



The Devil in the General Epistles, Part 3:

1 John

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Abstract

This paper outlines the dualistic worldview and the motif of cosmic conflict in the Johannine writings, before studying the individual texts in 1 John which refer to the devil. Christadelphian interpretations of these texts are described and critiqued and an alternative exegesis is provided in each case. Particular interest is paid to the interpretation of early Genesis which lies behind the allusion in 1 John 3:8-12. The conclusion reached is that the writer of 1 John understood the devil to be a supernatural personal being.

1. Background

1 John has received relatively little attention in studies on the devil, either in Christadelphian writings or in biblical scholarship. This is surprising, because this relatively brief epistle mentions the devil seven or possibly eight times. When word count is controlled for, this book may mention the devil more frequently than any other in the New Testament. There are four distinct passages within the epistle that we will consider: 1 John 2:13-14, 3:8-12, 4:4 and 5:18-19.

The brevity of 1 John provides little context for establishing the worldview that lies behind the writer's references to the devil. 2 and 3 John are no help either since they are much shorter still. Fortunately, since it is almost universally recognized by scholars that the author of John's letters was "either the author of the gospel [of John] or a close associate,"¹ the considerably longer Gospel can assist us in understanding worldview which lies behind this epistle.

1.1. Johannine Dualism

One of the most striking features of the Johannine worldview is its dualism, which contrasts light with darkness, truth with lies, life with death, good with evil, love with hate, etc. At the heart of this dualism is the conflict between God and the devil. This is laid bare in the contrast between the two fathers in John 8:42-44 and 1 John 3:10, and the two powers in 1 John 4:4 and 5:19. The dualism is not absolute, because God is greater than the devil (1 John 4:4). The devil already stands condemned (John 12:31; 16:11) and believers can already overcome him (1 John 2:13-14).

In Part 1 of this series we discussed the "modified cosmic dualism" reflected in certain Second Temple Jewish texts, particularly in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and how scholars identify the same kind of dualism in the Johannine literature.² Barton summarizes the point well:

"Certainly, as is recognized widely, the Gospel evinces the same kind of thought-world as that of the Qumran texts, and both share themselves the broader thought-world of the Scriptures and their intensive exposition and interpretation in the literature of early Judaism."³

Lieu asks what kind of dualism is present in John's writings. She distinguishes between

"ethical dualism (where two contrasting patterns of behaviour divide humankind), cosmic dualism (where there are two opposing camps of supernatural powers), metaphysical dualism (two absolutely opposed divine principles) and eschatological dualism (a contrast between the present age and the age to come)."⁴

Lieu stresses that these different kinds of dualism are not mutually exclusive, and draws comparisons between Johannine dualism and that found at Qumran, which has "both ethical

¹ Jobes 2014: 23.

² Farrar 2014 (2): 4.

³ Barton 2008: 14.

⁴ Lieu 1991: 80.

dimensions and a cosmic setting.”⁵ Lieu sees 1 John against the background of “the primeval act of rebellion against God by an evil or fallen angel”, views which “pushed the conflict between good and evil onto the metaphysical or cosmic stage.”⁶

Jobes similarly likens Johannine dualism to that found in Second Temple Judaism, for instance in the Two Ways tradition reflected in Qumran’s *Community Rule* and the *Testament of Asher*. However, she too cautions that John’s is not a pure cosmic dualism since he emphasizes that the powers of light and darkness are not equal. God’s ultimate sovereignty is never in doubt.⁷

1.2. Cosmic Conflict in the Johannine Writings

In her influential study of the “ruler of this world” motif in John’s Gospel, Kovacs argues that for the writer of this Gospel, Christ’s death “brings about the judgment of and victory over Satan, the ‘ruler of this world.’”⁸ Her main points are elaborated thus:

“(1) [John 12:31-32] and many other [passages] in the Gospel presuppose the ancient myth of cosmic combat, transmitted, in the author’s own time, especially in apocalyptic texts; (2) that such apocalyptic traditions have influenced the Gospel’s interpretation of the death of Christ, as well as its dualism.”⁹

Concerning John 12:31, Bruner observes that the devil is literally “exorcized” by Jesus’ powerful resurrection, so that he no longer enjoys ultimate power or supremacy over believers:¹⁰

“There are no individual exorcisms in the Gospel of John as there are in the other Gospels – except this One Great Cosmic Exorcism”.¹¹

Kostenberger summarizes the cosmology behind the Johannine writings, also explaining why John contains no references to Jesus’ exorcisms which play such a central role in the Synoptic Gospels:¹²

“The cosmic conflict between the world of light and the world of darkness is, first and foremost, a struggle between God and his Messiah on the one hand and Satan on the other. In order to focus his readers’ eye even more keenly on this titanic spiritual clash, John has eliminated virtually all references to demons...centering the evil supernatural on Satan (13:27), also called ‘the devil’ (8:44; 13:2; cf. 6:70; 1 John 3:8, 10) or ‘the prince of this world’ (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).”¹³

⁵ Lieu 1991: 83.

⁶ Lieu 2008: 134.

⁷ Jobes 2014: 65-67.

⁸ Kovacs 1995: 228.

⁹ Kovacs 1995: 228.

¹⁰ Bruner 2012: 868.

¹¹ Bruner 2012: 909.

¹² The centrality of the cross in Jesus’ defeat of Satan is also a reason given by Twelftree for the absence of exorcisms in the Gospel of John (Twelftree 1985: 90).

