 82, Isa. 24:21-23). These are the “gods of Egypt” (Exod. 12:12) defeated in the exodus, and the other gods of the nations.

*For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against **all the gods of Egypt** I will execute judgments—I am the LORD.*

Exodus 12:12

*And beware not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all **the host of heaven**, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.*

Deuteronomy 4:19

Notice that the word “demon” appears in the Old Testament two times to refer to this group of spiritual rebels. They are identified with the gods worshiped by the nations.

*They made him jealous with foreign gods; with abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to **demons** who were not God, to gods whom they have not known, new gods who came lately ...*

Deuteronomy 32:16-17

*They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the **demons**, and shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and their daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; And the land was polluted with the blood.*

Psalms 106:37-38

And finally, the spirits of deceased warrior kings who sought to terrorize the land are judged by Yahweh in the underworld (see Ezek. 32:17-32).

Jesus Encounters Spiritual Evil

When Jesus retreated to the wilderness after his baptism, he had a showdown with a spiritual adversary called by various titles in the different Gospel accounts.

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by **the devil**.*

Matthew 4:1

*At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tested by **the Satan**.*

Mark 1:12-13

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tested by **the devil**.*

Luke 4:1-2

Neither the words “devil” or “Satan” are proper names. Rather, they are titles, which is why they both have the Greek word “the” in front of them.

“The Satan” is an English transliteration of a Greek transliteration of a Hebrew word (complex, I know!): “*ha-satan*.” This biblical Hebrew word refers to an adversary, or “one who stands against.” It can refer to humans who oppose one another (1 Kgs. 5:4; 11:14, 23), to the angel of the Lord (Num. 22:22), or to a spiritual being in God’s throne room (Job 1:6 and 2:1). This is not a name but a categorical title describing a person’s function in a story. It is the one opposed, who stands against another.

“The devil” is an English translation of a Greek word, “*diabolos*.” It describes a person who slanders or speaks to defame another person. This Greek word is used to refer to humans who talk maliciously (1 Tim. 3:11), gossip (2 Tim. 3:3), or slander the reputation of others (Titus 2:3). It is also used to refer to the **function** of a spiritual being in God’s heavenly throne room, namely the one who accuses God’s people and slanders their reputation.

In fact, in the old Greek translation of the book of Job, the Greek word “*diabolos*” was used to translate the Hebrew word “*ha-satan*,” “the adversary.” These two titles were interchangeable in Jewish literature by the time of Jesus, and this explains the differences between the Gospel accounts.

Jesus Declares the True Enemy

Throughout Jesus’ mission of announcing the arrival of God’s Kingdom, he made perfectly clear that his adversary was not a human, but rather the spiritual powers of evil who are represented by one particular being referred to by many titles.

- “The devil” or “the Satan” (Matt. 4:1-2, Mark 1:12-13)
- “Beelzebul” which means “Lord of the house” (Matt. 12:24)
- “Ruler of demons” (Luke 11:15)
- “The power of darkness” (Luke 22:53)

It’s clear that Jesus assumes a whole storyline about the powers of spiritual evil that he never taught in any depth, including the origins and purpose of evil spiritual beings, why they have the power they do, and what kind of threat they pose. All this and more is assumed knowledge in the New Testament, aside from the occasional side comments (for example, Matt. 25:41). Jesus and the apostles presume their hearers have a shared understanding about spiritual beings.

Spiritual Evil in the New Testament

The New Testament authors carry forward Jesus’ message about the true enemy in the world, who are spiritual powers that influence and at times orchestrate human behavior. They too refer to these dark spiritual powers by various names.

The Satan/Slanderer

We began these notes with an exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures’ portrayal of spiritual evil. When the New Testament authors speak of the “the Satan/slanderer,” we can recognize the figure as the same one depicted as a snake in Genesis 3, as a dragon in Isaiah 27:1, and as a ruler of death in Leviticus 18 and 20.

Jesus’ testing in the wilderness (Matt. 4) is a replay of Adam and Eve’s test in the garden. And notice that the Satan offers Jesus a version of Babylon!

Again, the devil took him to a **very high mountain** and showed him **all the kingdoms of the world and their glory**; and he said to him, "All these things I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Matthew 4:8-10

The Satan is Jesus' primary enemy in the Gospels. From the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus knows that all humanity has given its allegiance to various forms of Babylonian idolatry, exalting human-made empires, economies, and gods to divine status. This rebellion is both individual and corporate, human and spiritual, which is why he viewed his confrontation with the leaders of Jerusalem as a battle against the power of darkness.

Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders who had come against him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as you would against a robber? "While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on me; **but this hour and the power of darkness are yours.**"

Luke 22:52-53

The Powers

In Paul's letters, the rebel members of divine council are referred to as "powers and authorities" who attract the allegiance and idolatrous worship of societies on political, cultural, and religious levels.

The age of this world, **the ruler of the authority of the air**, the spirit who is now working among the sons of disobedience.

Ephesians 2:2

Not flesh and blood, but **the rulers, authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, the evil spiritual beings in the heavenly realm.**

Ephesians 6:12

They take you away captive through philosophies and empty deception, in accordance with human traditions and the **elemental powers of the cosmos**, not in accordance with the Messiah.

Colossians 2:8

Jesus Messiah, who gave himself on behalf of our sins in order to rescue us from the **present evil age**.

Galatians 1:3-4

You were enslaved to what **by nature were not gods** ... the weak and impoverished elemental powers.

Galatians 4:8-9

The rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm.

Ephesians 3:10

All things were created in him, **things in the heavens** and things on earth, the visible and **invisible**, whether **thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities**, all things were created through him and for him.

Colossians 1:15-16

After disarming the **rulers and authorities**, he exposed them to public shame, triumphing over them in the Messiah.

Colossians 2:15

We were enslaved under the **elemental powers of the cosmos**.

