



# The Devil in the General Epistles, Part 1:

## Hebrews

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### Abstract

The three main historical antecedents of the New Testament doctrine of the devil (the Old Testament, Second Temple Judaism, and the teachings of Jesus) are briefly discussed. Christadelphian interpretations of the single text in Hebrews which mentions the devil (Hebrews 2:14) are described. Objections to interpreting this text as a reference to a personal devil are considered and addressed, as are arguments for interpreting the devil as a personification of sin in this text. Two texts in Hebrews about Christ's experience of temptation are discussed and it is argued that they are not incompatible with Christ having been tempted by a personal devil. Hence Hebrews is shown to be consistent with the teachings of Jesus and apocalyptic Judaism that the devil or Satan is a supernatural personal being.

## Preface

The Christadelphians are a religious movement founded by John Thomas, a British medical doctor, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the distinctive aspects of Christadelphian theology is the view that the devil is not a supernatural personal being but rather a personification of human wickedness. While it is common enough in modern theology to demythologize or rationalize the devil into an abstract concept, Christadelphians are virtually unique in claiming that their view of the devil was held by all the biblical writers.

Thus, for many modern theologians the point of departure from belief in a personal devil is contextualization – the need to adapt biblical teachings to a modern, scientific worldview. By contrast, Christadelphians uphold a doctrine of strict biblical inerrancy,<sup>1</sup> and claim to hold to the teachings of the apostles. For them, the point of departure from belief in a personal devil is exegesis – the interpretation of the biblical text in its original context.

In this study the objective is to evaluate Christadelphian exegesis of passages about the devil which occur in a portion of the New Testament known as the general or catholic epistles: Hebrews,<sup>2</sup> James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.

Besides evaluating Christadelphian exegesis, this study will offer an informal survey of scholarly exegesis of these passages and argue for the author's own view, which is that all of these epistles presuppose a belief in the devil as a supernatural, personal being.

### 1. Sources for the early Christian doctrine of the devil and Satan

By the author's own count, the devil is referred to by various terms 101 times in 66 distinct New Testament passages<sup>3</sup> spanning 19 of the 27 books of the New Testament. Under traditional views of the authorship of New Testament books, every New Testament writer refers to the devil at least once; under modern critical views; there are at most one or two who do not.<sup>4</sup> Whatever entity or theological concept stands behind these references, the devil evidently played a

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<sup>1</sup> The foundational article of the Christadelphians' Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith states that the Scriptures "were wholly given by inspiration of God in the writers, and are consequently without error in all parts of them, except such as may be due to errors of transcription or translation" (Christadelphians 1898).

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews was not traditionally grouped with the general epistles but rather with the Pauline epistles. However, given the near-universal agreement among modern scholars that Hebrews was not written by Paul, and the fact that it is not explicitly addressed to a particular audience, it seems more appropriate today to classify it as a general epistle than as a Pauline epistle.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 4:1-11; 5:37; 6:13; 10:25; 12:26; 13:19; 13:38-39; 16:23; 25:41; Mark 1:13; 3:22-26; 4:15; 8:33; Luke 4:1-13; 8:12; 10:18-19; 11:15; 11:18-19; 13:16; 22:3; 22:31; John 6:70; 8:44; 12:31; 13:2; 13:27; 14:30; 16:11; 17:15; Acts 5:3; 10:38; 13:10; 26:18; Romans 16:20; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 7:5; 2 Corinthians 2:11; 4:4; 6:15; 11:14; 12:7; Ephesians 2:2; 4:27; Ephesians 6:11-16; 1 Thessalonians 2:18; 3:5; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; 3:3; 1 Timothy 1:20; 3:6-7; 2 Timothy 2:26; Hebrews 2:14; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8; 1 John 2:13-14; 3:8-12; 4:4; 5:18-19; Jude 9; Revelation 2:9-10; 2:13; 2:24; 3:9; 12:9-12; 20:2-10

<sup>4</sup> Possible writers who do not mention the devil are the author of 2 Peter (if one follows the view of modern critical scholarship that its author was different from 1 Peter), and the author(s) of Philippians and Colossians (if one follows the view of modern scholarship that they were not written by Paul, and also understands their authorship to be different from the other so-called deutero-Pauline epistles).

prominent role in the thought world of the early church, and the so-called general epistles are an important witness to this fact.

The general epistles were not written as open letters to the worldwide Christian community. They were occasioned by specific sets of circumstances and written for particular purposes. They became known as general epistles because they are not explicitly addressed to a particular congregation or individual. Collectively, they represent the work of several different inspired human writers, addressed to Christian believers both Jewish and Gentile in different areas of the Roman Empire. While the general epistles are relatively short (excluding Hebrews), the devil is mentioned in all but three (2 Peter and the very brief 2 and 3 John). This attests to the ubiquity of this doctrine in the early church, and raises the question of how the term ‘the devil’ (Greek: *ho diabolos*) came into such widespread use in the early church. There are three main influences to consider here.

### 1.1. The Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *satan* is a common noun meaning accuser or adversary, and as a noun it occurs 27 times. It occurs several times with reference to individual human adversaries (1 Samuel 29:4; 1 Kings 11:14, 23, 25; probably Psalm 109:6) or a corporate human adversary (2 Samuel 19:22; possibly 1 Kings 5:4). There are four Old Testament texts in which the word is generally regarded by biblical scholars as referring to heavenly beings: Numbers 22:22-32, 1 Chronicles 21:1, Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3:1-2.<sup>5</sup>

In Numbers 22:22, 32 it occurs as a common noun to describe the angel of the Lord as an adversary to Balaam. In 1 Chronicles 21:1 it refers to an adversary which most scholars regard as angelic, and ‘satan’ may even function as the proper name of this being, although this is debated.<sup>6</sup> The two most important passages where this word occurs in the Old Testament are Job 1-2 (where *satan* occurs 11 times) and Zechariah 3:1-2 (where *satan* occurs twice). These two texts are distinctive in that *satan* occurs with the article: it is not *an* adversary but The Adversary or The Accuser (sometimes translated ‘The Prosecutor’<sup>7</sup>).

