A DECODING OF EVIL ANGELS: THE OTHER AETIOLOGY OF EVIL IN THE BIBLICAL TEXT AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS IN OUR CHURCH AND WORLD

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The Problems and Solution

For many Christians there is a renewed urgency about what constitutes Christian belief, and why, or why not, it might be important to share aspects of this with others in a multi-faith, global context. Interwoven in this search are issues of biblical interpretation, Christology and Soteriology. One of the difficulties in the current discussion is this: whilst the “solution” may be presumed to be “Jesus saves”—whether assented to or dismissed—there is a lack of clarity about the “problem.” Jesus may save, but save from what? Theological responses from prior times are no longer sufficient for many. To be saved from eternal damnation, saved from the depravity of original sin, saved from God’s wrath or saved from the requirements of divine justice are no longer problems as persuasive or relevant as they may have been in prior times. Nor are the (often violent) atonement theologies that have sought to explain the process of how the cross of Jesus provides the solution to one or more of these problems. Nuanced faith positions can become the casualty within this context. Some reject the possibility of Jesus saving at all. For others, the cross of Christ becomes emphasized as the focus of salvation with little reference to Jesus’ ministry or teaching. For still others only Jesus’ life becomes essential, offering a model for right and just behaviour. Within this contemporary debate the reality in the biblical text of an entirely different aetiology of evil—a very different problem to which Jesus is the solution—is commonly ignored. For many New Testament writers the primary problem to which Jesus provides the solution is not the problem of original sin,

1 E. P. Sanders rightly points out that Paul’s own starting point was his experience and conviction that Jesus saves. For scholars to assume that Paul began with an anthropological problem that needed a solution, and then to impose a particular problem upon Paul’s writing, is to misunderstand Paul’s priorities. E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism (London: SCM Press, 1981), 442–46. This said, as will be discussed below, in Galatians Paul clearly identifies a problem to which he believes Jesus provides the solution. The difficulty with this problem for some within a contemporary context is that it does not fit with anthropological presuppositions about Paul’s Soteriology.
appeasement for human wrong, or deliverance from God’s wrath, but instead, release from the power of evil cosmic forces.

Regardless of one’s views about the reality of such forces, they are an undoubted reality in Jewish and early Christian literature. Ancient, seemingly primitive belief in cosmic forces may be seen to add nothing to contemporary debate, instead only confirming the irrelevance of the Christian conviction that Jesus saves and calling into further question the place of the biblical text. However, the repeated focus upon cosmic forces, and upon Jesus who saves from their power, demands that this strand of New Testament Soteriology and Christology be acknowledged. Furthermore, by investigating this oft ignored problem to which Jesus is understood to be the solution, a vital and confronting understanding of salvation can be unearthed. In this article, utilizing the French philosopher Rene Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, I offer a decoding of this cosmic framework and highlight the poignant challenges of my reading for a contemporary context.²

**The Enochian Etiology of Evil**

Whilst many New Testament authors understand cosmic evil as a destructive force from which one needs rescue, such an understanding of cosmic evil is not dominant in Old Testament texts.³ Scholarship of recent decades, focusing on Enochian texts, has revealed that this cosmic worldview within the New Testament did not emerge in a vacuum.⁴ I will give a brief overview of

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² This article reflects an aspect of my current research, investigating NT and early church Christology and Soteriology.

³ NT understandings of enslaving cosmic evil are evidenced in the various exorcism accounts in the gospels (Mark 5:1–20; Matt 8:28–9:1; Luke 4:31–37; 8:26–39; 9:37–43). This is also exemplified in stories such as binding the strong man and the parable of the grain (Matt 12:22–32; 12:43–45; 13:18–19; Mark 3:20–30; 4:14; Luke 11:14–26). In the epistles the reality of a framework of cosmic evil that exists in battle with the faithful appears in many places; see Gal 1:3–4; 4:8–10; Eph 6:10–18; Col 1:13–14; 2:15–20; 2 Thess 2:9–12; James 4:7; 1 Pet 5:7–10; 1 John 1:13–14; 3:8–10; Jude 8–9, 23; Rev 20:7–10; see also Rom 7:14–25. As Archie Wright argues, “by the turn of the Common Era there was in place a world-view within Judaism in which the activity of autonomous or semiautonomous evil spirits was regarded as a reality. This view is exemplified, for example, in the ministry of Jesus as described in the Synoptic Gospels of the NT. By contrast, there is little evidence in Jewish literature during the earlier biblical period for such evil spirits.” Wright, The Origins of Evil Spirits: The Reception of Genesis 6.1–4 in Early Jewish Literature. (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe; 198 Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1.