Galatians 4:3

This age ... the **rulers of this age** who are passing away ... the rulers of this age ... who, if they did know [the wisdom of God] they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

1 Corinthians 2:6-8

When [the Messiah] hands over the kingdom to God and Father, when he nullifies every **rule and authority and power**, for it is necessary that he rule until he has placed **all enemies** under his feet; the last enemy to be nullified is **death**.

1 Corinthians 15:24-26

Neither **death**, nor life, **nor angels, nor rulers**, nor the present, nor the future, **nor powers** ... nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Messiah Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39

Paul considers the celestial bodies (also called “the elements” in Galatians 4:1-8), to be personalized spiritual forces of some kind, supernatural beings that hold power over human beings ... [he] has in mind the tribal deities that were thought to oversee the nations on behalf of God (as in Deuteronomy 32:8-9) ... but this purpose deteriorated. These same regulating beings are what is meant in Ephesians as *kosmokratoras* (Ephesians 6:12), “cosmic rulers.” But the metaphor in this word contains an ambiguity. On the one hand, they can be said to “hold” (*krateo*) the world (*kosmos*), administering justice and order on behalf of God; on the other hand, their holding might easily become a “grab” (*krateo*), in which they seek to detract attention from the true Creator God and establish themselves as the ultimate in divine power and authority. ... These are the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:11-12).

Bruce Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians*, 49, 54-55

Demons and Evil Spirits

When Jesus goes about announcing the good news of the Kingdom of God, he regularly confronts spiritual beings who terrorize individual humans, physically and mentally. These maladies are attributed to spiritually evil beings.

*Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. The news about him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, those under **demon-oppression**, epileptics, paralytics; and he healed them.*

Matthew 4:23-24

Notice how this list of ills combines demon-oppression in a list of what we would consider medical or mental illnesses. This is odd to us, because we don't share the same view of the world as the biblical authors. In the biblical imagination, anything that degrades the human person—sickness, death, mental instability, bodily malfunction—are all attributed to spiritual forces of death and the grave, that is, **the Rephaim**.

One of the most common titles for these evil spirits is “impure spirits” (Matt. 10:1; 12:43; Mark 3:11; 5:2, 8, 13; 6:7; 7:25; 9:25).

*Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an **impure spirit**; and he cried out, saying, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” And Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet, and come out of him!” Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him.*

Mark 1:23-26

Notice that this “spirit” (singular noun) speaks as if it is a collection of multiple spiritual beings: “Have you come to destroy **us**?”

This spiritual rebel is called “impure” because, in the biblical storyline, these spirits are associated with the **Rephaim**, the inhabitants of the realm of the dead warrior kings of old. In biblical Jewish thought, the bodies of the dead are ritually impure (see Lev. 14-15). So if a spiritual being is part of the remnant of the dead warrior-giants, they are, by definition, ritually impure. One of the “impure spirits” Jesus faces has a very clear connection to the **Rephaim**.

*When he got out of the boat, immediately **a man from the tombs with an impure spirit** met him, and he had his dwelling among the tombs. And no one was able to bind him anymore, even with a chain; because he had often been bound with shackles and chains, and the chains had been torn apart by him and the shackles broken in pieces, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. Constantly, night and day, he was screaming among the tombs and in the mountains, and gashing himself with stones. Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before him; and shouting with a loud voice, he said, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore you by God, do not torment me!” For he had been saying to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” And he was asking him, “What is your name?” And he said to him, “**My name is Legion; for we are many.**”*

Mark 5:2-9

This spiritual rebel, who is both an individual and a plural group (“**we** are many”), terrorizes a man in a graveyard. And, he is named after a Roman battalion! We are clearly meant to see here that Jesus is facing a battalion of **Rephaim** in a ritually impure location (the realm of the dead), yet Jesus is victorious over them.

Jesus’ Power over Spiritual Evil

In Luke’s version of Jesus’ testing in the wilderness, he includes a short comment after Jesus overcomes the spiritual rebel.

*When the slanderer had finished every test, **he left Jesus until the time.***

Luke 4:13

This comment casts a shadow over the entire narrative of the Gospel of Luke. We are meant to see Jesus' rising conflict with the leaders of Jerusalem and his arrival there for Passover as a **spiritual conflict**. When Jesus went about announcing the arrival of God’s Kingdom, demons and spiritual evil were subservient to him and to his disciples.

*They were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! **He commands even the impure spirits, and they obey him.**” Immediately the news about him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee.*

Mark 1:27-28

*Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and **gave them authority over impure spirits, to cast them out**, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.*

Matthew 10:1

It is only once Jesus arrives in Jerusalem that he intentionally yields himself to the powers of evil by allowing them to inspire his sham trial and execution. At every step, Jesus is fully aware that the Jewish soldiers, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and the Roman soldiers are captive to powers of cosmic evil, which are driving their behavior.

*While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on me; but this hour and **the power of darkness** are yours.*

Luke 22:53

*"Now judgment is upon this world; now **the ruler of this world will be cast out**. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." But he was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which he was to die.*

John 12:31-33

Conclusions About Spiritual Evil in the New Testament

The categories of spiritual evil in the New Testament map closely to the portrait we find in the Hebrew Bible. The conflict between Yahweh and the spiritual rebellion in the Hebrew Bible is carried forward by Jesus in his announcement of the arrival of God's Kingdom.

Paul's vision of the ultimate rescue of the entire created order ... a vision which flowed directly from what he believed about the Messiah, impelled him to understand "evil" as a whole which was more than the sum total of humans' sins or deaths. Rather, "Sin" and "Death" were themselves suprahuman forces bent on corrupting and destroying the Creator's good world ... Based on Paul's language about the "powers," the promise is **both** personal (the heart infected by sin, corrupting the mind into idolatry and the person into dehumanizing behavior) **and** cosmic, since the worship of idols allows the demons who masquerade behind them to gain power that is not rightly theirs ... Sin and Death have replaced, in Paul's mind, the wicked, idolatrous pagans as seen from within his pre-Christian worldview. Sin and Death are the real enemies to be defeated, and indeed they have been defeated on the cross and will be defeated fully and finally in Jesus' coming.