Laato writes:

“[I]t should be observed that Satan was not the self-evident name of the leader of demons in early Jewish writings...we lack an established tradition whereby the name of the personal Evil or the leader of demons is Satan. This evidence supports the view that *satan* originally referred to a certain office in the divine council and was only later connected with the proper name of personal Evil – a transition which could have occurred already in the Old Testament.”<sup>8</sup>

Commenting on Isaiah 45:5-7, Laato remarks that in scholarly discussion this text has been regarded as opposing Persian dualism:

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<sup>5</sup> Brown 2011: 203; Laato 2013: 3.

<sup>6</sup> See Stokes 2009 for a full discussion of this text.

<sup>7</sup> Fokkelman 2012: 35.

<sup>8</sup> Laato 2013: 4-5.

“This passage postulates that Yahweh is behind everything that happens...There is no evil power or dark side which governs history but Yahweh alone.”<sup>9</sup>

This rejection of a cosmic evil power opposite to Yahweh paved the way for locating the ultimate power of evil within the divine council:

“Satan as a celestial being became associated with the power of evil. He had the right to address in the divine council. By referring to Yahweh’s justice and righteousness he could demand that evil be inflicted on Israel and its people. He was, however, incapable of realizing his own plans for the world, since all his actions were controlled by Yahweh.”<sup>10</sup>

Scholars have used the term “modified dualism” or “qualified dualism” to describe this worldview.<sup>11</sup> So, for instance, Grindheim writes concerning one Qumran text, “The consensus view among scholars is that the dualism in 1QS 3:13-4:26 is a modified cosmic dualism.”<sup>12</sup>

We will have occasion to look more closely at Zechariah 3 in our discussion of Jude 9. From this very brief survey of the Old Testament testimony we can conclude that *satan* is both a common noun meaning adversary or accuser as well as the title of a particular angelic being or office. It is also worth drawing attention to the fact that *ha’satan* in Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 was translated with *ho diabolos* in the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. This version of the Bible was widely used by the early church, which makes it very likely that the use of the term *ho diabolos* in the New Testament was influenced by its use in Job and Zechariah in the Septuagint. So we too ought to look for clues in Job and Zechariah that might assist us in understanding the references to *ho diabolos* in the general epistles.

## 1.2. Second Temple Judaism

During the centuries of prophetic silence from the post-exilic period until the birth of Christ, the Jews studied and reflected on their Scriptures in light of their experiences as a nation. Considerable theological development took place during this period. We should not be quick to cast a negative judgment on these developments since, as we shall see, they exerted considerable influence on the early church.

Frohlich notes that our main source for Second Temple Judaism is the Dead Sea Scrolls, which show that belief in demons was central to the worldview of the Qumran sect.<sup>13</sup> Apocalyptic texts such as 1 Enoch and the Book of Jubilees provided those Jewish communities who subscribed to them with a “systematic demonology.”<sup>14</sup> Specifically:

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<sup>9</sup> Laato 2013: 16.

<sup>10</sup> Laato 2013: 17.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. von Wahlde 2010: 239; Kysar 2007: 72; Moberly 2009: 129; Harrington 2011: 98.

<sup>12</sup> Grindheim 2005: 56.

<sup>13</sup> Frohlich 2013: 24.

<sup>14</sup> Frohlich 2013: 33.

“1 Enoch formulated the essence and origin of the demons in a narrative form; while Jubilees delineated, in the frame of the patriarchal narratives, a theological system where the setting and functions of supernatural beings are established.”<sup>15</sup>

The Book of Jubilees names a leader of the demons, Mastema, whose role is to execute God’s judgment and also to be an agent of testing.<sup>16</sup> Mastema is also referred to in Jubilees by other names and titles including the Satan<sup>17</sup> and Belial. In Jubilees,

“Satan is clearly some sort of angel who has access to the heavenly region, but plays a negative role toward humankind, accusing them before God.”<sup>18</sup>

We can state conclusively that those strands of Judaism who held these apocalyptic writings in high regard, had a well-developed demonology in which the demons had a leader who was an instrument of both divine justice and testing, who went by various names including Satan.<sup>19</sup> It must be emphasized that Second Temple Judaism was a diverse marketplace of ideas and thus it cannot be assumed that all or even most Jews of Jesus’ day held to this apocalyptic worldview and associated demonology. The Pharisees’ challenge to Jesus in Matthew 12:24 presupposes a demonology similar to that of the Qumran sect. By contrast, the Sadducees did not believe in angels or spirits (Acts 23:8) and thus presumably did not believe in Satan or demons. There are Jewish texts of the Second Temple Period which appear to react against a demonological worldview, such as Sirach 21:27.<sup>20</sup>

The surviving writings of apocalyptic Judaism show that the concept of a personal, angelic prince of evil known by the name or title of Satan did exist by the time Christ was born. There were other Jews who seem to have ignored or even opposed this idea.

For at least a few decades, Christianity was effectively a sect of Judaism, more specifically apocalyptic Judaism, and traded in the marketplace of Jewish religious ideas. Although Christianity was theologically innovative, its Jewish background no doubt exerted a weighty influence on the terminology and thought patterns of the early church. Thus, while non-canonical Jewish texts are not authoritative for Christian doctrine, they do assist us in establishing the literary-historical context of the New Testament.