¹³ Kostenberger 2009: 281.

1.3. The devil in the Johannine Writings

There are three distinct designations for the devil in 1 John: “the evil one” (*ho poneros*, 1 John 2:13-14; 3:12; 5:18-19), “the devil” (*ho diabolos*, 1 John 3:8, 10) and “he that is in the world” (*ho en to kosmo*, 1 John 4:4). It is debatable whether the last designation refers to the devil or the antichrist, and this issue will be discussed later.

However, we first need to show that “the evil one” in these texts is a designation for the devil, in case there is any doubt on this point. To do this we must consider 1 John in its broader New Testament context, particularly in the text of the Gospel of John.

Virtually all English Bible translations since the KJV have rendered *ho poneros* as “the wicked one” or “the evil one” in 1 John 2:13-14, 3:12 and 5:18. The KJV translates this term abstractly as “wickedness” in 1 John 5:19, but virtually all modern translations remain consistent by translating the term as “the evil one” in this verse as in the others.

This term is clearly used as a designation for the devil or Satan in other places in the New Testament (a point conceded by Christadelphian writers such as Heaster, 420). In the parable of the sower, Matthew interprets the birds as symbolizing “the evil one” (Matthew 13:19), while Mark has “Satan” (Mark 4:15) and Luke has “the devil” (Luke 8:12). Similarly, in the interpretation of the parable of the tares, Matthew uses “the evil one” and “the devil” interchangeably (Matthew 13:38-39), as does Paul in his analogy of the armor of God (Ephesians 6:11, 16). Paul also uses the terms ‘Satan’ and ‘the evil one’ in close proximity in 2 Thessalonians 2:9 and 3:3. Even without recourse to the rest of the New Testament, it is clear that *ho poneros* is a designation for the devil in 1 John since it is used interchangeably with *ho diabolos* in 1 John 3:8-12.

Most modern translations and commentaries also understand *ho poneros* to refer to the devil in Matthew 5:37, 6:13, and John 17:15. In Jesus’ high-priestly prayer in John 17:15, he prays for his disciples’ protection from the evil one (as he also instructs them to do in Matthew 6:13). This prayer is necessary because the disciples remain “in the world” (John 17:11). It forms an important part of the background to the references to the devil in 1 John.

The other terms used for the Evil One in the Gospel of John are Satan (John 13:27), the devil (John 6:70; 8:44; 13:2), and the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The terms ‘Satan’ and ‘devil’ are used interchangeably in John 13. While it is less obvious within the Gospel of John that “the ruler of this world” is a designation of Satan, this is implied by the fact that both Satan and the ruler of this world are implicated in Jesus’ death. The similar terms “the god of this world” and “the ruler of the power of the air” are used by Paul for the devil (2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2). At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch (traditionally regarded as a disciple of John) frequently uses the term “ruler of this age” for the devil (Philadelphians 6:2; Magnesians 1:2; Trallians 4:2; Romans 7:1; Ephesians 17:1; 19:1). While John does not use the term “ruler of this world” in his epistle, 1 John 5:19 contains the same idea, explicitly identifying the Evil One as the one in whose power the whole world lies.

On John 13:27, Kovacs comments:

“Like John 8:39-47, this text demonstrates that, for the Fourth Evangelist, **‘the devil’ is not a mere figure of speech, nor a ‘faded mythological conception.’** Satan is an effective power who is active on the stage of human history.”¹⁴

Indeed, the language of John 13:27 is that of possession,¹⁵ implying that Satan is a spirit being comparable to demons (as is made more explicit in Mark 3:22-27).

Lieu summarizes the significance of the term ‘the evil one’ in 1 John well:

“[T]he evil one’ (*ho poneros*) is not anyone who is wicked (as in Matt 5:39; 12:34-35) but, as frequently elsewhere in the New Testament, the archopponent of God, who might also be labeled ‘the devil’ or ‘Satan’ (cf. Matt 13:19 with the parallels in Mark 4:15; Luke 8:12). The idea of such a figure has its roots in the biblical period, when Satan, initially a sort of public prosecutor in the service of God (Job 1-2), becomes one who is determined to incite men and women into disobedience toward God (1 Chronicles 21). In the subsequent ‘intertestamental’ literature this figure, his story and activities, and his names develop quickly, but no single label or account predominates, and this is also the case in the New Testament. The term ‘the evil one’ is particularly favoured by 1 John (2:13-14; 3:12; 5:18-19), and, unlike the possible ambiguity elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. John 17:15), the form is clearly masculine, not neuter.”¹⁶

Bruns observes that in rabbinic writings the term “prince of this world” is frequently used of the Angel of Death, and argues that in this epistle *ho poneros* is “primarily an agent of death.”¹⁷ In this respect, John’s view of the devil coheres with that expressed in Hebrews 2:14, which was discussed in Part 1 of this series.

In summary, the terms “evil one” and “devil” in 1 John refer to an effective power as they do in John’s Gospel, and are not merely figures of speech. These texts refer “to the one who exercises a cosmic power over human beings that is expressed in the rejection of the revelation of God’s redemptive plan in Christ.”¹⁸ The dualism between God and the devil in John’s writings is rooted in Jewish apocalyptic cosmology.