N.T. Wright, *Paul and Faithfulness of God*, 756

The climax of Jesus' war of liberation against the powers of spiritual evil is his arrest, execution, and death. This is how Jesus overcomes the powers of evil, and that is the topic of our last video in the Spiritual Beings series.

7. The New Humanity

Throughout the Spiritual Beings series, we’ve been exploring how spiritual beings fit into the storyline of the Bible and how important this theme is in understanding the mission and identity of Jesus. In these final study notes, we will see how the story of Jesus brings to fulfillment the story of all humanity, as presented in Genesis 1-3 in particular. In his death and resurrection, Jesus opens up the way for a new humanity that is both human and spiritual.

How the Biblical Story Works

When we turn to the four Gospel accounts of Jesus in the New Testament, we see him presented as the one in whom the entire biblical story reaches its climactic goal. The story of God’s covenant promises to Israel’s ancestors (Abraham, Moses, and David) is taken up by Jesus as he announces the arrival of God’s Kingdom. But his mission to Israel fits within an even larger drama, namely the cosmic rebellion of human and spiritual beings that is narrated in Genesis 1-11. The narratives about Jesus assume the reader will understand his story within both of these larger plotlines.

	Cosmic storyline (Genesis 1-11)	
	Israel storyline	
	Jesus’ story	

The Cosmic Storyline

God’s purpose is to partner with humanity as his image-bearing representatives, so they can rule over creation on his behalf.

*Then God said, “Let us make human in our **image**, according to our **likeness**; and **let them rule** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” God created human in his image, in the **image of God** he created him; **male and female** he created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, “**Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”*

Genesis 1:26-28

God elevates the humans from the dirt to the realm of the divine throne by placing them in the royal mountain-temple called Eden (Hebrew for “delight”).

Then Yahweh God formed human of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and human became a living being. Yahweh God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and **there he placed the human** whom he had formed. Out of the ground Yahweh God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food, and also the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. Then Yahweh **God took the human and put him into the garden of Eden** to cultivate it and keep it.

Genesis 2:7-9, 15

The tree of life is introduced to the reader by noting its presence in the middle of the garden. This is a clue to its significance, and the author assumes that the reader will grasp the contextual clues that point to the temple symbolism of the garden (see the study notes for episode 1, Introduction to Spiritual Beings).

The geography of Genesis 2 maps precisely onto the symbolic geography of the world in the Hebrew Bible.

The dry land	Eden	The garden in Eden	The tree of life in the middle
The promised land	Jerusalem and the temple mount	The holy place	The holy of holies

This helps us understand the meaning of the “tree of life in the middle of the garden.” Humans are commissioned to rule and tend the garden on God’s behalf and to “fill the land” (Gen. 1:26-28) by spreading its beauty. And to do so, God gives them access to the tree of life, that is, immortal life that transcends their “earthy” origins as mortal creatures. When humans live in the immediate presence of the creator, they transcend their mortal origins and are transformed into something more and greater.

[The tree of life] represents life that is beyond the original life that God breathed into human. The first human by nature is susceptible to death ... Nevertheless, continued eating from the tree could renew life and prevent death. Apart from disobedience to God’s command, mortals had access to this tree ... The tree of life allows humanity to transcend its mortality, the state in which it was created on the sixth day, so it can move to a higher dimension ... to eternal life and immortality. As one partakes of this ... fruit by faith, one participates in this eternal life. This highest potency of life was available in the garden and becomes once again available to us as we reenter the temple-garden through the second Adam ... and look forward to the resurrection of our bodies.

Bruce Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 257

Humanity’s Calling

Genesis 1-2 depicts God as offering mortal humanity the chance to rise above their mortal origins in the dirt so they can become God’s eternal partners in ruling the world together. This is why the poet of Psalm 8 is so blown away by God’s generosity—because this grand calling is so incongruent with humanity’s humble origins.

O Yahweh, our Lord,
how **majestic** is your name in all the earth,
you have displayed your splendor above the heavens!
From the mouth of infants and nursing babes you have
established strength
because of your adversaries,
to make the enemy and the revengeful cease.
When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have ordained;
what is human that you take thought of him,
and the son of humanity that you care for him?
You have made him a little lower than the spiritual beings,
yet you crown him with glory and majesty!
You make him to rule over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes through the paths of the seas.
O Yahweh, our Lord,
How **majestic** is your name in all the earth!

Psalms 8

This poem is reflecting on the remarkable calling that God has placed upon humans in Genesis 1-2. It seems ridiculous when the frail and mortal nature of humanity is compared with the honor of the heavenly beings and their exalted status. Note also that the **glory and majesty** that God gives to humans is precisely the **majesty** that characterizes God himself in the opening and closing lines of the poem.

Humans are given a two-part command that will guide their participation in God's commission.

Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."

Genesis 2:16-17

Notice that God's first command is to enjoy the garden and eat from all of the trees. What a great command to receive! "All of the trees" includes the tree of life mentioned in verse 9. This leads to the conclusion that humanity's access to all the trees of the garden, including the tree of life, is not conditional. They are given as a gift. But continued access to this gift comes with a warning.

The second part of the command regarding the tree of knowing good and bad is not a rule that must be followed in order to win access to the tree of life. It's just the opposite. The gift of eternal life is freely given so that the humans can rule with God forever. God's warning about the tree of knowing good and bad is just that, a warning. If they eat from that tree, it will signify a lack of trust in God's generosity, as well as direct rebellion against their creator's command. Without God's wisdom, humanity's "knowing of good and bad" will be shortsighted, prone to distortion, and easily corrupted. God does not want that kind of corruption to ruin Eden, where Heaven and Earth are one. So he warns them that such a rebellion will result in losing access to the tree of life and lead to exile and death.

Humanity Disobeys God

When humanity is deceived by a spiritual being, God reminds the humans that their loss of access to eternal life will result in exile and death.