Concerning 1 Enoch, Isaac writes:

“Likewise, even though Charles may have exaggerated when he claimed that ‘nearly all’ the writers of the New Testament were familiar with 1 Enoch, **there is no doubt that the New Testament world was influenced by its language and thought.** It influenced

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<sup>15</sup> Frohlich 2013: 35.

<sup>16</sup> Laato 2013: 18.

<sup>17</sup> Stuckenbruck writes concerning Jubilees 10:11, “Here, ‘the satan’ refers to the chief of the evil spirits who has just previously been mentioned by name as ‘Mastema’; the expression, then, describes a function associated with Mastema” (Stuckenbruck 2013: 63).

<sup>18</sup> Frohlich 2013: 34 n. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Other Second Temple Jewish texts which use Satan as a proper name or the title of a specific celestial being include the Assumption of Moses, the Testament of Job, and possibly 11Q5 xix 13-16.

<sup>20</sup> This text is discussed in Farrar 2014(1): 10-11.

Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 John, Jude (which quotes it directly), and Revelation (with numerous points of contact). There is little doubt that 1 Enoch was influential in molding New Testament doctrines concerning the nature of the Messiah, the Son of Man, the messianic kingdom, **demonology**, the future, resurrection, final judgment, the whole eschatological theater, and symbolism.”<sup>21</sup>

Pertaining to the Book of Jubilees, Helyer writes:

“We have already drawn attention to parallels in regard to angelology and demonology between the NT and Tobit, 1 Enoch 72-82 and the Additions to Daniel. Similar parallels exist between Jubilees and the NT. One should note especially the three NT passages that mention angels at Mount Sinai mediating the giving of the law (Acts 7:38; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2). This, of course, is repeatedly referred to in Jubilees. Although R.H. Charles held that Paul, Luke, James, Hebrews and 2 Peter were aware of and influenced by Jubilees, this probably overstates the case. Rather, we see instances where the common Jewish milieu of Jubilees and the NT shines through.”<sup>22</sup>

We should certainly be aware of this Jewish background when we approach New Testament texts about the devil, Satan or the evil one (which are equivalent terms in the New Testament).<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, we can go further and state that the burden of proof lies with the exegete who would *not* read the New Testament in light of this background. This is especially true when we consider that a significant number of New Testament devil texts undeniably occur in an apocalyptic<sup>24</sup> and/or dualistic<sup>25</sup> context.

### **1.3. The Teachings of Jesus**

No source apart from Jesus himself can explain the attention paid to the devil and Satan in the New Testament. Satan was not featured prominently in the Old Testament, but was featured very prominently in the teaching ministry of Jesus. The early church believed that Jesus was a source of divine revelation superior to that of the Old Testament prophets (Hebrews 1:1). As such, when Jesus brought to light new information and a new emphasis on Satan, the early church followed suit.

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<sup>21</sup> Isaac 2010: 10, emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Helyer 2002: 135.

<sup>23</sup> This can be easily seen by comparing parallel texts where the terms are interchanged, such as Matthew 13:19/Mark 4:15/Luke 8:12, or by considering instances where these terms are used interchangeably in the same passage, such as Matthew 13:38-39; John 13:2, 27; Ephesians 6:11-16; 1 John 3:8-12; Revelation 12:9 and Revelation 20:2.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Matthew 12:26-29/Mark 3:23-27/Luke 11:17-22; Matthew 13:38-39; Matthew 25:41; Luke 10:18-19; John 16:11; Acts 26:18; Romans 16:20; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; 1 John 3:8-12; Revelation 12:9-12; Revelation 20:2-10.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Matthew 13:38-39; Luke 4:6-8; John 8:44; Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 2 Corinthians 6:15; James 4:7; 1 John 3:10; 1 John 5:18-19; Revelation 12:9.

The Gospels contain 16 distinct sayings of Jesus in which he mentions the devil by one name or another.<sup>26</sup> In addition to this, the narrative of Jesus' wilderness temptations must have been recounted by Jesus to his disciples since they were not present. Furthermore, in the letters to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2-3, several statements about Satan or the devil are attributed to Jesus.

Thus the most obvious reason why the devil is mentioned so frequently in the New Testament is that Jesus' words and works had made it clear to his earliest followers that he considered this an important topic. The writers of the general epistles probably did not have access to the Gospels, but they likely did have access to oral traditions about Jesus' life, and some of them may have been eyewitnesses of his teaching ministry.

The texts about the devil that we will examine in the general epistles are, for the most part, **allusions rather than new doctrinal teachings**. The writers assume that their readers will know what they mean when they refer to *ho diabolos*. As we seek to place ourselves in these readers' shoes and wrestle with how they would have understood these texts, we will do well to keep the above sources in mind.

## **2. Hebrews 2:14**

### **2.1. Text**

14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. (Hebrews 2:14-15 NRSV)

In the relatively lengthy Epistle to the Hebrews there is just this one passing reference to the devil (*ho diabolos* in Greek). It occurs in a paragraph which emphasizes the importance of Jesus' humanity for his atoning work.

### **2.2. Christadelphian Exegesis**

Hebrews 2:14 is an important passage for evaluating the Christadelphian doctrine of the devil because it has functioned as one of the main proof texts for the Christadelphian position. The Christadelphian writer Pearce refers to it as "the greatest test passage for understanding 'the devil' in the New Testament."<sup>27</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in seeking to demonstrate that the devil is a personification, Robert Roberts appealed to this passage first as he sought to reduce the 'personal devil' view to absurdity:

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew 5:37; Matthew 6:13; Matthew 12:26-29/Mark 3:23-27/Luke 11:17-22; Matthew 16:23/Mark 8:33; Matthew 13:19/Mark 4:15/Luke 8:12; Matthew 13:38-39; Matthew 25:41; Luke 10:18-19; Luke 13:16; Luke 22:31-32; John 6:70; John 8:44; John 12:31; John 14:30; John 16:11; John 17:15. Matthew 10:25 has been excluded from the list because, while spoken by Jesus, it only describes what the Pharisees said about him and does not offer any positive teaching. By contrast, the Beelzebul controversy accounts do offer positive teaching about Jesus' defeat of Satan through the parable of the strong man, as discussed in Farrar 2014(2): 9-13.

