

The Troubling Acts of God: Did God or Satan Make David Sin? An Analysis of 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21

Mako A. Nagasawa

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^{2 Samuel 24:1} Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'

^{1 Chronicles 21:1} Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.

The Problems Stated

The narratives of 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 raise the question of agency and, behind that question, the question of the character of God. The question of agency begins like this: When the biblical writers say that God 'incited David' or that Satan 'moved David' to do this, are they saying that they took over David's will, momentarily or otherwise? Can God and/or Satan do that? What is the relationship between human free will and the agency of spiritual beings like God and Satan? Or did God or Satan merely influence David to take a census of Israel in some other way? If so, how? And behind the question of agency lies the question of God's character: How do these two statements above – referring as they do to both God and Satan – fit together? Does God's agency trigger Satan's activity? Is God – who claims to be 100% good – partially evil, such that 'Satan' may as well be a pseudonym for some attribute of God that is dark and mysterious? By acting through Satan, has God merely created a convenient legal fiction by which to test and tempt people without sully His own hands? What is the relationship between God and Satan?

I have been moved to write this paper because the commentaries and particular reflections I have read on it have not been as thoughtful and as thorough as I would like. For example, several commentators make Satan sound like a convenient legal fiction for God. Yes it is true that Satan is still God's Satan, but what that means must be very carefully defined. Some commentators don't even explicitly explore the unique role of Israel within the covenant, which is the only basis for God disciplining Israel in the first place, and which was not and is not meant to be duplicated by any other people group. We are not meant to read ourselves into their story. Nor are we meant to read God's activity out from that story into our every life circumstance. I am concerned that wrong assumptions are made very often about God's will, the role of Israel, and the role of David. So I will try to set forth my understanding in the hopes that this will correct some misinterpretations and bad impressions people have had as they have stumbled upon this issue.

The Fall of Melkor in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*: A Reflection on a Story of Good vs. Evil

Let me state my position on agency up front, and substantiate it as I write. David had free will, the Israelites had free will, and God and Satan played the role of influencers, but not in a mechanistic and causal sense so as to override David's agency or the Israelites' agency. In a larger sense, this is true of all human beings. The Hebrew words 'moved' and 'incited' which are found in the narratives of Samuel and Chronicles do not settle the question; they simply raise it. The question must be answered by visiting other texts, patterns, and theological concerns.

When I was a child, my father read me books at bedtime. He read me J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and the first two books of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I thought they were amazing stories back then. As an adult, I've found Tolkien – a devout and thoughtful Catholic believer since he was a boy – to have some of the most amazing insights into spiritual truth I've ever read. One of them is his story of God's creation of Earth, and God's struggle with evil, recounted in *The Silmarillion*. In this story, God's name is Iluvatar, and he creates all things through his song. He creates the Ainur, the angels, and they sing with him. Together their music fills the void. Tolkien writes, 'For a great while it seemed good to him, for in the music there were no flaws.'¹ But then, one of the most powerful of the angels, named Melkor, becomes impatient, wants to create things on his own, and so he starts to sing a discordant melody. The two songs clash. Here is how Tolkien describes that clash:

'Straightway discord arose about him, and many that sang nigh him grew despondent, and their thought was disturbed and their music faltered; but some began to attune their music to his rather than to the thought which they had at first. Then the

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p.16

discord of Melkor spread ever wider, and the melodies which had been heard before foundered in a sea of turbulent sound. But Iluvatar sat and hearkened until it seemed that about his throne there was a raging storm, as of dark waters that made war one upon another in an endless wrath that would not be assuaged.

‘Then Iluvatar arose, and the Ainur perceived that he smiled; and he lifted up his left hand, and a new theme began amid the storm, like and yet unlike to the former theme, and it gathered power and had new beauty. But the discord of Melkor rose in uproar and contended with it, and again there was a war of sound more violent than before, until many of the Ainur were dismayed and sang no longer, and Melkor had the mastery. Then again Iluvatar arose, and the Ainur perceived that his countenance was stern; and he lifted up his right hand and behold! A third theme grew amid the confusion, and it was unlike the others. For it seemed at first soft and sweet, a mere rippling of gentle sounds in delicate melodies; but it could not be quenched, and it took to itself power and profundity. And it seemed at last that there were two musics progressing at one time before the seat of Iluvatar, and they were utterly at variance. The one was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came. The other had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern.

‘In the midst of this strife, whereat the halls of Iluvatar shook and a tremor ran out into the silences yet unmoved, Iluvatar arose a third time, and his face was terrible to behold. Then he raised up both his hands, and in one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Iluvatar, the Music ceased.

‘Then Iluvatar spoke, and he said: ‘Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor; but that he may know, and all the Ainur, that I am Iluvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.’²

This is one of the most powerful and beautiful illustrations of the struggle between God and evil that I know. I use this story from Tolkien as a limited illustration God’s interaction with other beings, including beings intent upon disobeying Him. Tolkien’s account of the creation involves the historical, not merely philosophical, explanation for evil, and how it will one day be defeated. It serves me well here in explaining the questions of agency and God’s character with respect to the passages from 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 which I mentioned above.

The sheer number of parallels Tolkien’s story has to the biblical story is impressive. (1) Tolkien has one eternally existing God, Iluvatar, as the biblical story has one God. (2) Iluvatar creates the angels through a verbal means, singing, as God creates everything by a verbal means, speaking. (3) Iluvatar desires goodness and harmony in the universe, as God clearly does by the order He builds into creation. (4) Iluvatar allows the angels freedom, as God implicitly does. This explains why (5) Iluvatar is not the author of evil, as God is not the author of evil. Rather, (6) that role falls to a disobedient angel named Melkor, the Satan figure. Finally, (7) Iluvatar commits himself to overcoming the dissonance introduced by Melkor, using the motif of the song, as God commits himself to overcoming the dissonance introduced by Satan, using the motif of the spoken word-promise. Further reflection on some of the aspects of the story deepens the parallel, but reveals some limitations of the analogy.