⁴ Wright points out: “This third century B.C.E. Pseudepigraphic composite work offers the oldest extant record of the origin of evil spirits in Judaism.” Wright, The Origins of Evil Spirits, 2. George Nickelsburg argues, “the Enochic texts were known and significantly influenced early Christian thought.” George Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch, Chapters 1–36, 81–108. (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 82–83.
the Enochian aetiology of evil and then investigate the ways in which this aetiology relates to New Testament texts, Soteriology and Christology.\(^5\)

Through the citations of early church writers, scholars have known of the existence of an Enochian tradition for centuries. Enochian texts remained part of the canon of sacred scripture in the Ethiopian Church.\(^6\) However they were “re-discovered” and brought back to the West in the 1700s by the Scot James Bruce.\(^7\) The uncovering of multiple copies of Enochic texts in the Qumran library last century has highlighted the importance of these texts for at least some Jewish communities. In recent decades an increasing number of scholars have argued that Enochic texts and traditions had an important place at the turn of the Common Era for both Jews, and subsequently, for those within the emerging Jesus movement, including New Testament writers.\(^8\)

In the Enochian traditions the aetiology of evil is very different from commonly presented “Christian” understandings. According to the Enochian texts evil enters the world, not through Adam, Eve or a Serpent; instead evil is birthed on earth through coveting angels. The first book of Enoch, \textit{The Book of the Watchers (BW)} (chs 1–36), which scholars agree is one of the oldest in the Enochian tradition, states:

In those days, when the children of man had multiplied, it happened that there were born unto them handsome and beautiful daughters. And the angels, the children of heaven, saw them and desired them; and they said to one another, “Come, let us choose wives for ourselves among the daughters of man and beget us children” (1 En. 6:1–2).\(^9\)

And

they took wives unto themselves, and everyone (respectively) chose one woman for himself, and they began to go unto them. And they taught

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\(^5\) Whilst other ancient texts, including Jubilees, also speak of the angelic descent myth, within the space available the focus of this article will be the Enochian tradition.

\(^6\) 1 Enoch is found in complete form only in Ethiopic, however scholars argue that original traces of Hebrew and/or Aramaic are seen within the text. E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch: A New Translation and Introduction,” in \textit{The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments}, vol. 1, ed. James Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 6.

\(^7\) Wright, \textit{The Origins of Evil Spirits}, 12.


\(^9\) Translations of \textit{1 En.} are from Issac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch.”
them magical medicine, incantations, the cutting of roots, and taught them (about) plants. And the women became pregnant and gave birth to giants whose heights were three hundred cubits. These (giants) consumed the produce of all the people until the people detested feeding them. And they began to sin against the birds, wild beasts, reptiles, and fish. And their flesh was devoured the one by the other, and they drank blood. And then the earth brought an accusation against the oppressor (1 En. 7:1–6).

The Enochian account shares symmetry with the fleeting reference to the antediluvian Nephilim of Genesis:

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. Then the Lord said, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown (Gen 6:1–4 nrsv).

It could be assumed that the Enochian tradition is an elaboration of the angelic descent myth found in the Genesis passage. Alternatively it may be the case, as a minority of scholars suggest, that the traditions found in Enochian texts predate the Genesis material. Due to the lack of current available evidence regarding composition, definitive conclusions cannot be drawn.

In the Enochian tradition, the giants are defeated (1 En. 9–10). Despite this apparent success the text explains that evil spirits emerge from the bodies of the dead giants and continue to oppress humanity:

10 Philip S. Alexander points out: “When its oldest layers were laid down, the Pentateuch as we know it may still have been in flux.” He goes on to state: “The Enochic and biblical traditions may for a period have grown side by side, and have been, in consequence, intertwined.” Alexander, “The Enochic Literature and the Bible: Intertextuality and Its Implications,” in The Bible as Book: The Hebrew Bible and the Judean Desert Discoveries, ed. Edward D. Herbert and Emanuel Tov (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2002), 57. Similarly, Yoshiko Reed points out: “though the Book of the Watchers’ version of the angelic descent myth makes much sense as an interpretation of Gen 6, it would be misleading to conclude that this apocalypse subordinates its own message and authority to Genesis, as mere commentary on scripture. The extrabiblical material in this apocalypse cannot be explained solely in terms of the exegetical responses to textual problems and narrative lacunae in Genesis. Rather the author/redactors of the Book of the Watchers seem to have drawn on well-developed traditions about Enoch and fallen angels, the origins of which may be ultimately no less ancient than the biblical source to which this apocalypse appeals.” Yoshiko Reed, Fallen Angels, 53.
But now the giants who are born from the (union of) the spirits and the flesh shall be called evil spirits upon the earth, because their dwelling shall be upon the earth and inside the earth. Evil spirits have come from their bodies. Because from the day that they were created from the holy ones they became the Watchers; their first origin is the spiritual foundation. They will become evil upon the earth and shall be called evil spirits. The dwelling of the beings of heaven is heaven; but the dwelling of the spirits of the earth, which are born upon the earth, is in the earth. The spirits of the giants oppress each other, they will corrupt, fall, be excited, and fall upon the earth, and cause sorrow. They eat no food, nor become thirsty, nor find obstacles. And these spirits shall rise up against the children of the people and against the women, because they have proceeded forth (from them) (1 En. 15:8–12).

And in chapter 16:

From the days of the slaughter and destruction, and the death of the giants and the spiritual beings of the spirit, and the flesh, from which they have proceeded forth, which will corrupt without incurring judgment, they will corrupt until the day of the great conclusion, until the great age is consummated, until everything is concluded (upon) the Watchers and the wicked ones (1 En. 16:1–2).

The concept of evil spirits who “rise up against” humanity and who “corrupt” has resonance with the presentation of evil spirits within the writing of many NT and early church writers.