<sup>27</sup> Pearce 1986.

“The evidence of it makes a powerful beginning in Heb. 2:14... On the supposition that the devil here referred to is the orthodox devil, or a personal devil of any kind, there are four absurdities on the face of this passage. In the first place, to take on the weakness of flesh and blood was a strange way of preparing to fight a powerful devil, who, it would be imagined, would be more successfully encountered in the panoply of angelic strength, which Paul expressly says Jesus did not array himself in...In the second place it was stranger still that the process of destroying the devil should be submission to death himself! One would have thought that to vanquish and destroy the devil, life extinguishable, and strength indomitable, would have been the qualification...In the third place, the devil ought now to be dead, or whatever else is imported by the word ‘destroyed,’ for Christ died nineteen centuries ago, for the purpose of destroying him *by that process*. How comes it then, that the devil is clerically represented to be alive and busier than ever...In the fourth place, what an extraordinary proposition that the popular devil has the ‘power of death!’ It can only be received on the supposition that the devil acts as God’s policeman: but this will not square with the Miltonic and popular view, that God and the devil are sworn enemies, the latter delighting to thwart the former to the utmost extent of his power.”<sup>28</sup>

Roberts then cited several passages such as Rom. 5:21, 1 Cor. 15:56 and James 1:15 to show that it is sin that has the power of death. Consequently, he argued by comparing scripture with scripture that since the devil has the power of death and sin has the power of death, therefore the devil must be sin.

A century later, Peter Watkins declared with recourse to Hebrews 2:14 that the Lord Jesus “destroyed the devil when he was crucified.” He asked questions similar to Roberts’ designed to disprove the orthodox doctrine of the devil:

“Suppose that the popular idea is true, and that the devil is a powerful, wicked being. Is it reasonable to suppose that Jesus Christ would have come in our weak human nature and died upon a cross in order to destroy this monster? How could the death of Christ have effected the destruction of this mighty embodiment of evil – if indeed the devil is thus to be regarded? And if the death of Christ was for the purpose of destroying a monster, ought not the monster to be dead now?”<sup>29</sup>

He concludes that another definition of the devil is needed, one which can account for the Gospel temptation accounts as well as Hebrews 2:14. The definition he proposes is that “The devil that tempted the Lord Jesus was his own human desires.”<sup>30</sup> He observes the emphasis in Hebrews 2 that the Lord Jesus “possessed a nature just like ours” and in Hebrews 2 and 4:15 that he was tempted as we are. Thus the meaning of Hebrews 2:14 is as follows:

“The human desires that were frustrated in the wilderness were destroyed at Calvary. As long as there was an Adamic nature, there was the possibility of temptation. It was not enough to frustrate the human desires that opposed the will of God. They had to be

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<sup>28</sup> Roberts 1884: 194.

<sup>29</sup> Watkins 1971: 11.

<sup>30</sup> Watkins 1971: 11.

destroyed. And how else could this be done but by the destruction of the source of these ungodly desires – the nature inherited from Adam? Thus the Lord Jesus destroyed sin in the place where it resided. He destroyed sin in the flesh.

This is the message of Hebrews 2:14. Jesus came in our nature that he might die; that, by his death, the devil, or ungodly human desires, could be destroyed at their source. He “put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26).<sup>31</sup>

The argument against a personal devil from Hebrews 2:14 is repeated by Burke, who writes, “Hebrews 2:14 says that the devil was destroyed through the death of Christ (which contradicts the idea that the devil is immortal).”<sup>32</sup>

Burke anticipates the view that Hebrews 2:14 does not speak of the devil being destroyed but merely ‘rendered powerless’; however, he rejects it:

“Whether or not the devil was destroyed through Christ’s death on the cross: Some Christians say that this is yet future, others say that the devil was not ‘destroyed’ as such, merely ‘rendered powerless’, which begs the question as to why they still fear him or consider him a danger in their lives (what is the functional difference between a devil who has been destroyed, and one who has been ‘rendered powerless’?). What Scripture says: Hebrews 2:14 states clearly that Christ destroyed ‘that which has the power of death, that is, the devil’ through his death on the cross.”<sup>33</sup>

Heaster adheres to the standard Christadelphian interpretation of Hebrews 2:14, arguing that “the only meaningful and Biblically consistent approach here is to understand that the Devil is used here as a personification for sin – for it is sin which brings death (Rom. 6:23).”<sup>34</sup> Like Roberts, he argues on the basis of the parallel between the devil and sin that the devil *is* sin, or more specifically, “the sinful tendencies that are naturally within human nature.”<sup>35</sup>

Heaster appears to acknowledge that the Jews believed in a personal Satan or Devil, whom they expected to be destroyed at the changeover to the future Kingdom age.<sup>36</sup> Yet he understands the New Testament writers (especially Paul) to have referred to Satan and demons ironically in order to subvert these ideas: “The system of Satan, sinful angels, demons etc. which the Jews believed in, Paul is showing to be non-existent and at the best powerless.”<sup>37</sup> Although he does not say so directly, then, it appears that Heaster thinks the writer of Hebrews knew some of his readers would understand ‘the devil’ to refer to a personal being, but that the writer was denouncing such an interpretation without actually saying so.

Heaster is aware that the early church fathers understood this passage to teach that Christ had somehow ‘destroyed’ a personal being called the Devil on the cross. He denigrates this

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<sup>31</sup> Watkins 1971: 13.

<sup>32</sup> Burke 2007: 31.