Telling God Apart from Other Beings: God Acts by His Word

The first positive aspect of this analogy is Tolkien’s use of singing as a way to distinguish between the activity of God and the activity of Satan/evil. While singing is not the method God actually used to create the universe, singing explicitly denotes both structure/order and freedom/creativity, and we are very familiar with this phenomenon. In order to make music meaningful, there must be a basic structure and order regarding tempo, melody, chord progression, and underneath all that, a mathematical distance between notes that must be unalterable lest dissonance occur. On the other hand, to also make music meaningful, especially when multiple musicians are involved, there must be a wide range of creativity and freedom allowed. These two elements – order and freedom – must coexist within a song. There is a dynamic interaction between them, and, one might even say, an ideal convergence of the two *that we intuitively appreciate*. In the Genesis account, there is clearly both order and freedom in God’s handiwork, but also encouraged by God of life and humankind. There is order: Day does not violate the night, and vice versa; species reproduce ‘after their kind,’ i.e. they stay within their categories and do not intermingle (Daniel’s twisted beasts represents a creation gone mad). At the same time, there is freedom: God gives Adam the task of cultivating a garden; God allows Adam to name the animals; God gives Adam choices between multiple good things.

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p.16 – 17

At the same time, of course, singing also conveys a great sense of disharmony when the basic harmony is violated. In the case of the ‘good angels,’ and, by extension, all ‘good beings,’ singing in harmony with the true melody represents faithful obedience to God. Yet in the case of Melkor and, by extension, all who sin, singing in disharmony represents willful and arrogant disobedience to the rhythm and cadence established by Iluvatar.

Tolkien’s insight into the nature of evil is profound yet elegantly put. Evil is ‘loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated.’ It has ‘little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes.’ Tolkien shows us the cancerous nature of evil because evil possesses only a vague originality and is actually a mere response to something good prior to it. For instance, Satan could only twist and corrupt God’s word, making it seem false, introducing the idea that another reality can overcome God’s reality. Hence evil is an attempt to influence others to join one’s own melody. Evil attempts to drown out God, but cannot. It seeks to be as captivating and melodious as God’s goodness, but it cannot be so.

Tolkien’s vision of redemption, moreover, is portrayed as a third melody that is deep and wide and powerful, responding to the presence of evil, which is allowed to coexist for a time, but capturing the highest triumphs of the evil melody into its own song before emerging victorious. In Genesis, God’s victory is put forward in categories that reinforce but amplify the creation order. Who will be victorious over the serpent? A man, the ‘seed of the woman’ (Gen.3:14 – 15). It will not be an angel or other created being, but a man. This is important because *a human* was originally placed at the highest point in creation under God, and given rule and dominion and authority. It must therefore be *a human* who will vanquish evil and restore God’s good creation. The creational design will be maintained, implicitly restoring humanity itself to its intended place of honor. Furthermore, the highest triumph of evil, the bruising of this man’s heel, will become the occasion for this man to bruise the serpent on the head, just as the most brazen note of Melkor’s song is taken captive by the deeper and stronger song of Iluvatar. That is, this man will deliver the fatal blow. This sets the pattern for God’s victory: God will be victorious because His creation will be restored in an amplified way.

The main drawback of using this story as an analogy to the biblical story is that a song is not the same as the promise-fulfillment pattern established by God’s speech-acts. In Genesis 1, God acts by His word. The pattern of God speaking and then acting is a dominant pattern in the Old Testament. This pattern helps us know what God does and what people do, and how to separate them. Ten times God spoke in Genesis 1 to bring about life and bless life.

1. ^{1:3} Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.
2. ^{1:6} Then God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’
3. ^{1:9} Then God said, ‘Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear’; and it was so.
4. ^{1:11} Then God said, ‘Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them’; and it was so.
5. ^{1:14} Then God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years;¹⁵ and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth’; and it was so.
6. ^{1:20} Then God said, ‘Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.’
7. ^{1:22} God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’
8. ^{1:24} Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind’; and it was so.
9. ^{1:26} Then God said, ‘Let Us make man 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.’ ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.
10. ^{1:28} 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.’

To Abraham, God said, ‘I will redeem my people Israel from bondage’ (Genesis 15:13 – 14), and then He did it. Every time God acted, He spoke about it first beforehand. As God engaged with human beings, He always spoke to some human beings first, who then proclaimed that word, and eventually God would fulfill His word. This gave rise to what Israel called ‘prophecy.’

Amos summarized this pattern in Amos 3:7, 'Surely the LORD God will do nothing except that which He reveals to His servants the prophets.' Many people ignore that verse and this pattern, partly because (once again) they are too influenced by Augustine's monergism (God causes all), or Aristotle's idea of a primal cause that causes all other effects (God set up all dominos and then pushed the first one), as they defend a view of God's sovereignty that makes God the direct cause of everything that happens, both good and evil. Yet Amos did not say, 'Surely the LORD God is causing everything to happen that does happen, so that everything is a reflection of God's will and God's character.' This is absolutely important, because human beings have a tendency to attribute things to God that He has not spoken about. They seem to believe that they can see 'behind' Scripture to discern a terrible secret the text does not tell. But God is not *causing* human evil – abuse, negligence, or whatever – of any sort, in any way. Rather, God has granted human beings a genuine will with genuine choices, so other beings – Satan and human beings – are responsible for evil.

This is the doctrine of the *sovereignty of God's word*. God's *word* is sovereign. God is sovereign *through His word*. There is nothing that can stop God from fulfilling His word. So, it is a mistake to say that God caused any and all circumstances – especially moral evil – at any point in time, because God does not claim such a responsibility in the Scriptures. That kind of naïve doctrine of the meticulous sovereignty of *God*, which makes God the effectual cause of everything, is very different from a doctrine of the sovereignty of *God's word*. The doctrine of the meticulous sovereignty of *God*, or the omni-causality of God, which sees God as causing the totality of history and human choices, is quite foreign to the biblical characterization of God.

God's relationship with biblical Israel was exceptional. Within His covenant with Israel, which was a dynamic relation framed by His spoken promises and warnings, God took a more active role to shape Israel. He acted supernaturally in their midst, or exposed them to the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. These more dynamic actions on God's part were also part of His spoken word. But many readers mistakenly see God's hand behind every geo-political, natural, or supernatural event in their own lives, and then mistakenly read themselves into the role of biblical Israel. That is a fundamentally flawed way to read the biblical story. It comes from a fundamental laziness on the part of readers to recognize the uniqueness of Israel as it played out throughout the biblical story. I will explain how to understand the role of Israel and God's relation to Israel, below.