**ENOCHIAN, NEW TESTAMENT AND EARLY CHURCH UNDERSTANDINGS OF COSMIC EVIL**

As the Western Canon was solidified, Enochic literature was falling out of favour. However, for some New Testament and early church writers these texts were considered ancient, authoritative and sacred.\(^{11}\) Enochian texts are both quoted and referred to in the New Testament. In Jude, the text of the book of Enoch is quoted and attributed to Enoch himself: “It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam prophesied, saying: ‘See, the Lord is coming with ten thousands of his

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\(^{11}\) As Isaac summarizes: “Many Church Fathers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, and Clement of Alexandria either knew 1 Enoch or were inspired by it. ... But, beginning in the fourth century, the book came to be regarded with disfavour and received negative reviews from Augustine, Hilary and Jerome.” Isaac, "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch," 8.
holiness)” (Jude 14 NRSV). In First Peter Jesus is described as preaching to the “spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah” (1 Pet 3:19 NRSV). There are, at least some, parallels between Jesus and Enoch in this passage. In Second Peter the imprisoned angels are described: “For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment” (2 Pet 2:4 NRSV). In a detailed study, Robert Parkinson argues that the demons in the gospel exorcisms are presented with striking resemblance to the spirits of the Enochian giants.

In First Corinthians Paul argues, without further explanation, that women should wear veils “because of the angels” (διὰ τῶν ἀγγέλων, 1 Cor 11:10). Whilst this text is highly contentious, it is possible that Paul has the Enochian angels in mind. Tertullian, writing around 208 CE, argues that women should wear veils, and bases his argument on an angelic descent interpretation of 1 Cor 11: “In fact, if [it is] ‘on account of the angels’—we read plainly that they have fallen from God and from heaven because of their desire for females” (On the Veiling of Virgins 7:2).

Tertullian was not alone in the belief that evil, lusting angels presented a danger. Composed some time before his martyrdom between 162 and 167 CE, Justin Martyr also believed that demons who descended from the evil angels enslaved humanity:

But the angels transgressed this order, and were captivated by love of women, and produced children who are called demons. And besides they later enslaved the human race to themselves, partly by magical writings, and partly by fears and punishments which they occasioned, and partly by teaching them to offer sacrifices and

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12 Jude here quotes from 1 En. 1:9: “Behold he will arrive with ten million of the holy ones in order to execute judgment upon all.”
13 Yoshiko Reed argues, "Jesus here walks in the footsteps of Enoch." Yoshiko Reed, Fallen Angels, 110. However, there are important differences between the presentation of Jesus and Enoch in each text. In First Peter Jesus makes proclamation to the imprisoned spirits, rather than praying for them as Enoch does (2 En. 18:8–9).
15 Elsewhere Paul indicates his mistrust of angels (Gal 1:8; Rom 8:38–39).
17 Translation by Dunn, Tertullian.
incense and libations, which they needed after they were enslaved with lustful passions; and among people they sowed murders, wars, adulteries, intemperate deeds and every evil (Second Apology 5).\textsuperscript{19}

Justin’s concern was not appropriate clothing for Christian women, but an apologetic for Christian faith, therefore it is uncertain whether Justin is interpreting 1 Cor 11:10 here. However, it can be said that in Justin’s worldview the evil angels who lusted after human women were real, and their demonic offspring continued to be an oppressing and destructive force. Despite contemporary reticence to interpret Paul’s statement “because of the angels” in light of Enochian evil angels, for at least some within the early church this interpretation coalesced with their understanding of reality.\textsuperscript{20}

The significant focus upon evil spirits for New Testament and early Christian writers may have come as a result of the cultural-religious context in the Common Era in which views, such as those expressed in the Enochian and other traditions, were popular. These views may also have been fuelled by accounts of Jesus’ own liberating dealings with evil spirits.\textsuperscript{21} Whilst accounts of angels that leave their places in order to prey upon women, producing giants whose spirits continue to wreak havoc on earth may be confronting, this tradition was an important source for New

\textsuperscript{19} Translation by Barnard, Ancient Christian Writers.

\textsuperscript{20} As Yoshiko Reed argues: “Whereas pre-Rabbinic approaches to Enochic myth of angelic descent were marked by a reticence to accept the BW’s [Book of the Watchers] supernatural etiology of sin and by attempts to forge a genealogy of error based on human responsibility, many proto-orthodox Christians seem simply to assume that otherworldly forces are the primary causes for the sin and suffering in the world.” Yoshiko Reed, Fallen Angels, 186.

\textsuperscript{21} As Yoshiko Reed states, “[j]ust as Jesus had exorcised demons, so Christians were now to take up the fight.” She dryly details the prominence of belief in evil spirits in early Christian communities: “[j]ust as they saw demons swarming everywhere around them, inspiring deeds as diverse as sacrificing to idols to daubing one’s eyes with colour, so they embraced a heterogeneous body of Jewish lore about demons and spied their influence everywhere in human history.” Yoshiko Reed, Fallen Angels, 187. In Paul’s writing the concept of a cosmic matrix in which evil spirits threatened humanity can be seen at various points (for example Gal 1:3–4; 4:8–10; 2 Cor 11:13–15). For the author of Colossians, whether Paul, Timothy, or a close associate, this is also the case (Col 1:13–14; 2:15–20). This view is also evident in 2 Thess 2:9–12. Discussion of sin as a controlling, destructive force appears in Rom 7:7–13. Whilst this passage in Romans is the subject of ongoing debate, it is likely that Paul understood this force of sin through the lens of cosmic, controlling evil. See also, J. Louis Martyn, Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, ed. William Albright and David Freedman. (Anchor Bible, 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 372–73, 537–39.
Testament and early church writers’ understanding of the matrix of cosmic evil. By way of example, I will examine one New Testament text.