Then to the human he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it;'

*Cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.*

*Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;
and you will eat the plants of the field;
by the sweat of your face
you will eat bread,*

***till you return to the ground,
because from it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return."***

Genesis 2:16-17

Notice that humanity's return to the dust is a return to their mortal origins in the dirt. This is not a demotion of a perfect humanity. Rather, this consequence represents a loss of the destiny that God wanted for the humans. Eternal life was a calling that humanity forfeited.

God decides that eternal life would be terrible for a humanity that has chosen to **take** its own knowing of good and bad. And so, in an act of severe mercy, God exiles humans from the garden, so that the gift of eternal life remains out of their reach.

*Then Yahweh God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad; and now, **he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever**"—therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to work the ground from which he was taken. And he drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden he stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.*

Genesis 3:22-24

Conclusions About the Cosmic Storyline

God made humanity as his partners; they are to be his representatives who rule over creation on his behalf. While humans are mortal dirt-creatures, God invites them into his own divine presence and gives them the opportunity to transcend their mortal origins. Eternal existence is not an inherent property of human nature in Genesis 1-2. Rather, mortal humans are given the gift of eternal life and are warned about the kind of behavior that will ruin the gift. When the humans foolishly join the rebel spiritual being in Genesis 3 and take their own knowledge of good and bad, they both rebel against God and also take a cheap substitute for the tree of life. They would rather have their own wisdom than God's gift.

In an act of severe mercy, God exiles the humans so that they do not live eternally in their corrupted state. They are sent away from the garden to the realm of the dirt, where they return to the dust from which they came.

The plot conflict introduced in Genesis 3 governs the entire narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures: God's mission is to restore humanity to their lost calling, to reinstall them as his image-bearing partners who can rule the world in the divine power of immortal life and love.

The solution is seen in God's purpose to raise up a seed from the woman (Gen. 3:15) who will both overcome spiritual evil at its source (to strike the head of the snake) while also dealing with the horrific consequences of human and spiritual evil (to be struck by the snake). In other words, what we need is a new kind of human who will confront evil in God's good world and overcome it in a surprising and paradoxical way.

The Israel Storyline

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, we are introduced to a whole lineup of heroes and heroines who, for brief moments, are presented as potential candidates for the promised seed of Genesis 3:15. Each narrative character steps onto the stage with great promise and hope, only to fail and leave the story as simply an image or pointer to the anticipated seed of the woman who will fulfill the promise.

Noah

In Genesis 5-9, Noah is introduced as a character who will offer comfort to all humanity after the debacle of Genesis 3-4.

And he called his name Noah, saying, "This one will give us comfort from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the LORD has cursed."

Genesis 5:29

And yet, Noah replays the failure of Adam and Eve in another garden whose fruit leads to his nakedness and shame (see Gen. 9:20-24).

The Family of Abraham

In Genesis 12-25, Abraham is introduced as one whom God will use to restore the blessing of Eden to all the nations.

*And I will make you a great nation,
and I will bless you,
and make your name great;
and so you shall be a blessing;
and I will bless those who bless you,
and the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*

Genesis 12:2-3

Yet Abraham twice betrays his wife by endangering her in order to save his own life (Gen. 12 and 20). Then he and Sarah oppress an Egyptian slave and exile her and her son to die in the wilderness (Gen. 16 and 21).

In Genesis 37-50, Joseph is presented as the beloved son who is rejected and persecuted by his brothers but exalted by God from the pit to rule over the nations. Joseph's dreams in Genesis 37 hint back to humanity's lost calling to rule over Heaven and Earth as God's partners.

Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Look, I have had still another dream; and behold, **the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.**"

Genesis 37:9

Joseph is eventually elevated to become second in command over the nations, ruling at Pharaoh's right hand.

Then Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, **in whom is the spirit of God?**" So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so **discerning and wise** as you are. **You shall be over my house**, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; **only in the throne I will be greater than you.**" Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, **I have set you over all the land of Egypt.**" Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, "Bow the knee!" And he **set him over all the land of Egypt.**

Genesis 41:38-43

Yet Joseph eventually dies in Egypt, hoping for the future exodus from their exile and the return to the land of God's promise.

Moses

In Exodus 2-Deuteronomy 34, Moses is presented as a royal priest who confronts human and spiritual evil among the nations (represented by Egypt and its gods, see Exod. 12:12). He alone is invited to ascend to the high place of Sinai where Heaven and Earth meet, and he is transformed for a brief moment into a new mode of human existence.

It came about when Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moses' hand as he was coming down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with him.

Exodus 34:29

The high point of Moses' career as Israel's leader comes when he offers his own life for Israel's sins so that God's covenant could be maintained with the people.

On the next day Moses said to the people, "You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to Yahweh, **perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.**" Then Moses returned to Yahweh, and said, "Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. But now, **if you will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from your book which you have written!**"

Exodus 32:30-32

Yet Moses consistently rebels against God's purposes, from the first moments of his commission (see Exod. 4:10-17) to the wilderness wanderings when he dishonors God in the eyes of the people (Num. 20:8-13).

David

In 1 Samuel 16-1 Kings 2, David is presented as the royal seed of Israel who is used by God to reunify the family of Abraham so that it can become God's instrument of blessing to the nations and overcome the forces of evil in the world.

*Once you spoke in vision to your godly ones,
and said, "I have given help to one who is mighty;
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
I have found **David my servant;**
with my holy oil I have **anointed him,**
with whom my hand will be established;
my arm also will strengthen him.
The enemy will not deceive him,
nor the son of wickedness afflict him.
But I shall crush his adversaries before him,
and strike those who hate him.
My faithfulness and my loyal love will be with him,
and in my name his horn will be exalted.
**I shall also set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.**
He will cry to me, 'You are my Father,
my God, and the rock of my salvation.'
**I also shall make him my firstborn,
The highest of the kings of the earth.**
My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever,
and my covenant shall be confirmed to him.
**So I will establish his seed forever
and his throne as the days of heaven."***

Psalm 89:19-29

This poem is reflecting back on God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 and linking it to the cosmic storyline of Genesis 1-3. God called David to be that new human who would be exalted as God's human partner to rule the nations and subdue the chaos and evil among the nations. Like humanity in Genesis 1-2, David is the latecomer who was elevated as the firstborn. (He was the eighth son of his father! See 1 Sam. 16.)