God's reliability to act according to His word forms the basis for hope – hope that God will be faithful to His word. In the case of Israel, it is hope that God will be faithful to His covenant promise to them. God's word-act serves as a reliable way to trace God's actions through history (e.g. Amos 3:7). God will still be victorious in history and bring His good plans to fruition because He has *said* that He will be victorious over evil. These declarations start ringing from God's declaration in Genesis 3:14 – 15, get amplified through the prophets, find a new climax in the life and teaching of Jesus, and are anticipated by Revelation 20 – 21. In Tolkien's saga, the loss of the divine word-act seems to prevent Iluvatar from communicating to beings in the world once Middle Earth's history begins. Note that Tolkien's account occurs as a dialogue between Iluvatar and Melkor *prior* to the creation of the world of Middle Earth; in that sense, it is outside of earthly time. God's pronouncement, however, occurs within the flow of historical time in our world. Hence, God's intervention and hope features more strongly in the Bible than it does in Tolkien's Middle Earth saga. Within the flow of our time, God has assured us by His word – and ultimately by His Word made flesh – that He will be victorious over evil. While Tolkien's saga might ultimately be compatible with the biblical story, in that it talks around the biblical story and leaves open what the biblical story purports to explain – as an avid Tolkien fan, I entertain such a possibility – I will have to leave that question aside and return to the questions at hand concerning the incident in the life of David.

God Enlisted Israel's Voluntary Partnership: Human Agency and the Role of Israel

If God acts by speaking, then it follows that He can distinguish His own actions from human actions by speaking about them first. That is why human activity can – and must – be distinguished from God's activity. God simply does not take causal responsibility for the choices of other beings. This is especially true of human beings, who God made in His image (Gen.1:26 – 28). If one of the qualities of God is that He is not coerced by some force outside Himself, then that suggests that human beings, made in the image of God, are also not coerced by a force outside ourselves, even God Himself. We are called to respond in love for God personally, voluntarily, and not mechanically. This includes David and the Israelites.

Although much more can and should be said about this question of agency, this pattern of God's speech-acts is the first reason why I reject Augustine's *monergism*. *Monergism* is a Latin word that means 'one will.' Augustine (354 – 430 AD), the great theologian, preacher, and bishop of Hippo in Roman North Africa, may have concluded in his later years that God's will negated human free will, although this is debated. It is worth noting, for example, that Protestants and Catholics tend to differ on how best to interpret Augustine, since the younger Augustine affirmed the reality of human free will along with all the other early Christian theologians like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzus, and others.³ Roman Catholics tend to read Augustine in such a way that God's will and human will are not mutually exclusive, though I remain unsure of the overall coherence of this proposal. Protestants, however, especially those influenced by John Calvin, tend to hold to the *monergist* position, and read Augustine through that lens. In that framework, God activates a person and leads that person straight on to do His will. Obviously, that has immediate bearing on how we would have to read this incident in the life of King David. Monergist theologians will insist that human beings still have moral responsibility for their choices, despite the prior action of God upon them that led them irrevocably to do this or that. For an example, see Appendix A, below, where I reproduce a short essay written by Calvinist theologian R.C. Sproul on this passage. I see this as problematic. I remain dissatisfied by monergism for its late appearance in the history of Christian theology (Augustine was its first exponent four hundred years after Christ), its negative implications for the character of God by making God the direct cause of human evil, its irrational gaps to try to protect God's goodness nevertheless, and its inability to adequately explain why the biblical text seems to presume and teach the reality of human free will in the face of God's commands and invitations.

The classical Christian term for holding God's will and human together is called *synergism*. Synergism means 'working together with.' In this view, the human will is called to freely work with God's will and partner with God. This is the current view of the Eastern Orthodox communion. It was clearly articulated as the traditional Christian view by John Cassian (~360 – 435 AD), who was a contemporary of Augustine who wrote in response to him regarding the latter's written debate with the heretic Pelagius.⁴ John Cassian was no lightweight figure. He was a theologian of the first rank, who was called upon by the Archdeacon of Rome to write the orthodox reply to Nestorius. He transmitted the wisdom of the Christian Desert Fathers from the monasteries of Egypt and became the monastic leader of the Abbey of St. Victor, near present-day Marseilles in southern France. He was the first to start a monastic movement for both men and women in the Christian West. He was the primary influence on the great monastic leader St. Benedict, who recommended to his monks that they read the works of Cassian. In a moving chapter in a work on spiritual practices, John Cassian writes that God works graciously towards us and in us in such a way so as to enable genuinely free human choices. This is the definition of *synergism*. This is especially important since the fall, when Adam and Eve corrupted their human nature and, in the Eastern Orthodox doctrine known as 'ancestral sin,' passed that genetic corruption down to all of us. Although we now bear an image of God that is tarnished, have desires that are wayward and unruly, and thoughts and emotions that are self-centered, God nevertheless acts within us in such a way so as to enable us to make a genuinely freely choice about Himself, especially Himself as revealed in Jesus Christ. Hence, in the synergism model, a person comes to believe in Jesus by the grace of God. But a person may also freely reject Jesus by the grace of God. Of course, God calls all people to *work together with* His will; hence the term 'synergism.'

These larger issues are important to state because mere exegesis of the words 'incited' and 'moved' would prove indeterminate. The only other occurrence in Chronicles where the word 'moved' appears is with respect to God being 'moved' by a prayer:

¹² When [Manasseh] was in distress, he entreated the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. ¹³ When he prayed to Him, He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God. (2 Chr.33:12 – 13)

³ See my quotations in 'Human Free Will in the Early Church Fathers' here: <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-free-will-in-patristics.pdf>

⁴ John Cassian, *Conference 13*. See also Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, first edition 1950, second edition 1968), ch.4. See also the dialog between John Hendrix, founder of the website www.monergism.com, and Clifton Healy, an Eastern Orthodox lay theologian, at <http://benedictseraphim.wordpress.com/2005/03/31/st-john-cassian-on-grace-and-free-will/>

Given this second instance of the word ‘moved,’ in what sense, then, can we say that Satan ‘moved’ David to number Israel (1 Chr.21:1)? When we compare the two incidents, the evidence leans us in the direction of influence but not causal determination. God was surely not acted upon by Manasseh in such a way so as to be rendered without His own will. Rather, God was persuaded by the prayer. But this can hardly be said to settle the matter one way or the other. For someone else could argue that the word ‘moved’ can mean something slightly different when the mover is God and the moved is a human. In point of fact, some Hebrew words take their meaning with respect to the object and subject in this way. Be that as it may, we must keep the larger theological consideration in view. If one is inclined to see human free will as valid, as I do, because I see the *monergism* of the later Augustine to be a theological mistake, and *synergism* to be the original meaning of the biblical texts and the views of the earliest theologians, then one will not have a problem with distinguishing God and Satan from being the causal agent of David’s census-taking of the men of Israel.