<sup>33</sup> Burke 2007: 31.

<sup>34</sup> Heaster 2012: 60-61.

<sup>35</sup> Heaster 2012: 161.

<sup>36</sup> Heaster 2012: 44-45.

<sup>37</sup> Heaster 2012: 46.

interpretation for the same reasons given by Roberts and Watkins but does not attempt to explain how it became current in the church so soon after the apostolic era.<sup>38</sup>

Heaster is aware that the verb *katargeo* (translated ‘destroy’ in Hebrews 2:14 KJV) can mean ‘render useless’; he goes as far as to say, “the Biblical evidence is clear that ‘destroy’ means to render powerless.” He even compares the sense of the word in Hebrews 2:14 to Romans 6:6, where Paul teaches that the body of sin is ‘destroyed’ in baptism. This clearly does not refer to physical or total cessation of existence. Yet he still goes on to argue that “If the Devil is a personal being, then he should no longer exist,”<sup>39</sup> and opposes the teachings of the early Christian writer Lactantius that the devil was only provisionally destroyed through the death of Christ.<sup>40</sup>

He states that it is quite correct that Hebrews 2:14 does talk as if the Devil is a person, but explains this on the grounds of personification; that the Bible often speaks of an abstract idea as if it is a person.<sup>41</sup>

He repeats the argument against the orthodox position that “simply possessing human nature would be of no relevance if the victory of Jesus was merely against a literal personal being.”<sup>42</sup>

Heaster elsewhere suggests a different angle on interpreting the devil in Hebrews 2:14:

“‘Him that had the power of death, that is the Devil’ (Heb. 2:14) may refer to the fact that ‘the sting (power) of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the (Jewish) Law’ (1 Cor.15: 56; see also Rom. 4:15; 5:13;7:8, where ‘the Law’ that gives power to sin is clearly the Jewish law). Bearing in mind that the ‘Devil’ often refers to sin and the flesh, it seems significant that ‘the flesh’ and ‘sin’ are often associated with the Mosaic Law. The whole passage in Heb. 2:14 can be read with reference to the Jewish Law being ‘taken out of the way’ by the death of Jesus [A.V. ‘destroy him that hath the power of death’]. The Devil kept men in bondage, just as the Law did (Gal. 4:9; 5:1; Acts 15:10; Rom. 7:6-11). The Law was an ‘accuser’ (Rom. 2:19,20; 7:7) just as the Devil is.”<sup>43</sup>

In still another place in his book, Heaster suggests that Caiaphas the High Priest is the referent of the term ‘the prince of this world’ in John. He adds, “A number of expositors have interpreted “the Devil... that had the power of death” in Heb. 2:14–17 as an allusion to Caiaphas.”<sup>44</sup> He does not cite any such expositors.

In summary, Heaster understands ‘the devil’ in Hebrews 2:14 to refer simultaneously to Jesus’ defeat of his human nature and the ‘taking out of the way’ of the Law of Moses, as well as possibly Caiaphas personally.

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<sup>38</sup> Heaster 2012: 61.

<sup>39</sup> Heaster 2012: 161.

<sup>40</sup> Heaster 2012: 66.

<sup>41</sup> Heaster 2012: 163.

<sup>42</sup> Heaster 2012: 206.

<sup>43</sup> Heaster 2012: 171.

<sup>44</sup> Heaster 2012: 433.

Tennant writes:

“It is impossible not to conclude that there must be a relationship between flesh and blood, temptation and the Devil; and furthermore, the destruction of the Devil is achieved through death which must indicate that death and the Devil are related.”<sup>45</sup>

Following standard Christadelphian exegesis, he concludes that because “Sin is responsible for death,”<sup>46</sup> thus the devil must *be* sin. Thus Tennant makes the leap from positing a relationship between our flesh and blood nature and the devil, to positing that our flesh and blood nature is the devil.

We have seen that other Christadelphian writers describe the language of Hebrews 2:14 in terms of personification, a literary technique which is essential to the Christadelphian interpretation of the devil. Pearce, however, disputed that the devil is described in personal terms in this passage.

He observes that the Greek noun *diabolos* is masculine in gender and that the associated pronoun is therefore also masculine. He argues that the Greek is therefore neutral as to “whether the devil is a person or not.”<sup>47</sup> He does not explicitly deny that the devil is personified in this passage; he may indeed affirm this. However, he is careful to minimize the personal language attributed to the devil – an implicit acknowledgment that the Christadelphian position is not altogether comfortable with such language.

He uses the usual argument from parallelism, with recourse to Hebrews 9:26:

“From this valuable parallel comment we learn that "destroying the devil" is the same as "putting away sin". The devil, then, must be a way of referring to that human rebellion against God which the Bible calls sin.”<sup>48</sup>

He concludes, “And so the Bible is telling us that the real devil is sin.”<sup>49</sup>

Hayward argues based on God’s sovereignty that “no person, apart from God Himself, ever had the power of death. It would therefore be almost blasphemous to suggest that a wicked, rebellious angel could have the power of death.”<sup>50</sup>

Like Pearce and others, he also observes the apparent incongruity of Jesus becoming human in order to destroy a mighty evil spirit: “How could any human being hope to defeat such a monster?”<sup>51</sup>

He thus defines the devil as “human sinfulness.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Tennant 2004: 146.

<sup>46</sup> Tennant 2004: 149.

<sup>47</sup> Pearce 1986.

<sup>48</sup> Pearce 1986.

<sup>49</sup> Pearce 1986.

<sup>50</sup> Hayward n.d.

<sup>51</sup> Hayward n.d.

<sup>52</sup> Hayward n.d.

