

Through Fear of Death

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Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

— Hebrews 2:14–15

I. Introduction

The 14th and 15th verses of the second chapter of Hebrews comprise a passage of Scripture which often is quoted, but seldom, if ever, is correctly interpreted. Most teachers and commentators who attempt to analyze these verses quickly demonstrate that they haven't the foggiest notion regarding the meaning of the phrase 'the power of death', nor the nature of the bondage which is in view in the passage.

Previous journal articles¹ have shown that the popular conception of Satan or the 'Devil' as a fallen angelic creature has no Scriptural validity. Accordingly, the passage raises a plethora of questions. Who or what, then, is the entity termed 'the devil' to which reference here is made? Has the 'destruction' of this entity already taken place, or is it yet future? And is 'destruction' a proper translation of the Greek verb found in this passage?

Looking deeper into the passage, additional questions are raised. In what sense does a creature—any creature, angelic or otherwise—possesses the 'power of death'? Moreover, in the light of passages such as Hebrews 11:35 ("... others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection."), in what sense have men of previous ages "through fear of death [been] all their lifetime subject to bondage"? Does not the promise of resurrection apply to all the righteous of all time, i.e., to those who in faith looked forward in time to the atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God, as well as to we who now in faith look back in time to the same sacrifice?

Traditional interpretations of this passage generally ignore these difficulties. Few, if any, commentators appreciate the fact that the phrase 'the power of death' is metaphorical, and most

make the fatal error of accepting Jewish (i.e., Talmudic) tradition which supposes that the power of physical death over humans is exercised by angelic beings.

To assist in sorting out the truth of the matter, let us begin by listing the primary assumptions which underlie the traditional interpretations of this passage:

- 1. Until the Crucifixion, all men were subject to the fear of death.
2. For the Christian, the promise of resurrection dispels the fear of death.
3. The fear of death constitutes the bondage from which men are delivered by the death of Christ Jesus.
4. The entity known as 'the Devil' is a spiritual being, also known as 'Satan' or 'Lucifer'.
5. It is the Devil who wields the power of physical death. This jurisdiction extends over all mankind.
6. The destruction of the Devil is yet future, but it is sure, because of the sacrificial death of Christ Jesus.

Of course, these assumptions are inconsistent with one another, as well as being in conflict with the teaching of the Scripture. Perhaps the greatest error in the assumptions is that the promise of resurrection was unknown prior to the Crucifixion. But such an assumption is easily disproved; consider, for example, the testimony of Martha concerning her brother Lazarus:

21 Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. 22 But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. 23 Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. 24 Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

— John 11:21–24

And the ascription of the power of death to a supposedly-angelic creature known as 'Satan' or 'the Devil' is nothing less than preposterous. As we shall see, there are entities which legitimately hold the power of death over their subjects. However, these entities are flesh-and-blood, being earthly rulers. The commonly-held notion of an angelic 'Satan' who wields the power of death and who, in the manner of a warden of a prison, acts as the agent of God to kill and to torture, is foreign to the Scripture.

The first three chapters of the book of Job are frequently cited in support of traditional concepts regarding Satan or the Devil. However, what is seen in the book of Job is an entity

¹Vol. 2, No. 3, The Gates of Hell, and Vol. 2, No. 4, The Nature of Our Enemy and the Nature of Our Warfare

(apparently spiritual) who, acting as the agent of God, appears to have as the purpose of his existence the devising of trials (i.e., testing) for the righteous, in order to prove their character; apart from engaging in speculation, little more can be said concerning the identity of this entity. The agent of testing may be considered an adversary to the righteous, but only in the immediate context of trial, for in the long run, trial is beneficial; consider Job 42:10–17, Romans 5:3–5, and Hebrews 11:35. There is no indication that the agent is in rebellion against God, much less, that he is the archenemy of the Almighty.

Contrary to popular notion—*notion based largely upon the spurious, non-canonical book of James (specifically, the declaration of James 1:13, “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.”—God indeed brings testing upon the righteous.*² Specifically, the Scripture declares that God tested Abraham:

1 And it came to pass after these things that God tempted Abraam, and said to him, Abraam, Abraam; and he said, Lo! I am here. 2 And he said, Take thy son, the beloved one, whom thou hast loved—Isaac, and go into the high land, and offer him there for a whole-burnt-offering on one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. 3 And Abraam rose up in the morning and saddled his ass, and he took with him two servants, and Isaac his son, and having split wood for a whole-burnt-offering, he arose and departed, and came to the place of which God spoke to him, 4 on the third day; and Abraam having lifted up his eyes, saw the place afar off. 5 And Abraam said to his servants, Sit ye here with the ass, and I and the lad will proceed thus far,

and having worshipped we will return to you. 6 And Abraam took the wood of the whole-burnt-offering, and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took into his hands both the fire and the knife, and the two went together. 7 And Isaac said to Abraam his father, Father. And he said, What is it, son? And he said, Behold the fire and the wood, where is the sheep for a whole-burnt-offering? 8 And Abraam said, God will provide himself a sheep for a whole-burnt-offering, my son. And both having gone together, 9 came to the place which God spoke of to him; and there Abraam built the altar, and laid the wood on it, and having bound the feet of Isaac his son together, he laid him on the altar upon the wood. 10 And Abraam stretched forth his hand to take the knife to slay his son. 11 And an angel of the Lord called him out of heaven, and said, Abraam, Abraam. And he said, Behold, I am here. 12 And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the child, neither do anything to him, for now I know that thou fearest God, and for my sake thou hast not spared thy beloved son. 13 And Abraam lifted up his eyes and beheld, and lo! a ram caught by his horns in a plant of Sabec; and Abraam went and took the ram, and offered him up for a whole-burnt-offering in the place of Isaac his son. 14 And Abraam called the name of that place, The Lord hath seen; that they might say to-day, In the mount the Lord was seen. 15 And an angel of the Lord called Abraam the second time out of heaven, saying, 16 I have sworn by myself, says the Lord, because thou hast done this thing, and on my account hast not spared thy beloved son, 17 surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is by the shore of the sea, and thy seed shall inherit the cities of their enemies. 18 And in thy seed

²See also the journal article, Vol. 2, No. 2, *Testing and the Way of Escape*.

³Unless otherwise noted, all citations of Old Covenant scripture are taken from the Septuagint (typically, from the A. D. 1851 English translation of Brenton), which is a translation into the Greek dialect called ‘Koine’ of the ancient Hebrew canon of Old Covenant scripture. The Septuagint commonly is designated by the Roman numeral ‘LXX’, which corresponds to the number seventy, this supposedly being the number of men who laboured on the translation.

The translation was made a century or more prior to the Incarnation, and copies of the Septuagint circulated throughout the ancient world. By the time of the birth of Christ, the Septuagint had become accepted as the authentic and official Canon of Old Covenant scripture. Popular acceptance of the Septuagint was due largely to the fact that the Hebrew language had fallen into disuse; this, in turn, being largely a consequence of the dispersion of Israel by the Assyrian invasion, together with the subsequent seventy years of captivity in Babylon of the remnant which Assyria did not carry away. By the time of the return from Babylon, Greek had become established as the common language of the world, as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Thus, it is the Septuagint, rather than the ancient Hebrew Canon, which was in common use throughout Judea during the era of the Incarnation and the apostolic age, and there is little, if any, evidence that the ancient Hebrew canon was still in use by anyone during this period. Jesus and the apostles quoted from the Septuagint rather than the ancient Hebrew, thus authenticating the Septuagint as the official and authentic canon of Old Covenant scripture. Consequently, it is the Septuagint, rather than the ancient Hebrew text, which the early Church preserved and revered as genuine.

Veneration of the Septuagint—on the part of both the Christian and the Christ-rejecting, unregenerate Jew—persisted for a period of roughly a century after the Resurrection. However, the Jew, having nothing but an adversarial relationship with the Christian, began maintaining his own editions of the Septuagint. Sometime after the final destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple in A. D. 70, the Jew attempted to revive the defunct Hebrew language and to re-create the abandoned ancient Hebrew text—a text which, like the ark of the covenant, has disappeared without a trace. It appears that neither a copy nor even so much as a fragment of the ancient Hebrew canon survived to the modern era; at least, Christian scholars know of none to be extant. These efforts of the Jew culminated in creation of the so-called ‘Masoretic Text’, which was not published until the 15th century A. D. It is vital to understand that the Masoretic Text is the product of unregenerate men, working entirely in the Christian era—an era in which no man rightly can claim to possess covenantal relationship with God under the terms of the Old Covenant, for the Old Covenant came to a permanent and irreversible end upon the death of Christ Jesus. Being the creation of unregenerate men, the Masoretic Text by no stretch of the imagination may be considered canonical.