But God and Satan were still clearly influences, and what do we make of that? Here we need to briefly consider why there was even a ‘chosen people’ at all. Why didn’t God skip over this ‘chosen people’ phase and jump right to Jesus? This question is typically skirted by systematic theologians, especially those of the high federal Calvinist variety, because if human free will has no meaning in one’s theological considerations, then one would simply have no explanation for ‘why choose a chosen people’ other than God’s inscrutable will. I have considered this question at length,⁵ but will need to summarize that material quickly here. Since the fall of Adam and Eve and the corruption of human nature, God intended to take human nature to Himself in the incarnation of His Son in order to heal and cleanse human nature in his own physical body. But this presented a number of complex challenges. On the one hand stood the corruption in human nature in every single human being, by which human beings would deny their very problem and attribute the problem to something else. On the other hand stood God’s immutable love for human beings, by which He respected our freedom and love. So God drew to Himself a ‘chosen people’ called biblical Israel. He began to work through these frequently resistant human partners to bring about a historically evidenced, written diagnosis of the problem in human nature (Gen.6:5 – 6; 8:21; Dt.30:6; Ps.51:10; Jer.17:1 – 10; 31:31 – 34; Ezk.36:26 – 28), as well as a commitment in His human partners to allow Him to radically heal them through Jesus, and, even more incredibly, their commitment to joyfully announce that healing to their usually menacing Gentile neighbors. That was quite a challenge. God’s commitment to them was called a ‘covenant’ which began with Abraham but needed to be reaffirmed by each generation of Israelites. Individual Israelites were free to remain within this covenant or leave it. The phrase ‘to be cut off from his people’ indicates this early form of excommunication and departure from the covenant. This covenant, climaxing with Jesus of Nazareth and the Christian mission to the world, had as its goal the undoing of the sin of humanity and the renewal of a true humanity on God’s good, garden land. But in the meantime, God brought biblical Israel into a special relationship with Himself, unique out of all the peoples of the world. In this relation, God gave them – uniquely – blessings for obedience and chastisements for their disobedience.

The chastisements were important because the problem of the corruption of human nature still plagued the Jews despite their reception of the Sinaitic Law and habitation of the Promised Land. Within them was a deep and abiding resistance to God, even as they struggled to be His faithful partner in this special covenant relationship. This provoked God’s precise and targeted wrath. He addressed this through rites and rhythms and sacrifices which embodied conceptual lessons, and through His word, given to Israel’s leaders to teach the people, which included the recitation of biblical history. On some rare and extreme occasions, God took human life in Israel. He also took life from among the Egyptians, the Canaanites, and other hostile Gentile forces. This was sociologically challenging: Israel was surrounded by Gentiles who had less knowledge of God, less constraints upon their corrupted human nature, who many times threatened Israel’s very existence. But God was not consigning these people straight to hell. Instead, He was preserving them until the day Jesus would visit them and offer them a chance to receive him (1 Pet.3:19; 4:6). Although this ‘back story’ to the Old Testament is told only by the New Testament, it can reasonably be inferred from the fact that the biblical narratives and prophecies spoke of the current and eventual failure of the Israelites, bringing them to the same level as the Gentiles; so why would God ultimately treat Israelites and Gentiles differently? There had to be some way in which God’s self-revelation to each person in Jesus Christ would equalize the difference between Jew and Gentile. And the decentralized, spontaneous development of the so-called ‘Apostles’ Creed’ across virtually all churches in the 2nd century testified to the widespread oral teaching that Jesus visited the dead:

⁵ See my ‘Why Choose a Chosen People?’ here: <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-why-choose-a-chosen-people.pdf>

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.
Amen.

Therefore, although God took the lives of seventy thousand men of Israel by disease (2 Sam.24:15; 1 Chr.21:14), God did not cast them into hell, but merely brought them to some abode of dead spirits to await Jesus' self-presentation to them, at which point they could choose whether to receive Jesus or not. That is how I understand the unique role of Israel and the actions of God in taking human life.

In this context, and I would argue, *only* in this context, can we read the episode of King David taking a census of the Israelites in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21. God had arranged a covenant with Israel at Sinai by which He had warned them that He would bring (at times severe) consequences upon them for their disobedience; they had voluntarily accepted and reaffirmed that covenant. So this judgment on Israel's disobedience was a known category of the Sinai covenant, known beforehand and agreed to by the Israelites. It was not arbitrary, because Israel was learning about human sinfulness and God's desire to root it out of them ultimately in and through the new humanity of Jesus. Thus, we cannot read the event with King David as if God does this generally outside of biblical Israel. He does not. Moreover, the fact that the Israelites had free will in their obedience or disobedience to God cannot be neglected. Nor can we neglect the fact that the Israelites and King David also had free will and personal moral responsibility in this particular matter. God and Satan were internal influences, but the Israelites and King David had already been in an internal place of being vulnerable to certain sins. To that matter I now turn.

Israel's Sin, David's Sin, and the Narrative of Samuel

What was Israel's sin in the narrative of Samuel? First, the sin of Israel was related to its militarism. That was the immediate issue. When we find the list of 'mighty men' in 2 Sam.23:8 – 39, we must ask the question: 'Why is this list of mighty men here, directly contrasting with psalms of trust in God in 2 Sam.22:1 – 51 and 23:1 – 7?' The implication seems to be that the mighty men and all Israel generally were aware of their human strength. It seems reasonable to see that awareness as part of a sinful community self-identity.