We could summarize the bulk of Christadelphian exegesis of Hebrews 2:14 in two points:

- This passage is impossible to account for in terms of the orthodox doctrine of the devil because:
  - God would never allow a personal devil to have the power of death
  - For Jesus to take on human flesh would not assist him in defeating such a devil
  - For Jesus to die would not assist him in defeating such a devil
  - This devil ostensibly still exists and cannot have been destroyed
- The parallel between what is said about the devil in Hebrews 2:14 and what is said about sin in other biblical passages shows that the devil literally *is* sin:
  - Sin is elsewhere said to have the power of death
  - Sin is elsewhere said to have been destroyed through death
  - Sin is elsewhere personified

### **2.3. Evaluation of Christadelphian Exegesis**

Let us begin by considering the four reasons given by Christadelphian writers as to why Hebrews 2:14 cannot refer to a personal, supernatural devil.

#### **2.3.1. Could the devil have the power of death?**

First, is it plausible that a personal devil could be said to have<sup>53</sup> the power of death? Roberts acknowledges the plausibility of the idea that the devil could function as God's "policeman," but declares this to contradict the popular doctrine of the devil, in which the devil is God's arch-enemy.

However, one only needs to read a paper such as Page's "Satan: God's Servant"<sup>54</sup> to understand that the orthodox doctrine of the devil allows for Satan to be both God's implacable foe and His servant. One could draw an analogy with Pontius Pilate, who was no friend of God and yet who, according to Jesus, received power from God to crucify him (John 19:10-11).

Scholars are widely agreed that the Satan of Job<sup>55</sup> and Zechariah<sup>56</sup> functions as a prosecutor in God's heavenly council. While the Old Testament does not clearly teach that Satan is wicked, the New Testament casts him as an overzealous accuser who is disbarred from the heavenly court,<sup>57</sup> overcome by the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 12:7-11).

While France admits that the assertion in Hebrews 2:14 that the devil has the power of death "has no direct parallel in Scripture,"<sup>58</sup> he stresses that this is "an extension of his role as the

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<sup>53</sup> The Greek of Hebrews 2:14 is ambiguous as to whether the devil "had" or "has" the power of death. The verb is a present active participle of *echo*, so a literal translation would be "that through death he might destroy the one having the power of death".

<sup>54</sup> Page 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Habel 1985: 89; Hester 2005: 11; Fokkelman 2012: 35; Chase 2013: 24.

<sup>56</sup> Petersen 1984: 189; Meyers & Meyers 2004: 183; Klein 2008: 133.

<sup>57</sup> Beale & McDonough 2007: 1125-1126.

<sup>58</sup> France 2006: 55.

source of all evil.” And as other commentators note,<sup>59</sup> the language that the devil “has the power of death” is near to that of Wisdom 2:23-24:

“23 For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity. 24 Nevertheless through envy of the devil came death into the world: and they that do hold of his side do find it.” (Brenton translation)

It is also consistent with the assertion in John 8:44 that the devil “was a murderer from the beginning.” Allen states that Satan holds the power of death “because he was the instigator of sin through his temptation of the first couple in the garden.”<sup>60</sup> The idea that the serpent was merely a mouthpiece for the serpent<sup>61</sup> probably lies in the background to Wisdom 2:23-24 as well as Hebrews 2:14.

Another possible parallel (albeit probably a later one) is a rabbinic text that equates Satan with the Angel of Death (b. B. Bat. 16a):

“A. Tanna taught: [Satan] comes down to earth and seduces, then ascends to heaven and awakens wrath; permission is granted to him and he takes away the soul.”<sup>62</sup>

Witherington cites 1 Corinthians 5:5, 10:10 and John 8:44 as possible parallels to the idea of the devil inflicting death,<sup>63</sup> though 1 Corinthians 5:5 probably does not refer to physical death,<sup>64</sup> and it is debatable whether “the Destroyer” of 1 Corinthians 10:10 is Satan. 1 Peter 5:8 and Revelation 12:4 also surely refer to the devil inflicting death (whether literally or metaphorically). The Gospels also implicate the devil in Jesus’ own death (Luke 22:3; 22:53; John 13:2; 14:30), which carries great irony since this was the very means of the devil’s undoing.

More generally, the idea that the devil possesses power (Luke 10:18-19; Acts 26:18; 1 John 5:19; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and inflicts physical suffering (Job 1-2; Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38; 2 Corinthians 12:7) is well-established in the New Testament.

Thus, while the writer of Hebrews’ claim that the devil has the power of death has no exact parallel elsewhere, Guthrie is correct in saying, “The idea that the devil has the power of death is in complete agreement with other New Testament passages regarding his power.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Bruce 1990: 86; Johnson 2006: 100

<sup>60</sup> Allen 2010: 219.

<sup>61</sup> This idea was probably endorsed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 11. See Farrar 2014(1): 25-27.

<sup>62</sup> See Reeg 2013 for a full discussion of the devil in rabbinic Judaism.

<sup>63</sup> Witherington 2007: 156.

<sup>64</sup> Most contemporary commentators hold that Paul’s judgment here entails turning the man back out into Satan’s sphere of influence, i.e. excluding him from the covenant community (Fee : 208-209; Thiselton 2000: 398; Fitzmyer : 238; Garland 170ff; Ciampa & Rosner : 207-209), although several of these commentators note that this would leave the man exposed to Satan’s attacks, which can involve physical suffering (cf. Luke 13:11-16; 2 Corinthians 12:7).

<sup>65</sup> Guthrie 1983: 93.

### **2.3.2. Could human weakness and death defeat a supernatural devil?**

Robert Roberts intoned that angelic strength would be better suited to defeating the devil than human weakness culminating in death. However, this is precisely the scandal of the cross: God used weakness to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27). That the devil was defeated through death is a paradox, but this does not make it any less true.

