WHEATON COLLEGE

JESUS' VICTORY OVER SATAN (AND OURS)

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INTRODUCTION

What did Jesus’ death and resurrection accomplish? The New Testament authors answer this broad question from several different angles, using a variety of metaphors, sometimes even mixing metaphors, in order to display the variegated panoply of achievements brought about by the Son of God accomplishing his mission.\(^1\) From these metaphors, biblical interpreters throughout church history have posited essentially three explanatory models to help synthesize the various data of the New Testament: penal substitution, *Christus Victor*, and moral exemplar. Penal substitution takes into account the portrayals of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice (Rom 3:25; Heb 9:12, 15, 26, 28), in which his death pays the penalty due to human beings for their sins against God (Rom 6:23), which resulted from Adam and Eve’s sin at the beginning of human history (Rom 5:12, 18-19). In connection with the sacrificial system God established for the nation of Israel described in the Old Testament, Jesus offers himself as the final sacrifice that permanently cleanses the consciences, removes the guilt of sin, and enables those united to him by faith to fellowship with God forever by providing the occasion for God to justly forgive sins (Rom 3:21-26; Heb 9:12-14, 22; 10:10, 12, 14; cf. Lev 16; 17:11).\(^2\) The model known as *Christus Victor* highlights the texts of Scripture that teach Jesus’ death and resurrection as the ultimate defeat of the spiritual forces of evil, or, as Paul calls them, “the principalities and powers,” which surely include Satan and demons, as well as sin and death (Luke 10:18; John 12:31; 16:11; Col 2:15; 2 Thess 2:8; etc.).


Finally, the moral exemplar view, usually attributed to Abelard as the first great exponent of this view, emphasizes Jesus’ righteous life and how believers ought to imitate him. Also, some bring in Phil 2:5-11 with reference to Jesus’ humility all the way to death (cf. also John 13:34; 1 John 4:11; 1 Pet 2:21-25).

Interpreters have often set these models over against one another. Mark Heim has suggested a tendency among interpreters who have difficulties accepting the penal substitution view to seek alternatives that effectively eliminate the “need” for the idea of penal substitution. It seems, however, that, to answer the broad question of what Jesus’ death accomplished, all of these models have an appropriate place. Each model seems to answer a more specific question about Jesus’ death. For example, perhaps penal substitution answers the question, “What did Jesus’ death accomplish with respect to sin?” Christus Victor, then, answers the question, “What did Jesus’ death accomplish with respect to Satan and the powers of evil?” Finally, the moral exemplar model answers the question, “How should believers live in light of Jesus’ death?”

For this paper, we shall focus on how the New Testament authors have explained Jesus’ death as victory over Satan and the powers of evil. Since the Christus Victor model functions with warfare metaphors provided by several texts of Scripture, we will begin by examining the identity and nature of the enemy, with a narrow focus on the person and work of Satan. We will then examine the particular texts that proclaim Jesus’ victory over Satan to seek to understand the connection between his death and that victory. Finally, we will investigate the implications of Satan’s defeat for how Christians ought to understand the ongoing warfare that we still wage.

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3 For the “rediscovery” of this model, see Gustaf Aulén, Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement (New York: Macmillan, 1969). For a more recent insistence on this model as the primary biblical model, set in its context of the divine warrior motif, see Gregory A. Boyd, God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997).

SATAN—THE PERSON AND WORK OF THE ENEMY

For the Bible’s portrayal of Satan, we shall begin at the end with a look at Rev 12:9—“And the
great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the
deceiver of the whole world.” John’s vision involves a hideous red dragon with a legion of
“angels” fighting in heaven against Michael and his legion of angels. John identifies this dragon,
first, as the ancient serpent, referring to Gen 3. Then, he notes that this serpent has gone by the
names “the devil” and “Satan.” In the LXX, διάβολος regularly translated the Hebrew יָּֽשָׂ֖טן, found in Job 1-2 and Zech 3 and basically identifies an enemy or adversary. In both Job and
Zech, this figure stands in the heavenly assembly, but he does not initiate a conversation with
Yahweh. In Zech, it seems clear that he stands before Yahweh to indict Joshua the high priest for
his wickedness, his “filthy garments,” but without him speaking a word, Yahweh rebukes him
and cleanses Joshua. In Job, Yahweh brings Job to the attention of the accuser as a righteous
man. In response, the accuser questions Job’s motives and implicitly challenges Yahweh’s
evaluation of the character of Job. In these two texts, the Hebrew word has the article, which
indicates a common noun and not a personal name.