The premise of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians rests on the soteriological assumption that cosmic evil is real and an enslaving force from which Christ liberates. Whilst it cannot be claimed with certainty that this worldview emerged from an Enochian cosmology, the relative absence of cosmic evil in Old Testament traditions, the popularity of the Enochian tradition in the Common Era, as well as both explicit and implicit references to this tradition elsewhere in the New Testament, including perhaps Paul’s own writings, add weight to the possibility.

The presence of cosmic evil for Paul is evidenced in the opening of the letter: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal 1:3–4 NRSV). According to this text, the reason Christ has given himself is so that deliverance from this evil age is possible. For those tempted to interpret the “present evil age” in political, non-cosmic terms, this becomes more difficult in the light of later chapters of Galatians. In Chapter 4 the cosmic reality of enslavement for Paul is made clear: “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?” (Gal 4:8–9 NRSV).

Paul may have understood these elemental spirits in a number of ways. As well as the potential background of the angelic descent myth in Paul’s cosmic worldview, he may have been influenced by contemporary philosophical worldviews. George Van Kooten explores Greek philosophy, highlighting that elements of wind, fire, water and air were, to some degree, deified. According to this view: “man was composed of, and enclosed by, the elements of cosmos.”22 Van Kooten subsequently argues that this understanding of the elements is found in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians.23 Whilst the influence of this philosophical conception of the elements is plausible, Paul’s references to the cosmic elements are suggestive

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23 Van Kooten argues that: “Paul’s idea of man’s being subjected to the elements” is attributable to this philosophical framework in which elements such as water, earth, fire, sun or moon are deified and that “It seems highly likely that ‘those who are by nature no gods’ are identical here with the elements.” Van Kooten, *Cosmic Christology*, 65.
of an understanding that goes further than elements that “compose and enclose” humanity. For Paul these elements are enslaving, destructive forces from which rescue is needed and, through Christ, experienced (Gal 1:4; 4:3–7, 8–9; 5:1). Due to a lack of definitive evidence, the precise origins of these elements in Paul’s writing cannot be claimed authoritatively. Nevertheless, James Dunn is right to conclude that regardless of specific origins, “this phrase [the elements] was his way of referring to the common understanding of the time that human beings lived their lives under the influence or sway of primal and cosmic forces.” In Galatians Jesus’ salvation is described in the language of liberation, setting free. Whilst alternative interpretations can be placed over this language, for Paul this rescue is from a control of cosmic evil. This raises several questions.

**The Core of the Cosmic Problem**

The Enochian tradition provides important insight into a popular understanding of the origins of cosmic evil at the turn of the Common Era. In order to recognize the cause of this cosmic problem, within this tradition the reality of the angel-human event must be named. Language such as “sexual immorality” does not capture what the tradition actually describes.

The angels violate the laws of the universe and they violate the women that they desire. The term “wives” in the text obscures the reality of what is happening in this story. As Archie Wright indicates, the translation “wives” in Gen 6:2 and in the *Book of the Watchers* may not have been the intended

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24 In contrast to Van Kooten’s interpretation of deified, and in contrast to the suggestion that the elements refer to hostile cosmic forces, Bridgette Kahl interprets Gal 4:8–10 as referring to the “whole pantheon of Olympic and local civic deities … but also [to] their supreme contemporary representative: Caesar.” Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading With the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 221. Kahl’s contextual reading of Galatians offers fresh insight into the letter. Her interpretation of those who “by nature are not gods” as political leaders such as Caesar is plausible, however Kahl takes insufficient account of the elemental spirits τὰ στοιχεῖα (4:3, 9) in her reading.


26 Wright describes the angels, or sons of men, *ben elohim*, as having “union” with the daughters of men (*The Origins of Evil*, 127). He also describes them as having “transgressed the law of the cosmos” and of committing an “unlawful sexual act” (*The Origins of Evil*, 128). Isaac describes this act as angels who have “consorted with women” [*I (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch*, 9]. Yoshiko Reed describes the fallen angels’ action as “sexual impurity” (*Fallen Angels*, 30).
meaning in either text.\textsuperscript{27} Whilst the angelic descent myth can be interpreted otherwise, the story of the angels leaving their places is about rape.\textsuperscript{28}

Within the patriarchal context in which this tradition was codified the actions of the fallen angels were possibly not regarded as sinful against the women. Instead the sin was that the angels took men’s possessions, their women. Scholars highlight the possibility that the sin in first readings of the text may have been that a purity line had been crossed because different “beings” intermingled, thus the story served as a warning about inappropriate marriages.\textsuperscript{29} However, with the insight of contemporary perspectives the reality of the text can be acknowledged. In this story these women are taken without choice. The women are the innocent victims of violence. Covetous desire and rape are at the centre of this cosmic aetiology of evil, and from this, the tradition tells us, violence is birthed on earth with diabolical consequences. Recognizing the primal role of possessive, violent desire at the heart of this myth enables this ancient text to be decoded. Utilizing the work of philosopher and linguist Rene Girard makes such decoding possible.