This background is crucial to a correct interpretation of the devil or evil one in 1 John, because the most of the relevant texts in the epistle are cursory and assume the reader has a prior understanding of who this entity is. The writer is not interested in cosmology as an end in itself but only insofar as it impacts upon his readers:

“1 John has even less to say about how people become children of the devil than it does about the children of God. The author seems uninterested in the possible origins of the reality he observes, whether in cosmic history or in divine predestination. He simply wants

¹⁴ Kovacs 1995: 234, emphasis added.

¹⁵ See Boyd 1975: 32; Sorensen 2002: 121 n. 8 & 9.

¹⁶ Lieu 2008: 89.

¹⁷ Bruns 1967: 452.

¹⁸ Jobes 2014: 145-146.

to point out the existence of the two sets of ‘offspring,’ and emphasize the tests by which they may be recognized.”¹⁹

With this background in hand, we now turn our attention to exegesis of the individual texts which refer to the devil.

2. 1 John 2:13-14

2.1. Text

“12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name. 13 I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one. 14 I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.” (1 John 2:12-14 NRSV)

In this series of statements in a repetitive structure, John twice tells the “young people” among his readers that they have overcome the evil one.

2.2. Christadelphian Exegesis

Most Christadelphian works on the devil ignore this passage, perhaps because of limited awareness that “the evil one” is in fact a designation for the devil. The only work I could find that offers a detailed comment on this passage is Heaster’s, which takes “the evil one” here to refer to a specific human person:

“The existence of such an individual would make special sense of the Lord’s request for the Father to keep the disciples safe from ‘the evil one’ (Jn. 17:15). 1 Jn. 2:13, 14 alludes to this prayer and shows it to have been fulfilled in the first century – the true believers had been kept safe from “the evil one”. And there appears some connection with the promise of Rev. 3:10, given just prior to the cataclysm of AD 70, to keep the brethren safe from ‘the hour of trial’.”²⁰

Heaster does not offer a suggestion as to the identity of this human person. In his analysis of 1 John 5:19, however, he conjectures that “the evil one” may refer to the Jewish High Priest.

In an exposition of 1 John (not specifically focusing on the subject of the devil), Allfree interprets “overcome the wicked one” to mean “overcome the propensities of the flesh” but offers no justification for this interpretation.²¹ One surmises that this interpretation is based on an identification of “the evil one” with “all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches” mentioned subsequently in v. 16.

¹⁹ Rensberger 2001: 45-46.

²⁰ Heaster 2012: 503.

²¹ Allfree 2012: 60.

2.3. Evaluation of Christadelphian Exegesis

Heaster's view that "the evil one" here refers to a specific, unnamed human being seems to be a wild conjecture. Why should we resort to such an interpretation when "the evil one" is used as a designation for the devil elsewhere in this epistle and in several other places in the New Testament? Furthermore, who might the individual be who merits such a title? Heaster suggests the High Priest, but this is totally at odds with the historical setting of the epistle. Most scholars date this epistle to the mid-90s A.D.²² and situate the audience in western Asia Minor.²³ The ethnic makeup of the audience has been described as "predominantly Gentile"²⁴ or "Gentile-Jewish."²⁵ It is hard to imagine why young Christian men in western Asia Minor, consisting of Gentiles and Diaspora Jews, would need to overcome the Jewish High Priest in any sense. Furthermore, if the date in the mid-90s is correct, then the Jewish high priesthood had ceased to exist over two decades earlier, making an identification of "the evil one" with the High Priest anachronistic.

Allfree's interpretation offers more promise, since it at least takes cues from the immediate context in 1 John 2:16. However, the syntax of the Greek does not support the association of "the evil one" (*ho poneros*, masculine) with "all that is in the world" (*pan to en to kosmo*, neuter). Note the distinction between the latter expression with "he who is in the world" (*ho en to kosmo*, masculine) in 1 John 4:4, which will be discussed later. If the writer intended us to read the description of sin in v. 16 back into "the evil one" in vv. 13-14, we would expect the gender to match.

There is nothing in the context of 1 John 2:13-14 that warrants overturning the identification of "the evil one" with the devil which is found in chapter 3 and elsewhere in the New Testament.

2.4. Proposed Interpretation

There is widespread agreement amongst scholars that "the evil one" here, as elsewhere in 1 John, refers to the devil.²⁶ Yarbrough notes the parallel between John's statement that the young men are "strong" and have overcome the evil one and Jesus' self-description in the Synoptic Gospels as the one "stronger" than the strong man (Satan) who overcomes him (Luke 11:21-22).²⁷

Marshall explains that the perfect tense of the verb *nikao* (overcome) indicates that

"The victory has already been won, although there is still fighting to be done. John is thinking of the victory over the evil one which takes place at conversion, a victory due to the power of Jesus who conquered Satan by his death and resurrection."²⁸

²² Kostenberger 2009: 94.

²³ Thatcher 2006: 419.

²⁴ Kostenberger 2009: 94.

²⁵ Joslin 2006: 8.

²⁶ Marshall 1978: 140; Kruse 2000: 91; Lieu 2008: 89.

²⁷ Yarbrough 2008: 122.

²⁸ Marshall 1978: 140.