Second, the temptation of David is related to the militaristic frame of mind that he himself helped to bring about in Israel. The problem behind taking a census was that one can only take an inventory of what one possesses. One does not take an inventory of another person's possessions. David took an inventory of the people, but only God possessed them, and could issue a census. Also, David appeared to be quite aware of the strength of his 'mighty men.' So there was very much a human motivation in David. As king, David represented the people, and the general attitude of the people had affected him and vice versa. Their reliance on their own strength, their looking to themselves, had infected Israel from top to bottom. David even had the counsel of Joab who warned him against taking the census. So even though the text says that God was angry with *Israel*, not David, nevertheless David's sin is the result of Israel's sin as a whole. This is why David also violated the offering that God instituted with Moses whenever He did command that a census be taken:

¹¹ The LORD also spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² 'When you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them, then each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, so that there will be no plague among them when you number them. (Exodus 30:11 – 12)

This set the framework for God sending a plague upon Israel in David's last days; He had already *said* that He would do so as part of the covenant.

Third, this militarism, or trust in human strength, corresponds with God's warning to Israel near the beginning of the development of the monarchy. When Israel first wanted a king, and God instructed the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul as king over Israel, God also warned Israel of all the consequences that would befall them:

¹ Samuel 8:10 So Samuel spoke all the words of the LORD to the people who had asked of him a king. ¹¹ He said, 'This will be the procedure of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and place them for himself in his chariots and among his horsemen and they will run before his chariots. ¹² He will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and of fifties, and some to do his plowing and to reap his harvest and to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³ He will also take your daughters for perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and your vineyards and your olive groves and give them to his servants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards and give to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶ He will also take your male servants and your female servants and your best young men and your donkeys and use them for his work. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his servants. ¹⁸ Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.' ¹⁹ Nevertheless, the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, and they said, 'No, but there shall be a king over us, ²⁰ that we also may be like all the nations, that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.' ²¹ Now after Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the LORD'S hearing. ²² The LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to their voice and appoint them a king.' (1 Samuel 8:10 – 22)

The narrative of Samuel concerns the paganization of the people of Israel, with the kingship being the preeminent institution that is imported into Israel. The book of Samuel as a whole is a thematic inversion of the book of Genesis.⁶ Genesis is the record of God calling the chosen family out of paganism. Samuel is the record of paganism creeping back into the chosen people, which largely has to do with using political means to control life in Israel. Five other points of reference may be established.

1. First, the book of Samuel portrays Elkanah as the inversion of Abraham. Both Abraham and Elkanah were older men; both were involved with two women; both eventually fathered a supernaturally born son. But whereas Abraham cared about his future seed, which at the very least reflected a desire that Sarah be cared for should he die, Elkanah said to his wife Hannah, 'Am I not better to you than ten sons?'
2. Second, the book of Samuel inverts the relationship between fathers and sons portrayed in Genesis. In the patriarchal narratives, fathers bless sons. They may wrestle and struggle with one another, but remarkably, with God's providential help, fathers eventually bless their sons. In the narrative of Samuel, fathers curse their sons and vice versa.
3. Third, in Samuel, Israel establishes a city within the fundamental fabric of its existence; this is in contrast to the Genesis narrative, where the only cities are built by Cain and Nimrod, and whereas the patriarchs wander as pilgrims and sojourners in the land of promise. When at long last David became king and offered to build God a physical house in Jerusalem and Nathan blanketed David with blessing, God responded by *correcting* both Nathan and David in 2 Samuel 7:4 – 6. God made it clear that He had not initiated the selection of Jerusalem or the building of Jerusalem's Temple. The statement suggests at the very least that God preferred His wandering Tabernacle to a fixed house, a conviction that traces back to the literary structure of the Pentateuch as a whole.⁷
4. Fourth, yet another inversion of the Genesis narrative occurs in the story of Amnon's rape of Tamar (2 Sam.13). This story alludes to and reverses the story of Joseph in a number of ways.⁸ This tragedy in the

⁶ See also Joel Rosenberg, '1 and 2 Samuel' in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode

⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p.34 – 79; see also Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009). The Tabernacle is a 'plan B,' where 'plan A' would have been God's original intent: Israel meeting with Him face to face on Mt. Sinai. See my notes, <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-pentateuch-chiasm.pdf>

⁸ Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p.114 – 117. To clear his bedroom of all but Tamar, Amnon says, 'Have everyone go out from me,' the same words Joseph used in Gen.45:1 when he began to disclose himself to his brothers to reconcile with them. Amnon then says, 'Come, lie with me, my sister,' which echoes the lusty words of Potiphar's wife to Joseph in Gen.39:12, 'Lie with me.' Tamar is portrayed similarly to Joseph in terms of the type of words and proportion of words she speaks while trying to extricate herself from this terrible situation. Unlike Joseph, Tamar was unable to escape. After the brutal rape, Tamar tears her 'coat of many colors' (*ketonet passim* in 13:18); Joseph was, and is, the only other biblical character who wore such a coat. The significance of these allusions is seen in the convergence of literary techniques and

house of David, which went unaddressed by King David, set into motion the vengeful brother Absalom, and civil war.

5. Sadly, and fifth, bloodshed seems to be the major theme of the last portion of the book, as if to portray the seriousness of the curse of bloodshed God placed on the line of David. David's administration was undercut by Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam.15 – 18). During his retreat from Jerusalem, David was cursed for being a man of blood (16:5 – 8). Absalom was caught in the ridiculous situation of having his head caught between two branches of an oak tree and was killed by Joab and the ten young men with him (2 Sam.18:9 – 15). David's return led to a crisis of unity between the tribe of Judah and the other tribes of Israel, this time led by Sheba the son of Bichri, of Benjamin (2 Sam.19:40 – 20:26). While in pursuit of Sheba, Joab slew Absalom's former captain Amasa, who 'lay wallowing in his blood in the middle of the highway' (20:12). Sheba's rebellion was put down when the inhabitants of Abel Beth-maacah cut off Sheba's head and tossed it to Joab. David then intervened for the famine God had inflicted on the land for the bloodshed of Saul against the Gibeonites (2 Sam.21:1 – 14). 'After that God was moved by entreaty for the land.' The cause behind the last episode of God's wrath against Israel must be determined through analysis of the narrative what caused God's anger in the first place, and one certainly gets the impression that all the bloodshed, internal tension, and lack of reconciliation in the previous chapters had something to do with it.