Popular notion perceives the Masoretic Text as simply the ancient Hebrew text to which ‘vowel points’ have been added; but, in actuality, the Masoretic Text is a new Bible, written in a language considerably more complex than the language of the ancient Hebrews. Regrettably, William Tyndale translated his English Bible from the Masoretic Text, rather than from the Septuagint; thus were Christians originally introduced to the Jewish counterfeit of the ancient Hebrew Canon. And despite the fact that, soon after its publication, the Masoretic Text was demonstrated by Christian scholars to be but a counterfeit of the ancient Hebrew Canon and marred by numerous serious flaws, Tyndale’s use of the Masoretic Text set a precedent which has been followed by virtually every subsequent translator of the English Bible. Demonstration of the corrupt and spurious nature of the Masoretic Text is not difficult, for New Covenant scripture contains numerous quotations of Old Covenant scripture, and inspection of the quoted passages reveals all manner of corruption, including truncation, augmentation, and selective editing.

shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast hearkened to my voice.

– Genesis 22:1–18 (LXX)³

Ultimately, it is God who orchestrates every event of life:

Behold, behold that I am, and there is no god beside me: I kill, and I will make to live: I will smite, and I will heal; and there is none who shall deliver out of my hands.

– Deuteronomy 32:39 (LXX)

Another serious flaw in the traditional interpretations of Hebrews 2:14–15 is the contention that, prior to the Crucifixion, men were held captive by the fear of death. While there are always individuals whose lives are governed by fear of death, this is never been the rule for Israel. Anticipation of resurrection is seen throughout Old Covenant scripture. Moreover, the fact that those living under the Old Covenant had confidence in resurrection is attested to by a phrase which appears in Hebrews 11:35: “. . . *that they might obtain a better resurrection*”.

In olden times, Israelites, through the animal sacrifices, looked forward in faith to the death of Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God. They, as we, received deliverance and assurance of resurrection on the basis of faith in Christ. The 11th chapter of Hebrews testifies concerning the heroic deeds of Israelites of previous generations—deeds which, in many cases, placed them in jeopardy of death. Men immobilized by the fear of death do not subdue kingdoms, stop the mouths of lions, quench the violence of fire, escape the edge of the sword, become strong in weakness, wax valiant in fight, turn to flight the armies of the aliens; nor do they endure torture, not accepting deliverance.

Clearly, the fear of death which kept our forebears in bondage is not fear of death in the ordinary sense. The fear in view in this passage is a factor which confidence in the resurrection could not neutralize. As will be seen, this is because it was a legitimate fear—i.e., a fear of obligation. Release from that fear came only through redemption.

II. Invalidation—not Destruction

As they stand in the King James version, these verses—Hebrews 2:14–15—are poorly translated. In particular, use of the word ‘destroy’ is incorrect and misleading.

The word ‘death’ appears three times; each time, it is the Greek word *thanatos* [2288]⁴, and is correctly translated ‘death’. The first instance, “*that through death*”, refers to the sacrificial death of Christ Jesus, whereby he redeemed his people not only from the condemnation of the Law, Galatians 3:13, but also from the dominion of earthly rulers; cf. Luke 1:68–75, and Colossians 1:12–14.

Thus, despite its historical role as the basis for English Bible, the Masoretic Text is nothing more than a poorly-crafted modern Jewish counterfeit of the ancient Hebrew Bible which long ago had been abandoned, even by the Jew; as such, the Masoretic Text is unreliable, utterly worthless, and offers nothing whatsoever of value to the Christian. The oldest extant copies of the Septuagint predate the oldest extant copies of the Masoretic Text by more than a thousand years. Moreover, there is no *demonstrated* continuity between the ancient Hebrew Canon and the Masoretic Text. Without question, the Septuagint is the only reliable link to the ancient Hebrew Canon. Indeed, the Masoretic Text gives the appearance of being a heavily-edited translation of the Septuagint into the Masoretic Hebrew language. But whatever the pedigree of the Masoretic Text, it is the Septuagint alone which is the authentic canon of Old Covenant scripture, simply because it is from the Septuagint alone that Jesus and the apostles cited the Scripture.

For a more comprehensive discussion of this matter, see the journal article, “Rightful Succession & Imposture: The Case of the Septuagint vs. the Masoretic Text”, *Salt & Light*, Vol. 2, No. 6.

⁴Numbers in square brackets correspond to the word numbers assigned in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*

The word translated ‘destroy’ is *katargeo* [2763], which means literally, ‘to reduce to inactivity’; it may be translated by the verbs nullify, abrogate, annul, invalidate, etc., and by the phrases ‘to make of no effect’ or ‘to bring to nought’. Thus, whatever entity is represented by the term ‘the devil’, it has not been destroyed. Nor has the devil been ‘rendered of none effect’ in the general sense—a fact apparent from other passages of Scripture, such as I Peter 5:8. Rather, *katargeo* here refers to the divestiture of a specific attribute of the devil, namely, the ‘power of death’.