A Decoding of Evil Angels

Rene Girard has stimulated important debates in theology, philosophy and sociology in recent decades.\textsuperscript{30} In order to approach the Enochian angels from a Girardian perspective, a brief overview of Girard’s theory of mimetic desire must be sketched. Girard argues that humans do not simply copy one another

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\bibitem{27} Wright, \textit{The Origins of Evil}, 132–36.
\bibitem{28} William Loader comes closest to such acknowledgment. He states that both BW 6–11 and 12–16 “share a sense of abhorrence at the Watcher’s sexual wrongdoing.” Loader, \textit{Enoch, Levi, and Jubilees on Sexuality: Attitudes Towards Sexuality in the Early Enoch Literature, the Aramaic Levi Document, and the Book of Jubilees} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 48. At the conclusion of his study, he describes the fallen angels’ actions as “a shocking and abominable act.” However, Loader continues to resist naming this action as rape and instead reflects that “one might have expected rape to feature among their [the giants’] monstrous deeds, but this is not the case” (\textit{Enoch, Levi, and Jubilees on Sexuality}, 308).
\bibitem{29} Considering the BW portrayal of women as “bearers of forbidden knowledge,” Loader argues that “[t]his makes it also likely that the Watchers’ sin, in marrying those not of their kind, functions paradigmatically for the author as a warning for people not to enter inappropriate marriages, [with foreign wives] which he sees as defiling.” Loader, \textit{Enoch, Levi, and Jubilees on Sexuality}, 48. Wright also traces various scholarly interpretations of this sexual violence. Wright, \textit{The Origins of Evil Spirits}, 46–47.
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in their desires, but that humans do not know what to desire and so copy the desires of others. To quote Girard: “men are strangers to their desires; children don’t know how to desire and must be taught.”  

Girard argues that this process of desire transference, mimetic desire, is subconscious. K. Roberts Skerrett summarizes Girard’s mimetic theory accordingly: “Desire expresses our lack of being, a fundamental yet amorphous lack. We look around and see others who seem to have being, and so we desire to be like them.” Girard argues that this subconscious desire for what others desire creates rivalrous relationships: “Desire clearly understands that, in desiring what another desires, it makes a rival and an obstacle of this model.” Girard claims that this mimetic pursuit for the “other” is central to both human behaviour and to conflict: “Mimeticism is the original source of all man’s troubles, desires, and rivalries, his tragic and grotesque misunderstandings, the source of all disorder and therefore equally of all order through the mediation of scapegoats.” William Schweiker restates Girard’s mimeticism accordingly: “The triangle of desire of subject, object, and mediator/rival is what Girard takes to be the true meaning of mimesis. The curious origin and shape of desire mean that the subject and mediator of desire are unaware of their triangular situation.” Mimetic desire, according to Girard, is not simply the copying of another, instead it is the unconscious response to want what another wants.

Girard’s absolutism sits uncomfortably with many. It is argued that not all desire can be claimed to be the result of a negative mimeticism.

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33 Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 133.
36 This is a central concern within John Milbank’s assessment of Girard. He argues that Girard’s theory “demonises an entire aspect of our nature” and that “[d]esiring imitation and the accompanying quest for identity are not necessarily violent.” Milbank, “Stories of Sacrifice,” *Modern Theology* 12, no. 1 (1996): 27-56, at 53. George L. Frear Jr argues that Girard’s “laying all emphasis on mimetic desires that have no legitimate basis and lead only to unjustified violence [has] the effect of undercutting the recognition of legitimate needs and therefore of legitimate claims that may precipitate justifiable social conflicts.” Fread “Rene Girard on Mimesis, Scapegoats and Ethics,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1992): 115–33, at 124. Ultimately, Fread does not dismiss Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, but rather argues that by utilising it, important insights can be gained: “Girard’s analysis calls on us to examine ourselves, in order to discern between what is genuine in our desires and what is created by mimesis” (“Rene Girard on Mimesis, Scapegoats and Ethics,” 130).
However, despite passages in which Girard could be construed as claiming that all mimetic desire is conflictual this is not the case. For Girard desire is mimetic, learnt from others; but this mimeticism is not always negative. As Girard states: “It is everything. It can be murderous, it is rivalrous; but it is also the basis of heroism, and devotion to others, and everything.” As Girard further explains: “Is all desire mimetic? Not in the bad, conflictual sense. Nothing is more mimetic than the desire of a child, yet it is good. Jesus himself says it is good. Mimetic desire is also the desire for God.” Whilst Girard’s theory of mimetic desire will continue to be debated in relation to the origins of all desire, there is significant evidence of the existence of conflictual mimetic desire as explicated by Girard. In our own context the advertising industry graphically illustrates the power of mimetic desire, as it is fuelled by manipulating the desire for “what others are having” in order to make profit. The social media explosion of Facebook, Twitter, and other such technological tools, is also powered by the desire to see, learn and gain what others see, know, do, have and are, and in turn, to be seen to possess these same.

Girard acknowledges that his own explanations have, at times, contributed to misunderstanding: “the idea that mimetic desire itself is bad makes no sense. It is true, however, that occasionally I say ‘mimetic desire’ when I really mean only the type of mimetic desire that generates mimetic rivalry and, in turn, is generated by it.” Rene Girard, “The Goodness of Mimetic Desire,” in The Girard Reader, ed. James. G Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 62–66, at 63.