This inversion of Genesis by the book of Samuel is summed up by the establishment of the Davidic dynasty and the Davidic throne in Jerusalem. Sadly, *David's* political administration – not Saul's – fulfilled God's initial warning to the people before Saul's appointment as king (1 Sam.8). God made clear that their request for a king was a betrayal of Him, and evidenced their resistance to Him. Yet the people had come to *prefer* this state of affairs. They had come to accept the hypocritical political maneuvers, the backstabbing and betrayals, and the bloodshed. This was their sin that called forth the wrath of God.

David's sin was to take a census for his own military purposes. David apparently felt insecure about his position as king over the entire nation and was possibly seeking reassurance through the military strength of his own tribe. The result was that David became aware that Israel's fighting force outnumbered Judah's by three hundred thousand (2 Sam.24:9 – 10). When he discovered that Judah was outnumbered, David was troubled and then repented, but the deed had already been done. God's plague of pestilence, which He said He would bring about (Ex.30:11 – 12), killed seventy thousand men – presumably the fighting men – indiscriminately from all twelve tribes, incidentally reinforcing the sense that Israel was one people, not to be torn apart by military-political tensions or outright civil war between the twelve tribes. Once again, I would be quick to add that the New Testament and the Apostles' Creed provide us with the insight that God did not cast these men into hell, but held them for a time until Jesus appeared to them. However, in the narrative of Samuel, one certainly gets the sense that God took away these seventy thousand *men* – and any multiple of the number seven, the number of completion, indicates something very significant – to cripple Israel's sense of itself as a fighting force, a military power, and a strong geopolitical nation-state akin to all the other pagan nations around them, especially the militaristic Canaanites. No: Israel was still God's people, uniquely. And that humble posture, which God Himself maintained and supported through His covenant relation with them, made clear to His people that God alone was Israel's true king. God did this to judge their sin, and to stop worse sins from happening.

The Role of Satan in Israel's Covenant with God

What about Satan's role in the incident of David's census? What is Satan's role in the covenant between God and Israel? How does he reflect God's will and character? To serve as a point of contrast, I will comment briefly on R.C. Sproul's short essay which I have reproduced in Appendix A. Sproul says:

David commanded a census because the Lord ultimately planned that he do so, but Satan was used as the secondary cause to incite David. God ordained David's sin, but He is not to blame for the temptation, for

concerns. Robert Alter notes that the sequence of allusion proceeds in the reverse direction as in the Joseph story. In Joseph's narrative, the coat is mentioned first, then the temptation by Potiphar's wife, and then the reconciliation with his brothers in a tearful but joyous family reunion in Egypt when he says 'Have everyone go out from me.' In the Samuel narrative, the order of the allusions reinforces the sense that David's family is falling apart; this is the beginning of the state of profound unreconciliation within David's family. The reversal of the Joseph story is a microcosm of what is happening more broadly, the reversal of the Genesis story. David's effort to secure a political dynasty (a *city* in the language of Genesis) by marrying various politically important women backfires and results in bloodshed in his own house.

Satan did the tempting. In this case we might say the Lord “allowed” Satan to tempt David in order to clarify the point that God does not stand behind evil deeds in the same way that He does behind goodness. But make no mistake, John Calvin tells us, God’s decree of evil is not “bare permission — as if God sat in a watchtower, awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depended upon human will” (*Institutes* 1.18.1).

That God rules over Satan without Himself being guilty of sin is a hard truth, but it is also comforting. It tells us that what we suffer from the Devil, his demons, and all evil is not purposeless but will lead to our good and God’s glory.

God is much greater than we are, so He is able to do things that we could never do, such as being sovereign over the Devil without ever being guilty of the Devil’s evil. Knowledge of this truth should not only move us to glorify the Lord but also to be confident that every tragedy we meet will serve a good purpose when all is said and done. If you are going through a difficult time, know that God is using it for your good even if you cannot yet see how.

My disagreement with Sproul on how to understand the relation between God and Satan is deep and fundamental. First, Sproul suggests that this incident has relevance and general application for people anywhere at any time. I disagree, as I will discuss below. Sproul then makes a pastoral point to us as his readers about going through a difficult time, that God is using it for our good. One can question Sproul about this, for given his belief that God arbitrarily predestines and elects some for salvation and others for damnation, Sproul cannot actually say this with certainty to other people. But that is another matter. I believe, in comparison, that this encounter between Satan and David could have only taken place within God’s covenant relationship to Israel. This point needs elaboration. In the Sinai covenant, God said that He would express His wrath on Israel, to limit their actions and express His judgment on their flesh through divinely orchestrated punishments, or curses (Dt.27 – 29). At the same time, circumcision was the defining mark of how to interpret God’s action upon them. What was symbolized by physical circumcision – cutting off something unclean from the person (Gen.17:10 – 27) – was anticipated in the language of a future spiritual circumcision – cutting off something unclean from a person’s heart (Dt.30:6). God would circumcise the heart after Israel sinned and went into exile.

By speaking about His judgments beforehand, and making this kind of arrangement with Israel, God allowed Satan to have a role in the midst of Sinai covenant. How? Who, then, is Satan? And why would the Sinai covenant allow him some influence unique to Israel? Satan is a title that means ‘the accuser.’ Hence it is not the proper name of this being, but his title or function; as such, it is equally appropriate, if not more so, to speak of ‘the Satan.’ Lest there be any doubt, Revelation unequivocally identifies the serpent of Genesis with ‘the great dragon, the serpent of old, who is called the devil and Satan’ (Rev.12:9). Christian tradition holds that Lucifer, a chief angel, was angry with God for saying that the angels must serve human beings from the creation. Scripture hints at angelic protection around some human beings (e.g. Ps.91:11 – 12) and that in the age to come, human beings will judge angels (1 Cor.6:3). Thus, according to Christian tradition, we infer that this angel tried to prove to God that he and the angels should not serve humans. The evidence he sought was that humans are corruptible. Since the fall into sin, he had the additional weight to his argument that humans are now corrupt and mortal. Although he succeeded, as the voice of the serpent, in luring Eve and Adam into sin (Gen.3:1 – 7), to his dismay this did not change God’s love for human beings. Instead, God sought to redeem humans, and restore them to the place of prominence that He intended. This infuriated Satan.