The word translated ‘power’ is *kratos* [2904], meaning ‘force’, ‘strength’, or ‘might’, particularly in the sense of ‘manifested power’ or ‘dominion’. Here, the phrase, ‘*the power of death*’, refers to the prerogative of a ruler over his subjects; cf. Daniel 5:18–19.

III. Who or What is the Devil?

The word translated ‘devil’ is *diabolos* [1228], meaning ‘accuser’ or ‘slanderer’. *diabolos* is a descriptive title, not a proper name. In his American Dictionary of the English Language (1828), Noah Webster provides the following definition of slander, which he attributes to the jurist Blackstone: “slander. A false tale or report maliciously uttered, and tending to injure the reputation of another by lessening him in the esteem of his fellow citizens, by exposing him to impeachment and punishment, or by impairing his means of living; defamation.”

In Scripture, the term *diabolos* is applied to a variety of entities. Jesus applied the term to Judas Iscariot, John 6:70. *diabolos* is applied to humans engaging in slander and false accusation, I Timothy 3:11, II Timothy 3:3, and Titus 2:3. Peter applies the term *diabolos* to the Roman empire, i.e., to human government, comparing it to a roaring lion, seeking whom it may devour, I Peter 5:8. Paul was delivered from the same ‘lion’, II Timothy 4:17.

In I Peter 5:8, Peter categorizes *diabolos* as *antidikos* [476], translated ‘adversary’. The primary meaning of *antidikos* is ‘an opponent in a lawsuit’, and it is so used in Matthew 5:25 and in Luke 12:58 and Luke 18:3. However, *antidikos* also is used in the general sense of an adversary or enemy, and so it is used by Peter.

According to popular tradition, *diabolos* refers to a spiritual entity—an created being named Lucifer—which is at enmity with God. Supposedly, this Lucifer is a ‘fallen’ angel, formerly of the highest rank, i.e., archangel. Interestingly, the name ‘Lucifer’ appears but once in the entire Bible, in Isaiah 14:12. Lucifer is held to be one and the same with the entity termed ‘Satan’. Like ‘devil’, ‘satan’ is a title, rather than a proper name. It is of Hebrew origin, and connotes ‘adversary’.

Not surprisingly, the Septuagint uses *diabolos* to translate the Hebrew word which, transliterated into English, becomes ‘satan’.

Among Christians and non-Christians alike, Satan is viewed as a being who possesses god-like attributes, and the popular notion is that Satan and his kingdom are engaged in a desperate, spiritual struggle against the God of the Bible. This concept of Satan, however, is the invention of men, and is not taught by the Scripture. It is nothing other than the false concept of dualism, which maintains that the universe is ruled by two opposing gods—a god of good and a god of evil, and that the two are in continual conflict.

Some students of the Scripture have concluded that the traditional view of Satan, described in the preceding paragraphs, is erroneous. They note that, while there do appear to be spiritual beings whose role it is to tempt or test the righteous, and other spiritual beings whose role it is to deceive the wicked, all such beings are willing and obedient agents of the Eternal. According to the Scripture, there is but one God; all creatures are his creation and all serve his purpose. The assertion that there exists (or that there ever existed) warfare in heaven—i.e., in the abode of God Almighty—is untenable; consider Matthew 6:10. The phrase ‘war in heaven’ found in Revelation 12:7 is metaphorical; it describes conflict which lies wholly within the realm of earthly government.

IV. The Nature of Bondage

The word translated ‘deliver’ is *apallasso* [525], meaning literally ‘to change from’; it is used for a transition from one status to another, such as takes place upon release, healing, or departure. Here, *apallasso* refers to the deliverance associated with redemption.

The word translated ‘fear’ is *phobos* [5401], meaning ‘fear’, ‘dread’, or ‘terror’. By metonymy, *phobos* refers to that which causes fear, dread, or terror. *phobos* also is used for reverential fear, i.e., the fear a subject properly has toward a legitimate ruler, such as the fear which man owes God, or the fear a slave owes his master.

The word translated ‘lifetime’ is *zao* [2198], meaning ‘to live’, or ‘to be alive’. It has a wide variety of connotations, both literal and figurative.