Social media analyst Danah Boyd describes our current context as an “attention economy” and argues that within the realms of social media people are driven by the need to be seen by others: “Interestingly, fear on social media isn’t just employed by marketers, pundits, and politicians. Friends, family, and colleagues increasingly use fear to get attention because it works. … Attention is indeed the currency of contemporary society.” Boyd, “Whether the Digital Era Improves Society is Up to Its Users—That’s Us” The Guardian.co.uk (April 21, 2012), http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/apr/21/digital-era-society-social-media (accessed January 31, 2013). Writer William Deresiewicz assesses our current context accordingly: “What does the contemporary self want? The camera has created a culture of celebrity; the computer is creating a culture of connectivity. As the two technologies converge—broadband tipping the Web from text to image, social-networking sites spreading the mesh of interconnection ever wider—the two cultures betray a common impulse. Celebrity and connectivity are both ways of becoming known. This is what the contemporary self wants. It wants to be recognised, wants to be connected: It wants to be visible. If not to the millions, on Survivor or Oprah, then to the hundreds, on Twitter or Facebook. This is the quality that validates us, this is how we become real to ourselves—by being seen by others. The great contemporary terror is anonymity.” Deresiewicz, “The End of Solitude,” The Chronicle of Higher Education (Jan 2009), http://chronicle.com/article/The-End-of-Solitude/3708 (accessed February 6, 2013).
Soteriological discussion informed by Girard’s theories has largely begun from the assumption of an “original sin” aetiology of evil, such an approach is exemplified in the work of James Alison.\textsuperscript{41} This assumption has perhaps contributed to the critique levelled at Girard that his identification of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism imply an overwhelmingly negative superstructure of humanity.\textsuperscript{42} As argued above, this is not Girard’s position. When Girard’s theories are applied to the angelic descent aetiology of evil, there are surprising implications that hold both nuance and relevance. According to a Girardian reading of this cosmic aetiology of evil, the goodness of creation is preserved and humans do not “fall.” It is angels who fall as a result of their rivalrous mimetic desire and it is this that brings catastrophic consequences for humanity, and the earth more generally. The Girardian account of conflictual mimetic desire provides dynamic insight into the Enochian cosmic aetiology of evil, and this cosmic aetiology provides important insights into mimetic theory.\textsuperscript{43}

Upon close analysis of the evil angels in the Enochian tradition it becomes evident that their very function is the introduction of rivalrous mimetic desire. In the angelic descent myth the angels desire for what human men desire—the women of humanity—\textit{and} in the angels subsequent prohibited instruction, including the teaching of ornamentation and incantation, the angels expose and contaminate humanity with \textit{what} and \textit{how} to


\textsuperscript{42} Milbank understands Girard in this manner, arguing that the implication of Girard’s work is “a kind of self-abnegating denaturation, where all self-expressive attainments and erotic yearnings must be foregone.” Milbank, “Stories of Sacrifice,” 50. For a detailed exploration of Milbank’s response to Girard, see Skerrett, “Desire and Anathema.” To a point Frear concurs with Milbank, arguing that: “Girard presents the world too much in negative terms. His Christ denies this world created by violence and never affirms the world of creation. Girard rightly holds that Jesus teaches against mimetic desire and violence, but it is also important to see that Jesus’ teaching about love involves more than not harming” (“Rene Girard on Mimesis, Scapegoats and Ethics,” 128–29). Michael Kirwan explores the problem of implied negativity in Girard, concluding that whilst this is a risk in Girard’s work, ultimately Girard’s analysis makes an important contribution to soteriological understandings. Kirwan, “Being Saved from Salvation,” \textit{Communio Viatorum} 52, no. 1 (2010), 27–47.

\textsuperscript{43} In Kirwan’s analysis of Girard, he compares Anselm and Girard and celebrates the motivating factor in Anselm’s work as the rejection of a soteriological paradigm in which Satan plays an integral role. Kirwan, “Being Saved From Salvation,” 36. I can only imagine Kirwan’s discomfit at the reintroduction of cosmic forces within the present soteriological discussion.
desire what others have. According to this ancient myth, violence is the inevitable consequence of this rivalrous mimetic desire. The fallen angels serve as a flashcard for toxic mimeticism. It is no surprise to find that the Enochian angels who teach humanity what and how to desire are described as the revealers of oppression in the Book of Similitudes: “And they shall imprison those angels who revealed oppression” (1 En. 67:4).

Soteriological and Christological Implications: Old and New

Upon closer analysis, it appears that Paul is also aware of the prominence and corrosive power of mimetic desire. This is exemplified in Paul’s description of the desires and works of the flesh (Gal 5:16–21). Whilst works of the flesh are readily associated with “fornication, impurity, licentious- ness, drunkenness and carousing” (5:19, 21), Paul also states that works of the flesh include “idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy” (5:20-21). The desires of the flesh that Paul speaks of in Galatians are not simply sexual. Instead Paul has in mind the far more seductive power of conflictual mimeticism: the desire to have or become what others desire to acquire, or are. This is underscored in Paul’s sobering conclusion to the description of the fruit of the Spirit: “If we live by the Spirit, let us be also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another” (Gal 5:25–26).