Hiebert similarly argues that the perfect tense does not mean the battle is over, but that they stand assured of victory.²⁹

Putting this text together with the other references to overcoming in the epistle (1 John 4:4; 5:4-5; cf. John 16:33), Kruse concludes that

“[T]he author understands believers’ victory over the evil one to be achieved because God himself abides in them (he is greater than the evil one) and his Son, Jesus Christ, protects them, and as a result they are able to overcome the evil one through their faith in God. In the context of 1 John, where the forces of evil are arrayed against the faithful within the author’s community through the agency of the secessionists, to overcome the evil one is best understood as rejecting all that the secessionists stand for in belief and behaviour. This the readers do by remaining faithful to the message heard from the beginning.”³⁰

This interpretation is coherent in the context of 1 John and fits into the broader Johannine and New Testament testimony concerning the devil.

3. 1 John 3:8-12

3.1. Text

8 Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.
9 Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. 10 The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters. (1 John 3:8-12 NRSV)

This text closely parallels Jesus’ indictment of his opponents in John 8:44 and must be interpreted in light of that saying. Both passages describe the devil as a father in antithesis to God’s fatherhood. Both passages associate the devil with murder and declare him to be guilty of sin “from the beginning.” There are also differences between the two passages. John 8:44 emphasizes that the devil is a liar, while 1 John 3:8-12 does not; 1 John 3:8 emphasizes that Jesus came to destroy the devil’s works, which John 8 does not (though this idea arguably follows from John 12:31 and 16:11).

3.2. Christadelphian Exegesis

This passage has received considerable attention from Christadelphian works on the devil, probably because it uses the word *diabolos* and also because, like Hebrews 2:14, it relates the devil to the work of Christ. This has led to the same ‘argument from correlation’ used in Hebrews 2:14: because the devil shares certain characteristics with sin (such as being overcome by Christ’s death), the devil must *be* sin.

²⁹ Hiebert 1988: 430.

³⁰ Kruse 2000: 91.

Watkins appropriately discusses this text under the heading ‘The Way of Cain.’ He equates “the children of the devil” with “the seed of the serpent.”³¹ He explains that Cain was spiritually the offspring of the serpent, which is why he is said to be “of that wicked one”:

“Spiritually, Cain was the freeborn of the serpent, and the prototype of all wicked people. When Eve gave birth to Cain, she said, “I have gotten a man from the LORD” (Genesis 4:1). How wrong she was! This sinful child of sinful parents was spiritually a child of the serpent, or as John expresses it, he was “of that wicked one”. As such, he did not love his brother: he hated him and slew him. Cain was the first child of sinful parents; he was himself a sinner; in his sin he manifested, in a remarkable way, the deceitful and murderous tendencies of the serpent; he was, in a literal sense, the father of a wicked race.”³²

In order to fully comprehend Watkins’ point here, we must highlight his interpretation of the link between the serpent and the devil and Satan (a link which he acknowledges is made in texts such as Romans 16:20, 2 Corinthians 11, Revelation 12:9 and Revelation 20:2):

Watkins affirms that “in some way, the serpent is the devil and Satan.”³³ He expresses the way in which this is true thus:

“because the serpent was the first tempter, it became a symbol of that which thereafter tempted man – ungodly human desires: and two other names for ungodly human desires are the devil and Satan. The serpent of Eden is a symbol of ungodly human desires.”³⁴

Thus, for Watkins, 1 John is alluding, not so much to the literal serpent of Eden, as to the theological concept symbolized by the serpent (and the devil or wicked one), namely, ungodly human desires.

Burke understands “the devil” in this passage, as in John 8:44, to refer to Cain himself:

“The apostle John would later use this description of Cain in his own epistle, in the same context, confirming that it is Cain who is spoken of by Christ:

1 John 3:12 We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’ righteous.

Cain is therefore called the devil who is the father of those who think likewise.”³⁵

Heaster thinks that 1 John 3:12 alludes to John 8:44, which in turn alludes to the serpent. He also thinks it alludes to Cain; thus both the serpent and Cain were, in a sense, murderers.

“Cain was not a super-human person called the Devil, but an ordinary man. He characterized sin, the Devil. The way in which the fire consumed Abel’s offering but not

³¹ Watkins 1971: 29.

³² Watkins 1971: 30.

³³ Watkins 1971: 25.

³⁴ Watkins 1971: 26.

³⁵ Burke 2007: 66.

Cain's is paralleled by the fire burning up Elijah's offering but leaving those of the apostate Jewish Baal worshippers (1 Kings 18:19–40). This would associate Cain with apostate Jews, i.e. the Jewish Devil."³⁶

Ultimately, he thinks that what the Bible calls 'the Devil' is our natural, evil desires.³⁷ He explains this further with specific reference to the sin of lying:

"If we tell a lie, it is a result of the Devil, in the sense of our evil desires prompting us – not due to any force outside of us. Lying is one of those things that Jesus lists in Mk. 7:15, 21–23 as not entering a man from outside him, but originating from within him. The Devil is the 'father' of lies in the sense that they originate from within us – which is where the Biblical Devil is located."³⁸

He argues from the parallelism of 1 John 3:5 and 3:8 that "our sins" and "the works of the Devil" are the same."³⁹

Tennant similarly comments by comparing the term "the works of the flesh" from Galatians 5 with "the works of the devil" from 1 John 3 that "there is a strong connection between 'the flesh' and 'the devil.'"⁴⁰ He therefore argues that the only reasonable conclusion is that "the Devil has its roots in the flesh."

3.3. Evaluation of Christadelphian Exegesis

None of the Christadelphian interpretations of this passage take into account the cosmic dualism of the Johannine writings and apocalyptic Judaism. Instead, Christadelphian writers interpret 'the devil' on a purely anthropological level.