Satan’s intention has ever been to accuse human beings of sin, before the presence of God. Zechariah, for example, saw a vision of Satan accusing the high priest Joshua for being clothed with filthy garments, presumably to persuade God to reject Joshua’s priestly ministry. God’s removal of those filthy garments and placement of clean garments on Joshua nullified those accusations (Zech.3:1 – 6). And, now that God has reconciled human nature to Himself through Jesus taking human flesh and purging out the corruption therein, Satan has been defanged, for his accusations do not touch those who are in Christ and thereby reconciled to God; there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus by the Spirit (Rom.8:1). Furthermore, Satan can play the constructive role of stimulating a sense of guilt in human beings, and driving them to Jesus to be cleansed and forgiven by his Spirit. This is why the apostle Paul believed that the unrepentant Corinthian man who was having sexual relations with his stepmother and still claimed to be a Christian should be treated as a Gentile – still loved but placed outside the protective fellowship of the church – *so that Satan might exercise some influence in his life that would turn him back*

to Christ (1 Cor.5). In this sense, Satan's role as accuser coincides with God's loving will for people's restoration. Moral and spiritual accusation is all Satan apparently knows how to do.

Prior to Jesus' coming, though, Satan's accusations coincided with God's own pronouncement that He will judge Israel's sin in a specific way. God had not made that declaration concerning the Gentiles or towards them, and as I have already shown, God acts only by speaking His word first. That is why the Sinai covenant allowed Satan to play a role in Israel's life that he did not have elsewhere. God's spoken word actively condemning Israel's sin and predicting Israel's judgment within the covenant opened up a special possibility for Satan towards the chosen people. Ever the accuser and ever the one to try to show that God's love should not rest on people, Satan tried to attack Israel and condemn the Israelites. Once God made a promise to David that the Messiah would come through David's line, Satan knew even more specifically where in Israel to concentrate his temptations, accusations, and vituperation. Hence, only among the Israelites could this fallen angel be known as 'the Satan,' the accuser who accuses God's people before God Himself.

The book of Job also corroborates my point. The portrait of Job is very important. The reason why Satan singled out Job was because of what kind of person Job was. Job is introduced as 'blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil' (Job 1:1). 'Job would send and consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all' (Job 1:5). In other words, Job had a deep sense of integrity, a deep devotion to God, and a deep desire to bless other people. He prayed continually for his family, and in other parts of the book we learn that Job cared about other people as well. So Job is choosing to let God use him to bless the world around him. He was embodying the Abrahamic blessing of Genesis 12:1 – 3. Job was the ideal Jew. That is why Satan singled Job out. Job does not represent 'every person.' His suffering is not what 'every person' suffers. In the context of the canon of the Hebrew Bible, Job specifically represents God's people Israel.

Why did Satan attack Job? Because God's invites people to partner with Him to bless the world, and Satan wants to stop the human partners God works through. That's because Satan wants to stop God's blessing and redemption from flowing from God to the world. That is why Israel's history was one of suffering. That is why Jesus' life was filled with suffering. That is why true Christians suffer in a unique way for their faith. Paul writes in Colossians 1:24, 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of his body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.' That is why Job specifically represents the people of the biblical God. Job does not represent 'every person.' Satan does not have the calories to burn to attack 'every person.' He is only interested in attacking 'God's people.' So the 'Satanic attack' aspect of Job's story is pertinent to God's chosen people in particular.

Returning to the narratives of Samuel and Chronicles will further clarify my point. John H. Sailhamer, in his own treatment of the question of David's census, notes that the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel on other occasions.⁹ They can be found in Judges 2:14; 2:20; 3:8; 10:7; 2 Kings 13:3; 23:26. When this phrase is used, God gives Israel over to their Gentile enemies, foreign powers from which He normally protected them. In the reign of Solomon, God 'was angry' with Solomon for turning away from Him, overtaxing the people, etc. so He 'raised up an adversary' against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite (1 Ki.11:9 – 14). Shortly thereafter, God raised up another adversary against Solomon, Rezon the son of Eliada (1 Ki.11:23). Sailhamer suggests aptly, 'If the Chronicler were looking for a term from the deuteronomistic history itself to express his understanding that the anger of Yahweh against Israel meant the threat of foreign invasion, the term "adversary" was one of the most readily available. In using this term, the Chronicler not only would have interpreted his sources in their own language and with their own ideas, but also would have linked the failure of David with the notorious failure of King Solomon in the book of Kings.'¹⁰ Presumably the 'evil spirits' that make a very rare appearance in Judges 9:23 and 1 Samuel 16:13 – 16 fall into this category as well; they are sent by God because within the Sinai covenant, Israel agreed to lose the protection of God because of their disobedience.

Thus, in other words, this association seems to have allowed the author of Chronicles to read the biblical narrative histories before him and make what was implicit into an explicit statement:

⁹ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p.305

¹⁰ Ibid, p.306

² Samuel 24:1 Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'

¹ Chronicles 21:1 Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.

This does not mean, I stress, that the biblical writers thought God and Satan were equivalent in power, role, or (least of all) being. Rather, God and Satan are completely asymmetrical. The possibility of holding the above two statements together in the canon of Hebrew Scripture comes about because of a temporary overlap of intermediate goals. The refining wrath of God towards Israel found temporary overlap with the role of Satan as the adversary of Israel. However, their larger goals and objectives were totally divergent. Whereas Satan wanted to accumulate the accusations against Israel so that God's judgment would wipe out Israel itself *en toto*, God's judgment and wrath were actually never targeted not at Israel's very existence and future existence, but at the corruption of human nature within the Israelites. That is why God could entertain the accusations of Satan and even allow Satan to provoke David and other Israelites to sin, but always act in such a way so that this would only move Israel's history closer to Jesus and individual Israelites' hearts closer to their need for God's salvation of their human nature in Jesus. As Tolkien said astutely through the figure of Iluvatar to Melkor:

'And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.'