Paul proclaims that those in Christ no longer have to be dominated by conflictual mimetic desire, and that “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control” can now grow through the fecundity of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). However, Paul has no delusions that the Christian community is now immune from this polluting force. In Galatians the dual imagery of the works of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit are utilized in

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44 In the Book of the Watchers, after describing the angels’ descent and “sexual immorality,” the text then goes on to elaborate that Azazel and other evil angels teach humanity about weaponry, ornamentation, incantation and divination (1 En. 8:1–4). Many scholars argue that here there are at least two distinct traditions in Enoch: in the first tradition it is the angels’ “sexual immorality” that causes sin and suffering, and in the second it is the angels’ illicit teaching. However, it is an imposition on the text to read these angelic actions in such a delineated manner. Whilst there may be differing emphasis in the Enochian texts regarding culpability, the sexual violence of the angels and the covetous nature of their teachings are most helpfully read together, as the whole text presents them.
order to name the destructive dynamic of conflictual mimetic desire and to contrast this with Christ's liberating alternative.45

What are Christians to do with this ancient dualistic understanding of cosmic evil in contemporary dialogue? Girard provides an important insight. Whilst Girard does not write about Enochic cosmic evil, he does reflect on the demonic within the New Testament and argues that there is symmetry between the demonic and destructive mimeticism:

By acknowledging the existence of the demon we recognise the force of desire and hatred, envy and jealousy, at work among men. Its effects are far more insidious and twisted, its reversals and metamorphoses more paradoxical and unexpected, and its consequences more complex than anything man has since imagined in his eagerness to account for human behaviour without supernatural intervention.46

This appears to come close to what Paul is saying in Galatians: desires of the flesh and cosmic evil are intimately linked, enslaving and destructive (5:13–26).

The Enochic myth of angelic descent graphically portrays the reality at the core of human suffering. Rivalrous mimeticism is violent and consuming as it constantly drives people to desire an “other.”47 Those who live according to this desire experience a loss of personal identity and autonomy as they are, in a word, possessed. Twenty-first century anxiety about engaging with the Enochic tradition and its evil angels misses the mark. So too do questions that focus upon whether evil angels are real and continue to possess or destroy: conflictual mimetic desire is and does.

In New Testament texts how does Jesus actualize liberation from cosmic evil, possessive mimetic desire? That is, how is Jesus understood to provide the solution to the problem of cosmic evil? In these texts this liberation does not occur because Jesus is a wise role model who teaches people to live in

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45 John Barclay argues that this “already—not yet” tension in Galatians is present “since the apocalyptic conflict inaugurated by the resurrection has not yet been resolved, [thus] it can be readily understood why the flesh continues to threaten and to tempt the Christian and why the eschatological conflict continues to be worked out in the daily obedience of walking in the Spirit.” Barclay, Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul’s Ethics in Galatian. Studies of the New Testament and Its World, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1988), 117.

46 Girard, The Scapegoat, 195.

47 The term “other” is not restricted to other persons; conflictual mimetic desire might be for another person, but equally, might be for other things: status, material possessions, popularity, etc.
a new, more compassionate way. For Paul, in Galatians, and elsewhere, the wish to live compassionately is simply not able to manifest this outcome. In Galatians, and across New Testament texts, it is claimed that something happens on a cosmic level because of Jesus Christ. Thus Paul proclaims:

So with us, while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son in to our hearts, crying “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child, then also an heir, through God (Gal 4:3–7).

According to Paul interior freedom from cosmic slavery has been made possible through Christ, and is now being experienced in the community.⁴⁸

The shameful cross is the place in which this liberation occurs for Paul (Gal 6:14–15).⁴⁹ Nonetheless, this liberation from cosmic evil, through the cross, is achieved in a different way from that which is commonly assumed. Jesus, whom elsewhere Paul describes as the Wisdom and Power of God (1 Cor 1:24) is the “God One” who desires no competing, no status, no power play, no retaliation, nothing that others have, and instead, to borrow from the pre-Pauline hymn, empties himself (Phil 2:7). Jesus has nothing to do with rivalrous mimetic desire in life. What is more, Jesus willingly surrenders to humanity’s greatest “undesired”: humiliating rejection, even to the point of shameful state sanctioned death (Phil 2:8). Jesus surrenders himself in order to liberate humanity (Gal 1:4). As Paul puts it: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13). Christ redeemed humanity from the curse of believing that in the desires of an “other” (in this case the law) we will

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⁴⁸ Paul reiterates this in Gal 5:1. Sanders also identifies this emphasis: “In Galatians, the contrast is between the freedom for which Christ has set the Christians free (5:1) and the slavery of the law or the fundamental spirits of the universe (4:1-9).” Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 468.

⁴⁹ Martyn recognizes the priority of Paul’s cosmic perspective in relation to the cross: “The various ways in which Paul speaks of Christ’s death (and resurrection; 1:1) show that for him the motif of cosmic warfare is focused first of all on the cross, and it is from the cross that one perceives the contours of that warfare. There, in the thoroughly real event of Christ’s crucifixion, God’s war of liberation was commenced and decisively settled, making the cross the foundation of Paul’s apocalyptic theology.” Martyn, Galatians, 101.
find freedom.\textsuperscript{50} Ontological transformation is mediated through Christ who absorbs the curse of violent mimeticism.

Paul’s understanding of the law as a tool of rivalrous mimetic desire is underscored by his warnings to the emerging Jesus movement not to replace the law with a new set of desires (Gal 2).\textsuperscript{51} According to Paul, through Jesus becoming our “undesire,” freedom from enslaving mimetic desire is made manifest: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). For Paul the claim that Christ liberates is not an academic dictum to be assessed or discredited, Christ’s liberation, the conviction that Jesus saves, emerges from the lived experience of communities gathering around this crucified, risen One.