Furthermore, as the context makes clear, this method was adopted because Jesus did not come to rescue angels but human beings. If human beings were under the thumb of an overzealous prosecutor because of their sins, then only by atoning for their sins could Jesus deliver them from the prosecutor's grip. And, as is well established in Christian doctrine, Jesus' sacrifice could only have any effect on the human race if he shared human nature.

Johnson notes several Jewish texts which contain the idea of Messiah triumphing over the devil (Testament of Levi 18.2; Testament of Moses 10.1; 1 Enoch 10:13; 4 Ezra 13:1).<sup>66</sup> To these Thompson adds Testament of Dan 5:10; Testament of Judah 25:3.<sup>67</sup> The idea of Messiah triumphing over the devil *through death* is obviously a Christian innovation. This idea is found elsewhere in the New Testament (concerning the devil: John 12:31-32; 14:30-31; 16:11; Revelation 12:10-11; concerning the powers of evil more generally: 1 Corinthians 15:25-27; Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 2:14-15).

Furthermore, a "common theme in the early church's understanding of the atonement was rescue from Satan, the enemy of humanity."<sup>68</sup> <sup>69</sup> If this idea does not resonate with us today it may be because we are too far removed from the thought world of the early church.

### **2.3.3. Why does the devil still exist if Christ destroyed him?**

This objection has been raised by several Christadelphian writers, but the question is just as valid if one interprets 'the devil' in this text along Christadelphian lines, i.e. sinful human nature. It has been nearly 2000 years since the death of Christ, and sin and death still rage on. If we interpret this verse to mean that the death of Christ destroyed sin in an ultimate sense, then history tells us the writer of Hebrews was sorely mistaken.

It might be argued that the writer is saying that through death Christ destroyed the devil *in himself only*, but the context does not support this as the thrust is about how Christ saved his brethren and delivered them from fear of death. In any case, biblically there is only one devil;

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<sup>66</sup> Johnson 2006: 100.

<sup>67</sup> Thompson 2008: 75.

<sup>68</sup> Allison 2007: 6.

<sup>69</sup> The view that the atonement consisted in triumph over the evil powers in the world enjoyed a resurgence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the work of the Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen (Aloisi 2009: 23). It is also popular with the school of thought known as the New Perspective on Paul (Gilley 2011: 8). This has become known as the Christus Victor model of the atonement. It is not mutually exclusive of other atonement models that focus on human sinfulness or the wrath of God. Gilley, himself a proponent of the penal substitution model, nonetheless acknowledges that "Christus Victor has much to commend it, most important of which is that it has biblical support" (Gilley 2011: 14). He further expresses his opinion that it is wrong "to force one to choose between the three main interpretations of the atonement. The truth is all three biblical support and help explain the multifaceted beauty of Christ's great crosswork" (Gilley 2011:15).

there is not my devil, your devil and Christ's devil. So however we define 'the devil,' the question is, did Christ's death destroy 'him' or not? Since experience tells us that the power of death has not been removed in a consummate sense, we have every reason to seek a more nuanced interpretation.

The NIV translates Hebrews 2:14, "...so that by death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death..." The NASB and NLT also follow a similar translation. The verb translated "destroy" in other versions (KJV, NRSV, NET, ESV) is *katargeo*. One of its meanings is "to cause something to come to an end or to be no longer in existence", but another is "to cause something to lose its power or effectiveness."<sup>70</sup> Thus, the writer may be saying that Christ's death "broke the devil's grip on his people."<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, the verb is in the aorist tense and subjunctive mood. It functions as what Wallace calls a purpose-result *hina* clause,<sup>72</sup> which indicates an intention and its sure accomplishment. It specifies the surety of its accomplishment but not the time.

By way of comparison, in Ephesians 2:6-7, "so that in the coming ages **he might show** the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (ESV), the bolded words are an aorist subjunctive verb, even though their fulfillment is still in the future.

More analogous to Hebrews 2:14 are Romans 6:6 and Hebrews 2:9. Romans 6:6 says that "our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin **might be brought to nothing**" (ESV). The last verb is *katargeo* in the aorist subjunctive tense. Obviously the crucifixion did not immediately destroy or bring to nothing our bodies of sin in a consummate sense. This has been done provisionally, but its total fulfillment awaits the resurrection.

Similarly, in Hebrews 2:9 we read, "so that by the grace of God **he might taste** death for everyone". This verb is in the aorist subjunctive. Christ has not tasted death for everyone in a consummate sense, because everyone else still dies! However, in a forensic sense he has done so.

There are thus two possible interpretations of this Greek clause in Hebrews 2:14 which allow for the devil's continued existence after the death of Christ. The first interpretation takes *katargeo* in the sense of "render powerless" rather than "destroy" (following the NIV, NASB and NLT). Thus Jesus' atoning death broke the devil's accusing power over people because there was now a basis on which righteousness could be imputed to them.

The second interpretation takes *katargeo* in the sense of "destroy" (following the NRSV, NET, ESV and KJV) but allows that (as in Romans 6:6 and Hebrews 2:9) this occurred only provisionally at the time of the crucifixion and its consummation is still future.

In either case, the key point is that the devil was defeated in a forensic sense at the cross but will only be destroyed in a physical sense at the end of time. It is the difference between the pronouncement and the execution of a sentence (other theologians have drawn an analogy with the Second World War, in which Christ's death and resurrection correspond to D-Day and his

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<sup>70</sup> Arndt et al 2000: 525.

<sup>71</sup> Bruce 1990: 86.

<sup>72</sup> Wallace 1996: 473.

Parousia to VE-Day). This is consistent with the portrayal of the devil in Revelation: in chapter 12 he is cast out of heaven but continues to roam about wrathfully, knowing that his time is short. Only in the millennial period is he finally thrown into the lake of fire (chapter 20).