Moreover, John calls the dragon “the deceiver of the whole world.” The Gospel of John
also connects Satan with deception, calling him “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). His
deception goes back to the garden of Eden, where he first called into question God’s words (Gen

5 All Scripture quotations taken from the English Standard Version (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998).
6 Cf. O. Böcher, “σατανάς, ὁ,” EDNT 3:234. See Num 22:22, 32, where this term refers to the angel of
Yahweh opposing Balaam.
3:1, 4-5; cf. 2 Cor 11:3). Furthermore, John identifies this great red dragon by one additional epithet in Rev 12:10 that he surely must have drawn from Job 1-2 and/or Zech 3.\(^8\) He records a statement from an unidentified heavenly speaker: “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.” So, in this text, John has provided a succinct description of the enemy who wages war against believers even now by identifying him with the serpent of Gen 3 and the accuser of Job 1-2 and Zech 3 and by highlighting two of the enemy’s primary weapons with which he wages his war: deception and accusation.

The rest of the New Testament reveals other aspects of Satan’s character and work. Matthew and Luke provide an account of an initial confrontation between Satan and Jesus. Matthew calls Satan “the Tempter” (Matt 4:3; cf. 1 Thess 3:5; 1 Cor 7:5). The Evangelists portray Satan as a personal being\(^9\) who speaks with Jesus, even quoting Scripture, transporting Jesus around possibly by means of a vision, requests worship from Jesus, and finally leaves Jesus alone in obedience to his command (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-12). In the temptation narrative, Satan claims that he has all the authority and glory of all the kingdoms of the world and has the right to give all to Jesus (Luke 4:6). Jesus seems to confirm this by referring to him as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Moreover, the Pharisees characterize Satan, using the epithet “Beelzebul,” as the ruler over the demons (Matt 10:25; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15, 18-19). Rev 12 also indicates that he has “angels” with him. Paul probably means to include

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Satan and his demons within the categories of “rulers and authorities” (Eph 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:15).  

Nevertheless, despite all of their evil intentions, they remain under God’s control. As Yahweh limited Satan’s attacks on Job, so also Satan must request permission to “sift” the apostles at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion (Luke 22:31). Whatever else the Bible teaches about Satan, God’s sovereignty over him must remain a primary overarching concept. This explains, to a certain extent, how we see Paul turning people over to Satan for discipline with a clear hope that it will bring them to repentance (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20). Paul himself received what he referred to as a “thorn in the flesh,” identified more specifically as an angel of Satan, but God apparently used this for his good and refused to remove it, even as Paul pleaded repeatedly for it to go away (2 Cor 12:7-9).

The New Testament also portrays Satan affecting individuals in different ways. Many times in the Gospels, for example, the authors make a connection between demonic activity and sickness. In the book of Acts, Luke summarizes Jesus’ ministry as “doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38). Luke also tells the story about a woman whom Satan had “bound” for 18 years so that “she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself” (Luke 13:11, 16). Blocher connects the afflictions caused by the devil with his power of temptation, particularly rooted in his initial temptation in the garden of Eden; thus, whether instigated by individual demons or suffering as a result of the fallenness of humanity due to Sin and Death, perhaps. But, whereas he personifies sin and death on occasion, he seems to view the rulers and authorities, Satan and demons, as actual spiritual personal entities. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on Satan and consider him as representative of these other evil spiritual forces.