Burke's interpretation can be ruled out from a plain reading of the text. According to Burke, John means that Cain *was* the devil, whereas the text says is that Cain was *of* the evil one. The syntax here (*ek tou ponerou*), is identical to that in 1 John 3:8a except that *poneros* is substituted for *diabolos*. The context in vv. 9-10, together with John 8:44, makes it likely that this is the language of paternity. Cain was a child of the devil (a term also found in Acts 13:10); he was not the devil himself. Marshall writes, "The meaning of *ek tou diabolou* is not certain. It may express belonging to the devil or originating from him."⁴¹

Heaster's interpretation presupposes that 'the devil' here and elsewhere in Scripture is something within us and not a force outside of us. The only evidence he can marshal within this context is the parallel between Jesus' mission as described in v. 5 and v. 8. However, while this parallel may show a link between the devil and sin, it does not show that the devil *is* sin and not an external being. Similarly, Tennant may be correct to conclude by comparing the Pauline term "the works of the flesh" with the Johannine term "the works of the devil" that there is a strong

³⁶ Heaster 2012: 420.

³⁷ Heaster 2012: 161.

³⁸ Heaster 2012: 420.

³⁹ Heaster 2012: 161.

⁴⁰ Tennant 2004: 147.

⁴¹ Marshall 1978: 184 n. 29.

connection between the devil and the flesh. However, that there is a *connection* between the devil and the flesh does not imply that the devil *is* the flesh. To suggest otherwise is to commit a logical fallacy: “A is associated with B” does not imply that “A is B.” This fallacy was previously observed in Christadelphian interpretations of Hebrews 2:14 and James 4:7.

Watkins’ interpretation is complex. However, he offers virtually no biblical support for his assertion that the Edenic serpent became a symbol for ungodly human desires. He simply asserts it and then tries to assemble a coherent account of biblical satanology by reading various New Testament texts through this interpretive lens. However, it is not at all an obvious development that the serpent – something external to Adam and Eve – should come to symbolize an aspect of internal human nature. Genesis 3:15 certainly provides no hint of such a development.

Moreover, in the New Testament texts that most plainly link the serpent to Satan (2 Corinthians 11 and Revelation 12 and 20), it is clear that Satan does not denote ‘ungodly human desires.’ Unsurprisingly, while Watkins appeals to 2 Corinthians 11 to establish the link between the serpent and Satan, he does not return to it after giving his explanation of the nature of this link. In Revelation 12 and 20, he identifies “the dragon” to be a human government which is *characterized* by ungodly lusts as conveyed by its other names, “the ancient serpent, the devil, and Satan.”⁴² This is not the place for a detailed critique of his exegesis of Revelation 12 and 20. However, the word ‘Satan’ here is not merely a descriptive label which conveys “an impression of the magnitude and universality of this symbol of ungodly lusts.”⁴³ The dragon *is* the one and only Satan, who takes concrete actions (Revelation 20:7-8) and cannot possibly denote an abstract concept such as ‘ungodly human desires.’ Thus Watkins’ view of the link between the serpent and Satan breaks down in the very texts which establish this link.

Returning to 1 John 3:8-12 (and its sister text, John 8:44), the link between the devil and primeval history is only implicit, so it would require great imagination to claim that John is here unveiling the teaching that the Edenic serpent came to symbolize ungodly human desires. Watkins’ view that the serpent came to symbolize an abstract theological concept which is also denoted by the term ‘devil’ stands unsubstantiated.

However, Watkins’ interpretation does make one important contribution. There is an implicit reference to the Edenic serpent in John 8:44 and 1 John 3:8-12, and yet it is clear from the descriptions of ‘the devil’ as still active in the present that it does not refer the literal snake that tempted Eve. The writer is definitely reading some later theological development back into the Genesis narrative. But what is it?

3.4. Proposed Interpretation

3.4.1. Dualistic Antithesis

There are three main points about the devil that are made in this text. The first concerns the metaphorical fatherhood of the devil over the wicked, which is antithetical to the fatherhood of God over the righteous. The second concerns the ancient history of the devil: he has been

⁴² Watkins 1971: 42.

⁴³ Watkins 1971: 42.

sinning from the beginning, and Cain was 'of' him. The third concerns the work of Christ in relation to the devil: the Son of God appeared to destroy the devil's works.

The antithesis between God and the devil here is a statement of cosmic dualism typical of apocalyptic Judaism. Similar antitheses between God and the devil can be found elsewhere in the New Testament (Matthew 13:38-39; John 8:42-44; Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 4:4; James 4:7). Indeed, Von Wahlde notes how 1 John 3:8 expresses the purpose of Jesus' ministry in apocalyptic terms:

"It is very close to the Synoptic view of the ministry as reasserting the Kingdom (kingly power) of God over against Satan. In overall orientation it is quite similar to Mark 1:24."⁴⁴

Concerning 'from the beginning, Marshall comments:

"The present tense is used of an activity begun in the past and still continuing. *ap' arches* may mean: (1) from the beginning of the devil's existence...(2) from the beginning of human sin...(3) 'all along'...Probably view (3) should be adopted, although John has the story of the fall in mind."⁴⁵

3.4.2. Allusion to early Genesis

In light of this phrase and the allusion to Cain, there is a clear reference to primeval history as described in early Genesis. This demonstrates that the devil for John is a mythical figure (using the term 'myth' in the broadest sense without pejorative connotations). John 8:44 specifies that the sins which the devil has committed from the beginning are chiefly murder and lies. The account of Cain's sins in Genesis 4:8-9 mentions both murder and lying. Thus, since Cain's murder is explicitly mentioned in 1 John 3:12 and the serpent is not explicitly mentioned in either John 8:44 or 1 John 3, it is possible that John only has Cain in view in his reference to "the beginning" and not the fall in Eden. However, since the serpent's murderous lie was the truly prototypical sin,⁴⁶ it is likely that John alludes both to the serpent and to Cain.