The fruit of the Spirit described in Gal 5 is not a pietistic wish-list; instead, in the fruit of the Spirit, we see the reality of Paul’s Christology, and something of a realized Soteriology.\textsuperscript{52} Here Paul is pointing to a reality that is happening among and within Jesus communities—notwithstanding the difficulties—and that is enabling an entirely different way of seeing and being in which through the Spirit gentleness and kindness, patience and peace—

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\item \textsuperscript{50} Diverse opinions surround the intended meaning behind Paul’s seemingly inflammatory description of the law in Galatians. Whilst Paul’s references to the law have commonly been assumed to refer to Jewish Law, Van Kooten argues that for Paul in Galatians the term law “is taken as a specimen of a larger class of national laws” with particular reference to the “the elements.” Van Kooten, \textit{Cosmic Christology in Paul}, 77. From a contextual reading of Galatians, Kahl argues that the law in Galatians is better understood as “the ‘combat order’ of the imperial world construct.” Kahl, \textit{Galatians Re-Imagined}, 263. A full discussion of this debate is beyond the scope of this article, but while I concur with Martyn’s identification of Paul’s focus on cosmic, enslaving forces, I remain unconvinced that Paul believed that the law “seemed to have as its sole business the pronouncing of a curse.” Martyn, \textit{Galatians}, 373.
\item \textsuperscript{51} In Gal 2 Paul bemoans the pull of rivalrous mimetic desire that he perceives to be already corroding the emerging Jesus movement; Peter has taken a backwards step in the inclusive way of Christ by instead adopting the desires of “certain people from James” (2:12). It is within this context that Paul speaks so harshly of the law; from Paul’s perspective it has become a tool of the destructive power of mimetic desire, replacing the grace of God with “right action” (2:21). Paul is equally aware that in the “Jesus community” the law might be replaced by a new “code,” a new set of desires, that also misses the mark: “But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor” (2:18).
\item \textsuperscript{52} Barclay is right to dismiss the view that Gal 5:13–6:10 is an appendix; instead, Paul’s call to live in Christ is integral to the whole letter. Barclay, \textit{Obeying the Truth}, 216. This description of ontological freedom, or experienced Soteriology, is also found in various other NT texts. For example, “Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet 2:1–3). See also, 1 Tim 6:11; Phil 4:5; Jas 3:13–18; this is also reflected in the hymn of Phil 2:1–11.
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of being in antithesis with rivalrous mimeticism—are actually emerging. Paul's description, and this is echoed across the New Testament, of living intentionally apart from mimetic desire (the desires of the flesh) is not moralistic, but is a direct response to the internal freedom that the communities who are fed and shaped by the crucified, risen Jesus are starting to experience. There is an authentic alternative to being hounded by cosmic evil: in Christ, through the Spirit, communities are beginning to be liberated from possessive mimetic desire.

Conclusion

The solution “Jesus saves” no longer has the traction that it once had. This is largely because the problems that may once have been important—original sin, God’s wrath or eternal damnation—no longer hold sway for many. Whilst this has caused a great deal of anxiety and friction within and beyond Christian circles, within the New Testament a very different problem to which Jesus provides the solution has been largely ignored. This article, drawn from broader christological and soteriological research, has shown that by reengaging with frequent New Testament references to cosmic evil and Christ’s liberation from these forces, surprisingly relevant insights are offered within our own context.

The Enochian tradition stands as background to at least some, perhaps many, of the references to cosmic evil in the New Testament. Utilising Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, I have offered a decoding of the angelic descent myth. The story of evil angels who leave their places as a result of their desire to have what others have, and in the rape and subsequent devastation that follows, a graphic portrayal of rivalrous mimetic desire is depicted. The Enochian angelic descent myth transcends false dichotomies between “good creation” and “depraved humanity” and instead presents a more complex image of reality: we are good, but through covetous desire become possessed and possessing to our own, others’ and the earth’s detriment.

The problem of consuming mimetic desire is utterly relevant in our own context. In the west, but not only in the west, we are confronted with rapidly changing and expanding technology. Accompanying the myriad benefits of this technology, corrosive mimeticism has been able to spread at breakneck speed, Facebook, Twitter, and the internet more generally, relentlessly tell us what we need to acquire, to know, to be, to have, to see, and to be seen to have, in order to be anybody. For some, with phones never off, there is, literally, no space. It would appear that loss of personal identity and autonomy are at an all-time high as the incessant beat of rivalrous mimetic desire.

Sally Douglas, A Decoding of Evil Angels: The Other Aetiology of Evil in the Biblical Text and its Potential Implications in Our Church and World
is amplified. In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul proclaims that there is a tangible alternative to living under the domain of enslaving mimetic desire, “the desires of the flesh.” He declares that Jesus saves, or more precisely, Jesus sets free. Those who are in Christ, the one who has nothing to do with rivalrous mimetic desire in life, in death and in resurrection, are freed. This solution, from Paul’s perspective, is not theoretical but based on the ontological transformation that communities are experiencing in Christ, through the Spirit. Just as the problem of toxic mimetic desire continues to contaminate and corrupt in our own context, Jesus the “God One,” who becomes “undesired” for our liberation, continues to make real an alternative. In an era of skepticism about the relevance of Christianity, here we discover an ancient and fresh framework for understanding salvation that pulsates with relevance, hope and profound personal, and collective, challenge.