Adam and Eve’s original sin, “the power of affliction still stems from the power of temptation.” Moreover, Satan “entered” Judas as he went to betray Jesus (Luke 22:3-4; cf. John 13:2, 27), and he had emboldened Ananias to lie to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). The authors of the New Testament consistently portray Satan as a powerful person, vehemently opposed to Jesus and believers. Nevertheless, he has his own failing kingdom in which he rules over demons and blinds and seduces unbelieving humans (2 Cor 4:4). At the same time, the New Testament authors remain unequivocally clear that Jesus’ death has dealt an irrevocable death-blow to Satan and his kingdom.

JESUS’ PARADOXICAL VICTORY THROUGH CRUCIFIXION

Scholars continue to debate how best to situate the *Christus Victor* understanding of what Jesus’ death accomplished in connection with the penal substitution view. Wright, for example, argues that we should regard the *Christus Victor* model as primary or at least first among equals. Others, like Henri Blocher, argue in the other direction: the apostles regarded Jesus’ death as a vicarious sacrifice satisfying the justice of God as the means by which Jesus defeated Satan. Just as in contemporary society, we might not find the awareness that the New Orleans Saints

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won the Super Bowl exciting, compelling, or particularly worth celebrating without knowing the critical points in the game when the tide turned in their favor. Likewise, knowing how Jesus has won victory over evil and the implications of the great event for believers epitomizes good news!

Picking up the vision of John in Rev 12:7, we see a war in heaven between Michael and his angels and the great red dragon and his angels. Rev 12:8-9 notes simply that the dragon “was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.” In v. 11, then, the voice coming from heaven connects the victory over the dragon with “the blood of the Lamb.” In v. 10, the voice had identified the enemy as the one who accuses the people of God before God, which brings to mind Zech 3 and Job 1-2. It seems, however, that once this defeat has taken place, he no longer has the same level of access to God for accusing the people of God; therefore, he finds himself on the earth and he rages against the people of God in the world (Rev 12:12, 17).\(^\text{17}\)

Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim 1:15), and this salvation mission included rescuing sinners from Satan’s power. He came to destroy the devil and his works, which include sin and death primarily (Heb 2:14; 1 John 3:8). His mission of liberation involved entrenching himself in a war that, in one sense, began at the beginning of creation. The whole narrative of Scripture reflects a story of cosmic conflict that overextends and encompasses humanity.\(^\text{18}\) Jesus spoke of the casting out of “the ruler of this world” in connection with his impending death on the cross (John 12:31). The casting out of Satan makes way for the coming of the Holy Spirit to believers, which shows that he stands condemned (John 16:7-11). Within Jesus’ ministry, as the disciples came celebrating their successes in casting out demons, he “saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18), probably using vivid imagery to confirm


that their victories point toward his decisive victory soon to occur through his death and resurrection.¹⁹

To see how Jesus’ death accomplished victory over Satan, we must examine Col 2:13-15.²⁰ Recalling that Satan’s primary weapons include temptation/affliction and accusation,²¹ this text shows how Jesus’ death nullifies the effects of both of these weapons on believers.²² Satan’s role as tempter involves him in enticing people to commit sins, and the first sins committed in the garden of Eden had lasting ramifications for the rest of humanity which involve further proclivity to sin and the brokenness of a fallen world, with sickness and death following in its train. Therefore, Col 2:13 proclaims that God has made believers alive with Christ by forgiving them of their sins. Thus, the devil’s temptations to sin no longer compel those who have received this forgiveness with the same force. Moreover, he has made this forgiveness possible “by canceling²³ the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands” (Col 2:14a). More specifically, and more vividly, God nailed this record of debt to the cross when Jesus died (Col 2:14b). Thus, Jesus’ death signaled the nullification of the very tool by which Satan has the right to accuse people before God.²⁴ Furthermore, since the judgment bound up in this record of debt

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¹⁹ Cf. Blocher, Agnus, 85. Positioning and pronouncing the prepositional phrase is particularly perilous in this place. We could render the sentence, “I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning,” which creates some difficulties for understanding this to refer to a future event. It seems more likely that the comparison Jesus is making is between Satan falling, as evidenced by the disciples’ casting out demons, and lightning falling from heaven, that is, from the sky.

²⁰ Admittedly, these verses only specifically refer to the “rulers and authorities” in general. However, it seems most appropriate to apply this text to Satan as the head and ruler of those spiritual entities.