The likelihood that 'the devil' here is identified with the Edenic serpent increases when one takes the assertion that Cain was "of the evil one" as parallel to the seed of the serpent in Genesis 3:15. Cain was the progeny of the evil one, i.e. the seed of the serpent, as are the false teachers in John's community. However, the theological significance of the serpent in Genesis 3 is greater than its being the figurative parent of subsequent sinners. It is the *serpent itself* that will bruise and be bruised, according to Genesis 3:15. Similarly, it is the *devil himself* who continues to lie and sin, according to John 8:44 and 1 John 3:8, and whose works Jesus came to destroy. Thus the serpent in Genesis 3 denotes something more than a literal snake.

Watkins acknowledged this much, but did not offer any convincing evidence from Scripture to support his view that the serpent came to denote the abstract concept of evil desires. He also did not provide evidence that his interpretation had precedents in ancient Judaism or early Christianity.

⁴⁴ Von Wahlde 2010: 108.

⁴⁵ Marshall 1978: 184 n. 30.

⁴⁶ See Jobes 2014: 146.

An alternative – indeed, the alternative that Arnold calls the unanimous early Christian interpretation of Genesis 3⁴⁷ – is that the serpent is to be identified with Satan or the devil, a supernatural being.

3.4.3. Interpretation of the Edenic Serpent in ancient Judaism and early Christianity

According to Carr,

“From the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E. early Jewish interpreters added layers of interpretation to the stories of Genesis that were presupposed as parts of the text by later believers. Thanks to these early interpretations of the book, many later readers presupposed that the snake in the garden was Satan (e.g. Apoc. Mos. 16:4; 17:4).”⁴⁸

The identification of the serpent with a supernatural being was certainly not universal. Kugel mentions a number of ancient interpreters who “maintained that this snake was simply a snake, albeit an unusual one,” such as the Book of Jubilees, Philo, and Josephus.⁴⁹ To this Collins adds that in the Dead Sea Scrolls, “The serpent is never identified as the devil, and indeed he receives no attention at all.”⁵⁰

Kugel continues:

“Other interpreters, however, saw the snake as Satan (or Satan’s agent), or some other devil-like figure in disguise. This identification not only explained why this particular snake talked and was smarter than all other creatures, but also was reinforced by God’s words to the snake at the end of the story:

‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he [mankind] shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.’ (Gen. 3:15)

It seemed most unlikely that the Bible here was really concerned with future relations between humans and snakes...Instead, many interpreters concluded that these words were addressed to the eternal Tempter with whom humanity would forever be pitted in an unending struggle. (1 Enoch 69:6; Apocalypse of Moses 16:4, 17:4; 4 Maccabees 18:7-8; 2 Enoch 31:4-6; Revelation 12:9; 20:2; 3 Baruch (Slavonic) 4:8; 3 Baruch (Greek) 9:7; Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 103; Apocalypse of Sedrach 4:5; Testimony of Truth 47:3-6; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Gen. 3:6).”⁵¹

Other texts can be added to Kugel’s list. He thinks Wisdom of Solomon 2:23-24 may belong in the list, though he notes that some interpreters take this text as referring to the story of Cain rather than the events in Eden.⁵² He also notes Origen’s claim that the Ascension of Moses had

⁴⁷ Arnold 2009: 61.

⁴⁸ Carr 2011: 328.

⁴⁹ Kugel 2009: 98-99.

⁵⁰ Collins 2012: 173.

⁵¹ Kugel 2011: 99-100.

⁵² Kugel 2009: 100 n. 1.

attributed the serpent's speech to the devil's inspiration (though this text is no longer extant).⁵³ Besides these texts, Boyd adds Psalms of Solomon 4:9,⁵⁴ and Williams adds the Greek Life of Adam and Eve 17:1-4.⁵⁵

There is thus considerable evidence that Jews and Christians before, during and shortly after the New Testament period interpreted the serpent to be the agent or disguise of a supernatural tempter. These included writers of New Testament books.

We have seen that Kugel included Revelation 12 and 20 in his list of texts. Tonstad elaborates:

“The identity of the serpent in the setting of the original temptation, a vexing question to Old Testament expositors, is a lesser concern from the vantage point of Revelation. With an eye to this text Revelation gives the adversary in the cosmic conflict the title ‘the ancient serpent’, explaining that this character is also ‘the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world’ (Rev. 12:9; 20:2). Suggestions favouring a psychological reading of the temptation may suffice in the setting of Genesis, but this option seems closed from the perspective of Revelation and its resolve to pinpoint the identity of the cosmic antagonist. The eagerness to see the incident purely in anthropological terms is contradicted by evidence to the contrary in the text itself and in the relation it holds to other texts.”⁵⁶

Williams argues that Paul presupposes Satan's involvement in the Garden of Eden in Romans 16:20 and 2 Corinthians 11, and that his interpretation of Genesis 3 is mediated by traditional Jewish interpretations which are known to us through texts such as the Testament of Simeon 6:5-6 (in the case of Romans 16:20)⁵⁷ and the Life of Adam and Eve (in the case of 2 Corinthians 11).⁵⁸

As to our present text in 1 John 3:8-12, Marshall comments that John “is making the identification between the devil and the serpent which we find in Revelation 12:9; 20:2.”⁵⁹ Thus, it would appear that John stands with other early Christian interpreters who interpreted the Edenic serpent as an agent or manifestation of the supernatural devil. Indeed, if Revelation was written by the author of 1 John, this is virtually indisputable.