The word translated ‘subject’ is the adjective *enochos* [1777], meaning literally ‘held in’ or ‘contained in’, hence, ‘bound under obligation to’, ‘liable to’, or ‘subject to’. According to lexicographer Vine, *enochos* is ‘used in the sense of being in danger of the penal effect of a misdeed’; thus, it connects an individual with a crime, trial or tribunal, penalty, or victim. It is also used of the thing by which one is bound or to which one is subject.

The word translated ‘bondage’ is *douleia* [1397], meaning ‘slavery’.

Throughout her history, sinful, idolatrous Israel had repeatedly been sold into slavery by God; cf. Judges 2:14, 3:8, 4:2, 10:7, I Samuel 12:9, Isaiah 50:1. Each time, she remained in bondage until she finally came to her senses and called out to God for deliverance. Once sold into slavery, Israel was subject to the will of her new master, and—what is vital to note—it was the will of God that she be so, until she repent and he deliver

her from bondage.

A prime example is found in the 27th & 28th chapters of the book of Jeremiah. In that passage, Jeremiah commands, exhorts, and implores the remnant of Israel to submit themselves to the king of Babylon and serve him, that they might live. To Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, God gave absolute power over the captives, Daniel 5:18–19.

Here in Hebrews, the phrase ‘fear of death’ describes this power—legitimately held and exercised—which kept Israelites in subjection to the earthly rulers to whom God had sold them. Thus, the phrase, “through fear of death”, is tantamount to saying, “through respectful submission to legitimate (though oppressive) authority”.

V. The Status of the Redeemed

The point being made in Hebrews 2:14–15 is that, through the death of Christ Jesus, Israel has been once and for redeemed from bondage to earthly rulers. Of course, this redemption belongs only to such as have been baptized into the body of Christ Jesus, thus becoming Christians. The Israelite who is in Christ is no longer in bondage to earthly rulers. No longer does he owe them obedient service. No longer do they legally exercise the prerogative of death over him, to hold him in subjection. His relationship to them has changed from one of slavery to one of ambassadorship; consider II Corinthians 5:20 & Ephesians 6:20.

As an ambassador residing within a foreign realm, the Christian is bound to obey earthly rulers only to a limited degree, and with the sole purpose of maintaining, to the extent possible, a harmonious relationship with those rulers. Should an earthly ruler encroach upon his liberties in Christ Jesus, the Christian is free to act as necessary—being bound only by the Law of God—in order to defend himself and that which is his.

This redemption from the domain of earthly rulers is also described by the apostle Paul, in Colossians 1:13. The verse reads, “[God] who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear son.”

The word translated ‘delivered’ is *rhuomai* [4506], meaning primarily ‘to rescue from’, but also ‘to preserve from’.

The word translated ‘power’ is *exousia* [1849], meaning ‘freedom of action’, or ‘right to act’.

The word translated ‘darkness’ is *skotos* [4655], meaning ‘darkness’ in a variety of senses. These include physical darkness; intellectual darkness; blindness; moral and spiritual darkness and, by metonymy, those who are in a state of moral or spiritual darkness; evil works; the evil powers who dominate the world; and secrecy. Lexicographer Vine notes that, with the exception of the meaning ‘secrecy’, *skotos* is always used in a bad sense.

The word translated ‘translated’ is *methistemi* [3179], meaning ‘to change’ or ‘to remove’. As with the passage under consideration in Hebrews, this passage in Colossians portrays redemption from legitimate authority which legitimately exercises its power over its subjects.

VI. Paul the Author of Hebrews?

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews is unknown. Many teachers and commentators attribute the epistle to the apostle

Paul, but to do so is to ignore irrefutable evidence which lies within the epistle itself. Indeed, it seems that almost no one has considered the implication of the third verse of the second chapter with respect to authorship of the epistle.

Hebrews 2:3 reads, "...how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, **and was confirmed unto us by them that heard [him]**..." This is a statement which the apostle Paul never could have made! Several passages of Scripture attest to the fact that Paul's knowledge of the Gospel came directly to him by revelation from Christ Jesus; consider I Corinthians 11:23, II Corinthians 12:1-7, Galatians 1:11-12 & 2:6-9, & Ephesians 3:3-4. Moreover, Paul was an eye-witness to the resurrection, having had a personal encounter with the risen Christ Jesus:

And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. . . . And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

— Acts 9:1-9, 26-27

Thus, the Gospel which Paul preached was not hearsay; he received it directly from the Lord; unlike the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, Paul had no need for confirmation of the Gospel message.

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***These, having put the world in commotion,
are also here present...and these all do contrary
to the decree of Caesar, saying another
to be king—Jesus.***

— Acts 17:6-7

We ought obey God rather than men.

— Acts 5:29