In Psalm 89:29, we see humanity's lost calling reappear: eternal life for the promised line of God's human partners, through whom the divine rule will be extended over all creation. For related statements of this hope connected to David and his line, see 2 Samuel 7, Psalms 2, 72, and especially 110.

*Yahweh says to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."
Yahweh will **stretch forth your strong scepter from Zion**, saying,
"Rule in the midst of your enemies."
Your people will volunteer freely in the day of your power;
in holy array, from the womb of the dawn,
your youth are to you as the dew.
The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,
"You are a priest forever
according to the order of Melchizedek."*

Psalm 110:1-4

Here, David is portrayed as speaking of another master whom Yahweh will elevate to sit beside the divine throne and rule over the nations from Jerusalem.

Notice that this ruler is also a priest, which was not true of any of David's sons who ruled in Jerusalem. Rather, this poem anticipates that the future seed of David will be both a king and a priest, like Adam and Eve who ruled as the royal priests in Eden. Yet David replays the sin of Adam and Eve and Cain (Gen. 3-4) and the sons of God (Gen. 6).

David in 2 Samuel	Adam, Eve, and Cain in Genesis	The Sons of God in Genesis
2 Samuel 11:2-4 <i>Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw (הִאֵר) a woman (הַשָּׂא) bathing; and the woman was very good of appearance (הֶאֱרַמְתִּיבוֹט). So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" David sent messengers and took (חָקַד) her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house.</i> 2 Samuel 12:9 <i>Why have you despised the word of Yahweh by doing evil in his eyes? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have murdered (גֵּרַה) him with the sword of the sons of Ammon.</i>	Genesis 2:9 <i>And Yahweh caused to sprout from the ground every tree that was desirable of sight (הֶאֱרַמְתִּיבוֹט) and good (בֹּט) for eating ...</i> Genesis 3:6 <i>When the woman (הַשָּׂא) saw (הִאֵר) that the tree was good (בֹּט) for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took (חָקַד) from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.</i> Genesis 4:6-8 <i>Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you hot with anger? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and murdered (הָרַג) him.</i>	Genesis 6:1-2 <i>Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, and the sons of God saw (הִאֵר) that the daughters of men were good (בֹּט); and they took (חָקַד) women (הַשָּׂא) for themselves, whomever they chose.</i> Genesis 6:11 <i>And the land was corrupted in the eyes of Yahweh, and the land was filled with violence.</i>

Through the repetition of key vocabulary, the sin of David is set in comparison with the rebellion stories in Genesis 3-6. Just as humanity forfeited its access to the tree of life and partnership with God in ruling the world, so now David loses his chance to embody God's rule over the nations. Just as the sons of God violated the boundary between Heaven and Earth, so also David forfeits his chance to become the promised seed that would rule over Heaven and Earth.

Conclusions About the Israel Storyline

All of the narrative characters are presented as images of the anticipated seed of the woman promised in Genesis 3:15. In very different ways, they all replay the sins of their ancestors and forfeit the calling God has placed on Israel to mediate God's Eden blessing to all the nations.

Israel's exile from the promised land, which happens in two waves (2 Kgs. 17 and 24-25), replays the exile of Adam and Eve from the garden (Gen. 3:22-24). These portraits of humans at their best, in the figures of Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and David, stand in the Hebrew Scriptures as anticipatory images of the one who is to come. One book in the Hebrew Bible specifically picks up all these images and combines them into one complex mosaic, namely the Son of Man figure in Daniel chapter 7.

Daniel 7: The Israel and Cosmic Storylines Come Together

In Daniel chapters 1-6, we are introduced to the line of David ("the seed of the kingdom," Dan. 1:3) that is taken into exile in Babylon. Throughout Daniel 1-6, the line of David is faced with a test of allegiance to Yahweh (the famous stories of the fiery furnace and the lion's den). Daniel and his companions are all threatened with death to give allegiance to the kings of Babylon and Persia, and they refuse. This leads to their "deaths" in Daniel chapters 3 and 6, but God intervenes to redeem them from death. After this vindication, Daniel and the friends are elevated to rule over the empire alongside the king (sounds like Joseph!).

These narratives in Daniel 1-6 are combined and replayed in a dream Daniel has in chapter 7, which takes the royal seed of Daniel and the friends and combines them with all the narrative images that we explored earlier. And the combined portrait is astounding!

Instead of a snake, we find a horde of mutant beasts crawling out of a dark, chaotic sea to wreak violence on the earth (Dan. 7:1-8). But all of a sudden, the creator takes to his heavenly throne and brings divine justice upon the beast and its evil (Dan. 7:9-12). Then comes the climax of the dream.

*I kept looking in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
one like a Son of Man was coming,
and he came up to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And **to him was given dominion,**
glory and a kingdom,
that all the peoples, nations and men of every language
might serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
which will not pass away;
and his kingdom is one
which will not be destroyed.*

Daniel 7:13-14

Here, we see the original human calling restored to a figure who will rule alongside God as an eternal partner. The everlasting rule of the Son of Man will take place after the beastly evil of human empires has been done away with so that only the rule of God and the Son of Man remains.

Notice that in the stories of Daniel 3 and 6, the seed of David is brought through persecution and death (the furnace in chapter 3 and the lion's den in chapter 6) and then elevated to rule beside the king. So here in Daniel 7, the Son of Man is brought up from the realm of the violent beasts to rule over all creation.