A relevant question here is whether the satanic interpretation of the serpent in Genesis 3 which we are ascribing to these New Testament writers is actually valid from the vantage point of Genesis. A number of conservative exegetes have argued that it is, and the reader is referred to their arguments.⁶⁰ Most exegetes of Genesis 3 using the historical-critical method of

⁵³ Kugel 2009: 124. This text will be discussed further in Part 4 of this series since Origen also claimed it was the source of the allusion in Jude 9.

⁵⁴ Boyd 1997: 155.

⁵⁵ Williams 2009: 89-90.

⁵⁶ Tonstad 2006: 103.

⁵⁷ Williams 2009: 93-94. See also Boyd 1997: 155.

⁵⁸ Williams 2009: 89-90. See Farrar 2014(1): 25-27.

⁵⁹ Marshall 1978: 185.

⁶⁰ Boyd 1997: 155-157; Rydelnik 2010: 136-140; Noll 2003: 96-102; McKeown 2008: 38-39; Reno 2010: 77-84. Notably, Reno deals with theological objections to the notion that an angel could have precipitated the Fall, such as those raised by Watkins (1971: 16).

interpretation do not see justification for reading Satan back into the text. However, some, such as Skinner, have recognized that the serpent possesses supernatural characteristics, which he thinks reflects “an earlier form of the legend in which [the serpent] figured as a god or demon.”⁶¹ While conservatives may not find his explanation convincing, they can agree with him that a purely natural encounter between a snake and two humans fails to account for the details of the Genesis narrative.

In any case, the historical-critical basis for seeing Satan behind the serpent in Genesis 3 is of secondary importance here. For those with a high view of Scripture,

“the explicit designation of the serpent as Satan by later inspired New Testament authors is enough to settle the question on a theological level, however one interprets the author’s original intent.”⁶²

Indeed, Christadelphians such as Watkins acknowledge that there is a theological link between the serpent and Satan and that Genesis 3:15 is about more than relations between humans and snakes. Conservative scholars and Christadelphians alike are already committed to a Messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15 that is not endorsed by critical scholarship.⁶³

In summary, the interpretation of ‘the devil’ and ‘the evil one’ in 1 John 3:8-12 as a supernatural personal coheres with the worldview reflected in the Fourth Gospel and the interpretation of early Genesis in numerous apocalyptic Jewish writings, the Pauline epistles, and Revelation.

4. 1 John 4:4

4.1. Text

1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. 4 Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; **for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.** They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:1-6 NRSV, emphasis added)

4.2. Christadelphian Exegesis

None of the Christadelphian works on the devil that I consulted made any reference to this text. There appears to be no awareness of the possibility that this passage may refer to the devil.

⁶¹ Skinner 1930: 71-72.

⁶² Boyd 1997: 155.

⁶³ A Messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15 is actually affirmed in Article 7 of the Christadelphian Statement of Faith.

4.3. Proposed Exegesis

1 John 4:4 is a classic statement of the “modified dualism” of the Johannine worldview. While it is clearly dualistic in contrasting “the one who is in you” with “the one who is in the world,” it also emphasizes that one of these powers is greater than the other.

Who is “the one who is in the world”? Three views are expressed in scholarship:

- 1) “The one who is in the world” is ‘the spirit of antichrist’ of v. 3 or ‘the spirit of error’ of v. 6.⁶⁴
- 2) “The one who is in the world” is the antichrist.⁶⁵
- 3) “The one who is in the world” is the devil.⁶⁶

Proponents of these three views tend to identify “the one who is in you” as either the Spirit of Truth, Jesus Christ, or God, respectively.

The first view can actually be ruled out on grammatical grounds, because the definite article (functioning as a pronoun) in v. 4 is masculine whereas the word *pneuma* (spirit) is neuter:

“The use of the masculine definite article (*ho*) to signify 'the one' in you and 'the one' in the world rules out identifying the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Error.”⁶⁷

Von Wahlde asserts that the writer meant to refer to the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Antichrist in v. 4 but that he made a grammatical error in using the masculine gender. This hardly seems likely.⁶⁸

In favour of the second view, ‘the antichrist’ is the nearest evil masculine antecedent to v. 4. Lieu explains her reasoning for identifying ‘the one who is in the world’ as the antichrist:

“The author does not identify the ‘greater’ one who is in them, or the one in the world, but the masculine in each case serves to focus the conflict not as between abstract forces, nor as one between the spirits (neuter), **but as a personal one** in which the audience are also participants. The one who is in them is presumably either God (cf. 3:20) or Jesus – the author would have seen even less reason here than elsewhere to belabor the distinction. The continuity from verse 3 suggests that the one in the world is the antichrist, but now viewed not in terms of its manifestations in their immediate experience (2:18-19) but as the chief antagonist in a mythic struggle whose last stage is now being played out. That elsewhere the author can speak of victory over the evil one or even over the world (2:13; 5:4-5) does not mean that the antichrist is the evil one or the devil, nor that the

⁶⁴ So Kostenberger 2009: 455.