²¹ Cf. Blocher, Agnus, 79-84.


²³ It may be better to take this participle as indicating the ground for the forgiveness of sins, but it does not affect the point under discussion very much. See discussion in Douglas J. Moo, Colossians and Philemon (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 208-9.

²⁴ For the identification of this “record of debt…against us…with its legal demands” as an IOU connected to God’s decrees that humans fail to obey, see Moo, Colossians, 209-12. Cf. Blocher, Agnus, 83.
inevitably requires the death of the sinner, we can imply that the victory spoken of here also nullifies Satan’s power over death (cf. Heb 2:14).  

Paul concludes the paragraph by showing how Jesus’ death affected the “rulers and authorities.” God “put them to open shame,” publicly displaying them defeated by disarming them, stripping them of their power, just as conquering Roman armies would lead their prisoners of war in a parade for all the people to see. Witherington adds that this procession usually ended in the prisoners’ execution; therefore, Satan and his horde, stripped of their power and headed for their final destruction (cf. Matt 25:41; 1 Cor 15:24-6; Rev 20:10), nevertheless continue to function in this world after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Following Moo, the triumphal procession in view probably refers to Jesus’ resurrection.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE—FIGHTING A DEFEATED ENEMY?

The New Testament authors consistently warn believers to live in combat mode, aware that a very real enemy desires eagerly to do damage to God’s people. As Rev 12:12 puts it, “But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” Or, as D.A. Carson puts it, “The troubles of Christ’s people (the children of the woman) arise not because Satan is too strong but because he is beaten in principle and will


26 Cf. Arnold, Powers, 106.


28 Moo, Colossians, 215.
rage violently to the very end.”²⁹ In light of this state of affairs, the New Testament authors command believers to resist the devil (1 Pet 5:9; Jas 4:7) and not to give him an opportunity to exert any influence through a believer’s lingering anger (Eph 4:27).³⁰

In addition to these commands, the authors of the New Testament provide several statements of assurance that God himself continually protects believers from Satan’s attacks. For example, 1 Pet 1:5 indicates that believers “are being guarded through faith” “by God’s power.” Moreover, 1 John 5:18 speaks of Jesus as the one who keeps the believer safe, “and the evil one does not touch him” (cf. 1 John 4:4).³¹ John Stott explains this verse, saying, “The devil does not touch the Christian because the Son keeps him, and so, because the Son keeps him, the Christian does not persist in sin.”³² Thus, because of Jesus’ victory over Satan, he “can no longer take us captive, separate us from God and keep us in sin.”³³

Finally, God protects believers living in this fallen world, facing attacks from a fallen enemy, by providing them with his own armor (Eph 6:11-17).³⁴ Notably, he does not exempt any believer from fighting in the war.³⁵ Appropriating this armor of God enables the believer “to stand against the schemes of the devil.” Truth, righteousness, an eagerness to proclaim the gospel message comprise the list of armor which believers must wear. The shield of faith has particular

²⁹ Carson, Scandalous, 92.


³¹ This interestingly may serve as the answer to Jesus’ own prayer for his future followers in John 17:15.


³³ Arnold, Powers, 123.


³⁵ I suppose, however, one could argue that death is one way God takes a believer out of the fight!
power; with it, the believer “can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one.”\textsuperscript{36} Also, believers must hold tight to “the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” The “word of God” here surely refers to the gospel message, and its identification as “the sword of the Spirit” probably points to the Holy Spirit as the one who makes the message powerful or effective in the spiritual battle (cf. Eph 1:13).\textsuperscript{37} Finally, Paul emphasizes the role of prayer, which he perhaps views as that which holds the armor together, and he requests that the Ephesian believers would pray specifically for his ability to proclaim the gospel boldly (Eph 5:18-20). This may indicate that the work of proclaiming the gospel “will especially attract spiritual opposition.”\textsuperscript{38} Nevertheless, knowing that God has provided such a rich suit of armor to equip the believer with everything needed to wage successful warfare with the enemy should provide believers with great encouragement and confidence.