This is a culminating image that summarizes the messianic hope of the Hebrew Scriptures. Notice that the heavenly beings play a key role in Daniel's dream. They are surrounding the divine throne (Dan. 7:10), but the Son of Man is elevated to rule over them as well. We are back to our foundational images from Genesis 1-2, Psalm 8, and Psalm 110: humanity was called by God to transcend their mortal origins and discover their elevated purpose to rule over Heaven and Earth, which is only possible if they accept God's gift of eternal life.

Daniel 7 is a poetic dream-image of the fulfillment of God's promise in Genesis 3:15 through an eternal human who is exalted to rule as a divine-human partner over all creation.

Check out the BibleProject video *The Son of Man* for a summary of these ideas and our Son of Man podcast series for an in-depth exploration of this biblical theme.

Jesus' Storyline

The four Gospel accounts in the New Testament all portray Jesus, in their different ways, as the one in whom all of these promises find fulfillment. This is why the stories emphasize Jesus' conflict with spiritual evil from the very start.

Jesus' Divine-Human Identity

After the litany of heroic failures from the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels present God's surprising solution to the cosmic crisis and the failure of Israel. The creator God who called Israel into being will himself become human in the person of the divine Son. Jesus will be the humanity that we could not be for ourselves, and he will be "Israel" in order to fulfill its calling to the nations.

The Gospel writers present Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit as the way that the creator God enters into and becomes one with his human creations.

The angel answered and said to [Mary], "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy one to be born shall be called the Son of God."

Luke 1:35

Jesus as the Ultimate Divine-Human Partner

Recall how the plot tension generated by Genesis 1-3 created the need for a human who can not only partner with God, but also transcend death itself. The Gospels portray Jesus as the one in whom Yahweh, the God of Israel, is coming among his people to accomplish this very task.

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God.
As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:
"Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying in the wilderness,
'Make ready the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"*

*John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him; and a voice came out of the heavens:
"You are my beloved Son, in you I am well-pleased."*

Mark 1:1-4, 9-11

Notice how Mark’s Gospel begins with an extended quotation of Isaiah 40:1-3 (combined with wording from Mal. 3:1 and Exod. 23:20), which foretells of a prophetic herald who will announce the arrival of Yahweh. Mark clearly identifies John the Baptist as the heralding voice, who will prepare Israel for Yahweh’s arrival.

Notice the narrative logic: if John is the herald for Yahweh, then Jesus’ arrival is equated with the arrival of Yahweh.

Jesus’ Initial Victory over the Satan

Three of the four Gospel accounts situate Jesus’ initial Kingdom announcement around his baptism and subsequent testing in the wilderness. Luke’s account is an excellent example.

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, he became hungry. And the devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’” **And he led him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to him, “I will give you all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore if you worship before me, it shall all be yours.”** Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”*

*And he led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you,’ and, ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” And Jesus answered and said to him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” **When the devil had finished every test, he left him until an opportune time.***

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus’ test is presented here as the climactic next step of both the cosmic storyline of Genesis 1-3 **and also** of the Israel storyline of Genesis 12 and onward.

Jesus’ Story	Humanity’s Story
The divine Son is tested in a wilderness.	Adam, the first son of God (see Gen. 5:1-3), is tested in a garden.
The Satan tests Jesus to take power over the nations at a place described as “on high” (Luke 4:5).	Adam and Eve were tested by the snake in Eden, the high garden-temple.
The Satan’s test is about how Jesus will become the ruler of the world.	Humanity’s test is about how they will become co-rulers with God in Eden (Gen. 1:26-28).

Jesus’ Story	Israel’s Story
40 days in the wilderness	40 years in the wilderness
The wilderness is where Jesus obeys the will of the Father by not putting him to the test.	The wilderness is where Israel tested God and disobeyed the will of Yahweh.
In Jesus’ first and last tests, he responds to the Satan by quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3 and 6:16, passages that recall Israel’s failure in the wilderness.	

Jesus is reversing the failure of Israel in the wilderness and so proving himself as Israel's true royal priestly representative who can fulfill the nations' calling before God.

In every case, Jesus resists the temptation to grab political power on his own terms, and he deprives himself of food and honor, trusting that his Father will deliver him. In this way, he overcomes the testing of the Satan, and submits himself to the road of hardship that lays ahead.

Jesus' Mission to Inaugurate God's Heavenly Kingdom

Jesus went about announcing the arrival of God's Kingdom, and he brought God's reign to bear on the lives of Israelites and non-Israelites living around Galilee. Notice Matthew's description.

*Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and **proclaiming the good news of the kingdom**, and **healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness** among the people. The news about him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to him all who were ill, those suffering with various **diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and he healed them.***

Matthew 4:23-24

Notice how Matthew equates Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God with two kinds of activity: teaching/ announcing as well as healing. Notice also that these healings are for people who are sick, along with those who suffer from what modern Western cultures would call "mental illness," a sickness of the brain.

In Jesus' view of the world, sickness, mental illness, and even death itself are signs of our world's captivity to the powers of spiritual evil. His announcement of God's Kingdom manifests itself in ministries of healing, generosity, and hospitality to the outsider. Jesus' ministry of healing is portrayed as an act of liberation from humanity's captivity to spiritual evil.

*And he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a **woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit; and she was bent over, and could not straighten up at all.** When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your sickness." And he laid his hands on her; and immediately she was made erect again and began glorifying God.*

*"And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, **whom the Satan has bound for eighteen long years**, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?"*

Luke 13:10-13, 16

*Then they brought him a **demonized man** who was blind and mute, and **Jesus healed him**, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?" But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But **if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.** Or again, **how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.**"*

Matthew 12:22-29

Notice that in both of these stories, Jesus describes his ministry of healing in the language of confrontation with and liberation from spiritual powers of evil. Jesus viewed his healings as a kind of offensive battle against the spiritual forces of death and evil.

Jesus invited his followers to view themselves as participants in the arrival of God's Kingdom. This is why his famous Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) has at its center the prayer which Jesus invited his followers to say everyday.