⁶⁵ Lieu 1991: 87; Kelly 2006: 162-163; Painter 2008: 255; Jobes 2014: 182. Kelly thinks the antichrist is the more likely candidate for the referent, but acknowledges that “perhaps” the referent is the devil.

⁶⁶ Kruse 2000: 91; Thatcher 2006: 476. Thatcher notes that “The relationship between Satan and the Antichrist in this context is not clear, and perhaps John did not distinguish them carefully. Both represent evil and opposition to God, so that either can be identified as the spiritual force that leads the world and the Antichrists away from truth.”

⁶⁷ Painter 2008: 255; so also Jobes 2014: 182.

⁶⁸ Von Wahlde 2010: 145.

world, as the place of all human experience, is itself inherently evil. In his scheme of things, these labels are different modes of expressing the same conflictual worldview, sharing the same allegiance and embodying the same hostility and danger that face the readers.”⁶⁹

In favour of identifying “the one who is in the world” as the devil, one notes that elsewhere in the epistle, the ultimate dualistic contrast is between God and the devil (1 John 3:10; 5:18-19). The devil is also the one who is “overcome” in 1 John 2:13-14, just as the false prophets in whom this “one” dwells are “overcome” in 1 John 4:4.⁷⁰ Furthermore, as Kelly notes, “the concluding summary of the Epistle [1 John 5:19] asserts a connection between the World and DEVIL.”⁷¹ So too, Kruse asserts that the language of 1 John 4:4 suggests “an identification with ‘the prince of this world’ mentioned in the Fourth Gospel.”⁷² (Kruse 148)

In the end, we cannot be certain whether the writer is referring to the antichrist or the devil in 1 John 4:4. Indeed the distinction is not so important, because the two are clearly related (as 2 Thessalonians 2:2-9 and Revelation 13:2 also assert). Painter notes:

“While not mentioning the Evil One, 4:1-6 deals with recognizing and distinguishing the Spirit of God (4:1), the Spirit of Truth (4:6), from the Spirit of the Antichrist (4:3), the Spirit of Error (4:6). We may suspect that the Spirit of Error is also the Spirit of the Evil One.”⁷³

Thus, regardless of whether 1 John 4:4 refers to the devil directly, the cosmic conflict between God and the devil is clearly in view here.

5. 1 John 5:18-19

5.1. Text

18 We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them. 19 We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one. (1 John 5:18-19 NRSV)

5.2. Christadelphian Exegesis

In some instances, Christadelphian writers follow the old KJV reading of 1 John 5:19b: “The whole world lieth in wickedness.”⁷⁴ However, even the KJV renders *ho poneros* with ‘that wicked one’ in 1 John 5:18, while nearly all modern translations render this phrase with ‘the evil one’ in both v. 18 and v. 19.

⁶⁹ Lieu 2008: 171, emphasis added.

⁷⁰ This link is noted by Jobes 2014: 106.

⁷¹ Kelly 2006: 162-163.

⁷² Kruse 2000: 148.

⁷³ Painter 2008: 324.

⁷⁴ Tennant 2004: 154; Heaster 2012: 445, 501.

While Heaster sometimes follows the KJV reading of v. 19, in one place he interprets this text as referring to a particular ‘Satan’. He understands this ‘Satan’ to refer to a particular human being, the one referred to as “the ruler of this world” in John’s Gospel; perhaps the High Priest.⁷⁵

5.3. Evaluation of Christadelphian Exegesis

Heaster’s interpretation of 1 John 5:19 as referring to a particular human being is purely conjectural and shows no understanding of the broader context of Johannine cosmic dualism.

5.4. Proposed Interpretation

1 John 5:18-19 reaffirms ideas asserted elsewhere in John’s writings (and throughout the New Testament): that the devil stands defeated by the redemptive work of Christ and powerless over the redeemed (John 12:31; 16:11; 1 John 2:13-14; 3:8; 4:4), but also that the devil continues to hold sway over the unredeemed in ‘the world’ (John 8:44; 1 John 3:10-12; 4:4; as also the term ‘ruler of this world’ implies). Kostenberger summarizes the point:

“In 1 John 5:18, it is affirmed that ‘the evil one’ cannot harm those who have been born of God, in keeping with John’s teaching on Christian assurance (cf. John 10:27-30). While still in control of the world, the domain of darkness (1 John 5:19), and the spiritual father of the unregenerate (e.g., 3:12) the devil is a defeated foe whose eventual doom is sure (see Rev 20:7-10).”⁷⁶

6. Conclusion

The several references to the devil in 1 John display the same worldview which characterizes the Gospel of John, featuring modified dualism and cosmic conflict between God and Christ on the one hand and Satan on the other. The epistle’s focus is pragmatic and as such does not provide much detail about the devil. Nevertheless, the information that is provided is sufficient to demonstrate that the writer held the devil to be a supernatural personal being who has been defeated by Christ but still wields power over the world. Furthermore, it is evident that the writer accepted the interpretation of Genesis 3 found in numerous other Jewish and Christian texts of the period, which attributed the temptation of Eve not merely to a reptilian animal but to the devil himself.

⁷⁵ Heaster 2012: 502.

⁷⁶ Kostenberger 2009: 281.

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