Returning to Rev 12:11, we recall the note of victory stated on behalf of believers: “And they have conquered [the accuser] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” In connection with the constant warfare which involves much suffering in believers’ lives, how can this victory really belong to them as well? Paradoxically, “the suffering of Christians is a sign, not of Satan’s victory, but of the saints’ victory over Satan because of their belief in the triumph of the cross, with which their suffering identifies them.”\textsuperscript{39} The defeated devil continues to rage against the people of God, aware of his
defeat, but not prepared to concede, and believers can stand firm against him knowing that the strength of his roar far exceeds the strength of his bite (cf. 1 Pet 5:8). Furthermore, the proclamation of Rev 12:11 explicitly grounds believers’ victory over Satan on Jesus’ death. Worth quoting at length, Beale comments on this verse:

How have they “overcome” the devil? Through Christ’s death they have been declared not guilty of the accusations launched against them. Therefore, they are exempt from the ultimate punishment. Satan’s accusations are unable to unleash the infliction of the “second death.” And just as Satan’s and the world’s guilty verdict on Christ was overturned through Christ’s resurrection, so Christ’s followers have their verdict reversed in the same manner through their identification with Christ’s resurrection.

The next clause gives a further basis for their victory: “the word of their testimony.” This seems to refer to the proclamation of the gospel message, even if (or when) it led to their martyrdom. God delivers people from Satan’s kingdom, transferring them into the kingdom of his Son, by means of the gospel message (see Acts 26:18; Col 1:13; Rom 1:16-17; 10:13-15), and by this means alone will God spread abroad the benefits of the victory Jesus has won in his death and resurrection.

CONCLUSION


42 Beale, Revelation, 664.

43 Cf. Stott, Cross, 246, and Carson, Scandalous, 105-6.
John portrays a paradox concerning “the ruler of this world.” On the one hand, he stands condemned (John 16:11), but on the other hand the whole world lies in his power (1 John 5:19). Nevertheless, “these are not self-contradictory ideas. Rather, they suggest that for John, Jesus’ death and resurrection constitute a victory over Satan in principle; yet the implementation of this victory will be gradual, and yet awaits a climactic conclusion.”

According to Peter O’Brien, the biblical drama of redemption with respect to Satan and the powers of evil unfolds in five stages: 1) their original creation; 2) their subsequent fall; 3) Christ’s defeat of the powers of evil; 4) their continued hostility; and 5) their final overthrow. From the other side of the stage, as it were, Stott suggests the drama of Christ’s victory unfolds in six stages: 1) the conquest predicted; 2) the conquest begun in the ministry of Jesus; 3) the conquest achieved on the cross; 4) the conquest confirmed and announced in the resurrection; 5) the conquest extended through the church’s mission; and 6) the conquest consummated at Jesus’ return. From whatever angle we choose to view the drama, Jesus’ victory shines through as the climax, and believers receive the benefits of his victory and, indeed, have the victory as their own simply by trusting Jesus for the work that he has done on our behalf.

As we struggle and fight, making war against the spiritual enemies who desire our harm, we must take note of the emphasis on trusting in Jesus as they key to experiencing victory in our lives (cf. 1 Pet 1:5; 5:9; Eph 6:16). Believers must maintain the biblical emphasis on the victory Jesus has won on our behalf so that we do not elevate Satan and his demonic cohorts beyond the

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45 Much speculation continues about when, how, and why Satan and some angels “fell.” The discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but I remain unconvinced that Isa 14:12ff or Ezek 28:12ff has any reference to Satan. I do wonder if the angels mentioned in 2 Pet 2:4 and Jude 6 might include Satan among their number.


status they now have: defeated, disarmed, doomed.\textsuperscript{48} May we take hold of the hope found in Paul’s promise of a final and total fulfillment of Gen 3:15: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom 16:20). Our hope remains grounded in Jesus, who showed himself stronger than the strong man, binding him and plundering his goods by releasing his captives and nullifying his power (Matt 12:29; Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21-2).\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{48} Cf. Schreiner, \textit{Penal}, 51.

\textsuperscript{49} William L. Lane, \textit{The Gospel of Mark} (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 143.


——. *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997.