*Our Father who is in heaven,
may your name be recognized as holy.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not lead us into the test, but deliver us from the evil one.*

Matthew 6:9-13

Jesus presented God's Kingdom as arriving, even invading Earth, in and through his own mission. He invites his followers to pray that God's will and purpose be more and more manifest on Earth. Within the context of the Sermon on the Mount, this means that God's Kingdom displays itself **through the behavior of Jesus' followers as they imitate his own mission and way of life.**

Jesus Brings God's Kingdom to Jerusalem

Jesus intentionally timed his Kingdom of God movement to come to its climax in Jerusalem during Passover. Every moment in this part of Jesus' mission was preplanned and strategically executed.

He made a public challenge to Israel's leaders who governed the Jerusalem temple. His announcement and symbolic destruction of the temple was a prophetic warning that their days as Israel's leaders were numbered. See the sequence of events in Mark 11.

Jesus provoked the temple leaders, knowing that they would arrest him as a troublemaker and rebel. This was his plan. His words and actions at his messianic Passover meal make clear that he meant to offer his own life on behalf of rebellious Israel (and therefore, for all humanity). See the sequence of events in Mark 14:22-31.

In the final hours before his arrest, Jesus went to a garden for one last test. In Gethsemane, we watch Jesus wrestle with his calling once again, just as he did in the wilderness.

*Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then he said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with me." And he went a little beyond them, and fell on his face and prayed, saying, "**My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will.**"*

*Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and **the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners.** Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays me is at hand!"*

Matthew 26:36-39, 45-46

Notice that Jesus' prayer matches the Lord's Prayer that he taught his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. This helps us see that for Jesus, this prayer was not simply an item of instruction. Rather, he shares with us the very words that sustained him in his effort to bring God's Kingdom into the world at the cost of his own life and well-being.

Notice also that Jesus calls himself **the Son of Man**, that is, the figure from Daniel chapter 7 and Psalm 8. In this moment of vulnerability and weakness, Jesus is paradoxically at his most influential and royal: he is the truly human one exercising God's rule over the world—by giving up his life.

In Luke's version of Jesus' arrest, Jesus identifies the Jerusalem authorities as agents of spiritual evil.

*Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders who had come against him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as you would against a robber? While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on me; **but this hour and the power of darkness are yours.**"*

Luke 22:52-53

Jesus described his coming death and resurrection as his victory over the powers of darkness.

*And Jesus answered them, saying, "**The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.** Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."*

John 12:23-24

*Now my soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, "Father, save me from this hour?" But **for this purpose I came to this hour.***

John 12:27

*Now **judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.** And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.*

John 12:31-32

Jesus is portraying his coming death as precisely the way that he will overcome the powers of evil who hold the power of death itself. Only through experiencing death on behalf of rebellious Israel and humanity can Jesus become the new humanity.

Jesus' resurrection is portrayed as his vindication from death and the way through which he receives divine authority over all of Heaven and Earth.

*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "**All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.** Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Matthew 28:18-20

Jesus is here claiming to be the vindicated Son of Man, the figure from Daniel 7:12-14 and Psalm 8, who is installed as the divine-human ruler over all of Heaven and Earth. The risen Jesus is the new humanity!

Jesus as the New Humanity in Paul the Apostle's Letters

Paul regularly refers to Jesus as “the image of God” from Genesis 1 and to followers of Jesus as the “new humanity” who are being transformed to become like the risen Jesus.

*For he **rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son**, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. **He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.** For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him.*

Colossians 1:13-16

*And having **disarmed the powers and authorities**, he made a public spectacle of them, **triumphing over them by the cross.***

Colossians 2:15

*Do not lie to one another, since you put aside **the old humanity** with its evil practices, and have put on **the new humanity** who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to **the image of the One who created him**—a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but **the Messiah is all, and in all.***

Colossians 3:9-11

Notice that in these passages, Jesus is the truly human image of God who has defeated the spiritual powers of darkness in his death and resurrection.

In Colossians 1:13-15, Paul uses the language of “firstborn” and “kingdom of the Son” (recall Ps. 89 discussed above) and the “image of God” from Genesis 1. He also draws upon the imagery of Daniel 7 in Colossians 2:15, describing Jesus’ death as his victory over the powers of evil. Here, Paul is combining the ideas of Genesis 3:15 with the Gospel announcement of Jesus’ resurrection.

In Colossians 3, Paul then extends Jesus’ new humanity to include those who trust in Jesus and give their allegiance to him. They will find themselves being transformed into the new kind of humanity that Jesus pioneered on our behalf.

The Resurrection of the New Humanity

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul offers his most developed thoughts on the nature of Jesus’ resurrection and how it provides a solution to the problems created in Genesis 1-3.

*But the Messiah has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For **since death came through a human, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a human.** For as in Adam all die, so in Messiah all will be made alive. But each in turn: Messiah, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, **when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power.** For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For **he “has put everything under his feet.”***

1 Corinthians 15:20-27

Paul presents Jesus as a new Adam—and remember, in Hebrew the word “*adam*” is the word for “humanity.” It was humanity’s rebellion, leading to death, that prevented humans from being God’s eternal partners who could rule over Heaven and Earth.

This is precisely the problem that the resurrection of Jesus solves. It opens up the way for a new humanity who cannot die to be God’s covenant partners in ruling creation. Jesus is presently the only new human who exists in this resurrected, new creation state.

Notice that Paul quotes from Psalm 8:6 in the final line above, showing that he equates Jesus with the new humanity. The climax of Paul's argument in this chapter is an exploration of the new creation humanity, whose prototype is the risen Jesus.

*But someone will say, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as he wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. **All flesh is not the same flesh**, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.*

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a corruptible body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spirit-empowered body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spirit-empowered body.** So also it is written, "The **first man, Adam, became a living being.**" **The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.** However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. **The first human is from the earth, of dust; the second human is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.