¹¹

Second, Sproul believes that 'the Lord ultimately planned' the census and Satan was only a 'secondary cause.' Then Sproul unfortunately goes further. He quotes John Calvin who says that God's decree of evil is not 'bare permission' but rather active and planned oversight. As Sproul is, I am sure, aware, many others have discussed the inconsistencies in Calvin's theology of providence and found it dissatisfying.¹² But Sproul treats us to this statement: God actively rules over Satan without being guilty of sin. He calls this 'a hard truth' which he finds nevertheless 'comforting.' What Sproul calls 'a hard truth,' I call a simple logical inconsistency. And I cannot understand what he finds 'comforting' about his own conclusions. For if God is the origin of the angel we now know as 'the Satan,' and also causally responsible for his rebellion and attack on humanity, then God is also against some portion of humanity, and is partially evil by His own definition. And if God is fundamentally arbitrary, and wills both good and evil, then God cannot be the logical source of His own moral will, because He makes of Himself an exception and exemption. Neither can God be trusted to uphold His own moral will, for He is not an appropriately moral being who can sustain moral commitments nor serve as the ground and basis for human morality. Nor can God be said to be honest and truthful in the Scriptures when He holds people responsible for their own choices when He never gave them authentic moral agency in the first place. Nor do we have any guarantees that God would not reintroduce evil at any future point, since apparently evil resides in His very character.

By comparison, I believe that God did not 'plan' the census but was responding dynamically to Israel's sinful choices. As such, the census was never 'fated' to happen. Moreover, I believe that the census had some redemptive and preventive intention, to check Israel's growing militaristic posture and reliance upon its own human strength. As Iluvatar did not 'plan' the dissonant music of Melkor, but was great enough to recapture that dissonant melody and weave its points back into a third, more sober and moving melody, so also God did not 'plan' the rebellion of Satan or of any other being, but is great enough to recapture the effects of sin's dissonance into a more sober and moving – and yes, still melodious – story.

I would go one step further to offer a comment on the relationship between God and Satan. Did God create the being we know as Satan – Lucifer, if that is indeed his true name – simply to make of him the enemy, the foil, the fall guy? I do not believe so. As far as I can tell, God still loves Satan himself. But God's love for the angels is shaped and defined by His love *for humanity*. It is in loving human beings that angels, who bear some similarity to

¹¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p.16 – 17

¹² As a recent example, David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) p.155 – 167; and his more accessible *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). See also my paper intended for a popular audience, *Atonement Theology: Why Everyone Should Care*, found here: <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-atonement-theology-reasons-to-care.pdf>. Calvin's inconsistencies are especially evident in *Institutes* 1.17.5, where he admits them.

God in their appropriate way, find their purpose, their *telos*. Just as God is greater than human beings and yet serves us, so the angels are also greater than human beings and yet serve us. It is this pattern of relationship that serves as the fundamental and unwavering vision God has for His angels, for all things are like God in their appropriate way, corresponding to the way He made all things. It is possible that this angel's original and unique role was to see what perfection was coming or could come by God's good grace. But instead of rejoicing with God and playing his part, he perverted his gift of long-sighted vision of a still-nearing perfection into an impatient condemnation of the present and a harsh accusation against all other beings. Therefore, even the accuser's strength had its beginning in an uncorrupted gift that reflected God's sheer goodness. As Tolkien elegantly wrote of how Melkor will be overcome by Iluvatar, and how evil will be overcome by good, 'No theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.' The angels apparently have a free will that is appropriate to them, just as human beings did and still do but in a weakened state because of the fall. Because of some angelic choice that conditions angelic nature, just as human choices condition human nature, the one we know as 'the Satan' has chosen his sad and futile destiny. For it is not for lack of love or because of a desire for vengeance that God places the devil into the fiery state for eternity. No, for the Triune God is love. And if God is love, then even wrath and hell must be an aspect of God's love and must be coordinated with God's love – for hellfire is the fire of God's refining judgment, a refinement that burns steadily and precisely against the corrupt thing in every being who refuses to surrender himself or herself to God's transforming and perfecting love.¹³

¹³ For a fully patristic and Eastern Orthodox sermon on 'Hell as the Love of God' please see <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-hell-as-the-love-of-god.pdf>

Appendix A: A Reformed View

God's Devil

R.C. Sproul

<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/gods-devil/>

“Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel” (v. 1).

- 1 Chronicles 21

Dualism, that philosophical idea that says good and evil are two equal and eternal forces, is shown to be false in the Word of God in its very first verse. When the Bible says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1), the words the heavens and the earth are a synonym for “all things.” In the beginning, God created all things; this includes the Devil. Although he is very powerful, Satan is ultimately a finite creature who is by no means a match for our Lord.

Though He created the Devil, God is not in any way culpable for evil. Like everything else, Satan was originally “very good” (v. 31), and how Satan could fall when there was no evil present in creation is a great mystery. Still, we know our Creator cannot be tempted with evil, nor can He ever tempt anyone (James 1:13).

That Satan is a creature means he is subject to the Lord, who uses him to fulfill His good purposes (Rom. 8:28). In the final analysis, the Devil is God's Devil (to summarize Martin Luther) and never operates outside the Lord's decree. This truth can be seen when we compare today's passage with 2 Samuel 24. Applying material from the books of Samuel to the Israelites after the Babylonian exile, the Chronicler tells us Satan incited David to take a census of Israel (1 Chron. 21:1) even though 2 Samuel 24:1 says God moved David on that occasion. This is no contradiction; it illustrates the doctrine of providence. Since God is sovereign over all, everything that happens is grounded in His plan. David commanded a census because the Lord ultimately planned that he do so, but Satan was used as the secondary cause to incite David. God ordained David's sin, but He is not to blame for the temptation, for Satan did the tempting. In this case we might say the Lord “allowed” Satan to tempt David in order to clarify the point that God does not stand behind evil deeds in the same way that He does behind goodness. But make no mistake, John Calvin tells us, God's decree of evil is not “bare permission — as if God sat in a watchtower, awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depended upon human will” (Institutes 1.18.1).

That God rules over Satan without Himself being guilty of sin is a hard truth, but it is also comforting. It tells us that what we suffer from the Devil, his demons, and all evil is not purposeless but will lead to our good and God's glory. *Coram Deo*

God is much greater than we are, so He is able to do things that we could never do, such as being sovereign over the Devil without ever being guilty of the Devil's evil. Knowledge of this truth should not only move us to glorify the Lord but also to be confident that every tragedy we meet will serve a good purpose when all is said and done. If you are going through a difficult time, know that God is using it for your good even if you cannot yet see how.