1 Corinthians 15:20-27

This is an extremely dense paragraph, and our English vocabulary "physical" and "spiritual" are inadequate translations to help us understand the nature of what Paul is trying to say in Greek.

Paul's larger point is that different creatures have different kinds of bodies, so that the heavenly bodies (which, remember, are considered spiritual beings in the biblical worldview) are a kind of body that is similar but also different from the bodies of earthly creatures. This helps Paul's larger point, that the resurrection body of Jesus is still a body, but of a different kind.

In 15:43-44, Paul contrasts a "natural" (Grk. *psuchikon*, ψυχικόν) body with a "spiritual" (Grk. *pneumatikon*, πνευματικόν) body. The problem is that in English, the contrasting pair "natural" and "spiritual" sounds like a contrast between "physical/material" and "non-material/spiritual." This has led some readers to read this paragraph, which in 15:45 describes the risen Jesus as a "life-giving Spirit," to conclude that Paul believes that the resurrection body is non-physical, that is, a disembodied reality. This is **not** what Paul is saying.

Paul used the words "natural" and "spiritual" earlier in this same letter, and these parallel examples are important to understand what Paul means by these same words in chapter 15.

Now we have received, not **the spirit of the world**, but the **Spirit** who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by **human** wisdom, but in those taught by the **Spirit**, combining **spiritual** thoughts with **spiritual** words.

But a **natural** (psuchikos, ψυχικός) human does not accept the things of the **Spirit** of God, for they are **foolishness** to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are **spiritually** appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one.

For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

And I, brothers and sisters, could not speak to you as to **spiritual** humans, but as to humans of the **flesh**, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still **fleshly**. For since there is **jealousy** and **strife** among you, are you not **fleshly**, and are you not walking like **mere humans**?

1 Corinthians 2:12-3:3

Notice that we find the same contrast between “natural” and “spiritual” but we have lots of other additional terms that fill out the portrait of each word. “Natural” is “foolish,” “human,” and “fleshly,” and therefore connected to “jealousy and strife.” “Spiritual,” on the other hand, is “from God,” “wise,” and “mature.”

In other words, Paul’s main contrast in using the words “natural” and “spiritual” is not between physical and non-physical. In this context, he’s addressing how there are some Corinthians who have turned the church into a popularity contest aimed at increasing the honor and status of celebrity leaders. This is what he calls “natural” and “fleshly,” because it leads to jealousy and strife.

For Paul, “spiritual” refers to a mode of humanity that is **empowered by God’s life-giving Spirit**, creating love, peace, and generosity in the world. These are acts that are very much physical, but they exist in a different kind of way than “mere human” behavior.

When we apply these conclusions to the contrast between the Genesis 1 human who is “natural” and “earthly” and the risen Jesus who is “heavenly” and a “life-giving Spirit,” Paul is not saying that the resurrected Jesus is not physical—just the opposite! He is saying that the risen Jesus exists as a **new kind of humanity**, whose origins, values, and nature are not determined by the physical constraints of creation as we currently experience them. The risen Jesus is the first prototype of a Spirit-empowered humanity whose life can be given to others through the power and presence of God’s Spirit.

When Genesis 2 speaks of the Creator making Adam as a living “being” (Greek Septuagint, *psyche*), this was not a secondary form of humanity, but its primary form. What humans now need is not to get away from, or back behind, such an existence, but rather to go on to the promised state of the final Adam, in which this physical body will not be abandoned, but will be given new animation by the Creator’s own Spirit. Paul does not believe in a return to the primal state, but in the redemption from the sin and death which has corrupted the primal state, in order that a way forward be found into the new creation which, though always in the mind of the Creator, has never yet existed. The “man from heaven” is not a being who, unsullied by the world of creation, remains in a purely non-physical state; he is the risen Lord who will come from the heavenly realm (1 Corinthians 15:47-49). He will enable other humans, not to escape from the physical world ... but to go on to bear, in the new resurrected body, the ‘image of the human from heaven.’

N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 353

With the contrast between the new and old humanity in place, Paul concludes the entire line of thought with his hope of a transformation of our mortal bodies into a new creation existence (the immortal state that humanity forfeited in Genesis 3).

*Now I say this, brothers and sisters, that **flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God**; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but **we will all be changed**, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and **we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.** But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "**Death is swallowed up in victory.** O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us **the victory through our Lord Jesus Messiah.***

1 Corinthians 15:50-57

In Paul's mind, the future resurrection of the new humanity is the grand fulfillment of the storyline of Genesis 1-2.

The New Humanity and the New Creation

In Revelation, the final book of the Bible, John the visionary depicts the new creation as a new Jerusalem-Eden temple, which recalls Genesis 1-2 but also carries it further into new territory.

*Then I saw **a new heaven and a new earth**; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, **new Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, **the tabernacle of God** is among men, and he will dwell among them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be among them ..."*

Revelation 21:1-3

*Then he showed me **a river of the water of life**, clear as crystal, coming from **the throne** of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of **its street**. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his bond-servants will serve him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; **and they will reign forever and ever.***

Revelation 22:1-5

This new creation is simultaneously a new Heaven and Earth (recalling Gen. 1:1), a new Jerusalem (recalling Isa. 60 and 65), a new temple (recalling Exod. 25-31 and 35-40), and a new garden of Eden (recalling Gen. 2) all at the same time. John is combining images of the new Eden from all over the Hebrew Scriptures because he takes them as referring to one ultimate reality.

Notice the final line of the scene in 22:5, "and they will reign forever and ever." This clearly recalls the original human vocation from Genesis 1:26-28, that humanity, as the image of God, reigns as God's partners and children forever in creation.

Once all of creation joins Jesus and the new humanity in the resurrection, God's ultimate purposes for creation will be fulfilled. This is all possible in and through the divine-human partner, who loved us and gave himself for us so that his eternal life could become our own.

Resources

For further reading on the topics explored in our New Humanity video and study notes, check out the following resources.

- Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*
- Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination*
- Brandon Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels*
- N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*