This broad assessment of the sense in which Jesus' death "destroyed" the devil is widely supported by New Testament scholarship.<sup>73</sup> As Ellingworth puts it:

"Realized and unrealized elements in eschatology are held in tension...The one who has power over death is himself reduced to impotence, but death itself is not yet destroyed."<sup>74</sup>

Or, as Bruner aptly wrote, "The devil's defeat does not mean the devil's absence."<sup>75</sup>

### **2.3.4. Parallels between the devil and sin**

If the devil is the personal embodiment of evil, as orthodox theology teaches, then it is no surprise that there are close parallels between what is said about the devil and what is said about sin and death. One can agree with Harry Tennant that "death and the Devil are related" and similarly one can rightly say that sin and the devil are related, but this does not imply that sin literally is the devil.

If *ho diabolos* were an unknown quantity, it would make sense to infer its meaning from the description given to it in this verse. However, this is precisely the mistake that Christadelphian exegetes make. *ho diabolos* was not an unknown quantity to first-century Jewish Christians, and the writer in Hebrews 2:14 is not defining a new concept for his readers; he is alluding to something he assumes they know about. The identity of *ho diabolos* or *ho satanas* was well-established in apocalyptic Judaism and even more so in apostolic Christianity through the teachings of Jesus. As long as the use of this term is consistent with its use in other writings of the period – and it is – then we ought to give it its usual meaning and not invent a new meaning for it.

### **2.3.5. Personal language used of the devil**

While most Christadelphian writers acknowledge the use of personal language for the devil in Hebrews 2:14 and explain it in terms of the literary technique of personification, Pearce expressed doubt as to whether personal language is used for *ho diabolos* in Hebrews 2:14.

This is an important point, because if the devil is in fact an abstract entity, we would not expect it to be personified in every instance. Surely there ought to be at least one place in the New Testament where this literary device is dropped and the writer states plainly that the devil is a thing and not a person. Are there grounds for asserting that Hebrews 2:14 is that place?

In the phrase translated "him who holds the power of death" (NIV) or "the one who has the power of death" (NRSV), 'him' or 'the one' translates the article (*ton*) which functions here as a pronoun. The article is here masculine in gender and accusative in case. This could indicate that

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<sup>73</sup> Guthrie 1983: 93; Bruce 1990: 86; Ellingworth 1993: 173; Witherington 2007: 156; Allen 2010: 219.

<sup>74</sup> Ellingworth 1993: 173.

<sup>75</sup> Bruner 2012: 873.

the object of the sentence is a 'he', but since it refers to the masculine noun *ho diabolos*, it would be masculine in gender even if *ho diabolos* were a thing. Thus Pearce is correct that the Greek pronoun is ambiguous as to whether *ho diabolos* is a person or not. Nor is the word 'who' in the Greek; it has been supplied by the translators.

From a strictly grammatical point of view, then, it would be possible to translate, "that through death he might destroy **that which** has the power of death, that is, the devil." However, since "power" (*kratos*) is a personal quality, and there is nothing to suggest that *ho diabolos* is impersonal, 'him' is surely the correct translation of the pronoun. Viewed on its own, *ho diabolos* in Hebrews 2:14 is either a person or a personification, and is not described as a thing.

The broader context of the Septuagint, the writings of apocalyptic Judaism, and the rest of the New Testament tell us that *ho diabolos* is a person and not merely a personification.

#### **2.4. Proposed Interpretation**

The devil is an angelic being who in some sense held the power of death, either as a function granted to him by God or because he precipitated the Fall in the Garden of Eden (or both). When Christ atoned for the sins of the world on the cross, the devil was exposed for his overzealous, vindictive accusation of mankind and disbarred from the heavenly court (Revelation 12:7-10). His eventual destruction is certain and his power over the church curtailed but God allows him to continue working evil in the world until the end of this age.

### **3. Hebrews 2:18 and 4:15**

#### **3.1. Text**

"17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." (Hebrews 2:17-18 NASB)

"15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15 NASB)<sup>76</sup>

#### **3.2. Christadelphian Exegesis**

Christadelphian writers take Hebrews 4:15 as a pivotal passage on the subject of the devil. Most writers<sup>77</sup> mention the text, but the more extensive discussion by Heaster and Burke will illustrate the issue.

It is better in this case simply to quote Burke at length:

"Many Christians point to the temptation of Christ as a supposed model of temptation by Satan, but will acknowledge that no Christian has ever experienced an external temptation

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<sup>76</sup> I normally provide the NRSV translation of a passage by default as it is my preferred version. In this case, I have provided the NASB translation because the NRSV takes a minority view in rendering *peirazo* 'tested' rather than 'tempted' in these two texts.

<sup>77</sup> See Roberts 1882; Watkins 1971: 11

by Satan physically appearing to them and enticing them to commit sin, as he is supposed to have done to Christ. What Scripture says: Hebrews 2:18 says that Christ suffered temptation in order to identify with our temptation, and Hebrews 4:15 states clearly that the process of Christ's temptation was identical to that of our own. These statements cannot be true if Christ was tempted by the devil in a manner which is totally different to the process of temptation to which we are subjected. If the 'orthodox' view of Satan is true, then we should experience the same process of temptation as is supposed to have occurred to Christ – a literal and visible supernatural being coming up to us and engaging us in conversation in an effort to entice us to sin.”<sup>78</sup>

“Secondly, it is false to propose that Christ could never have encountered a temptation which had arisen from within himself. Quite apart from the fact that Christ was a human being identical to those he came to save (Hebrews 2:14-17), and therefore subject to the same temptations we ourselves experience (Hebrews 2:18), Scripture informs us explicitly that the process of his temptation was identical to our own (Hebrews 4:15). This not only means that Christ could have encountered a temptation which had arisen from within himself, it tells us that he did.

In any case, we either believe that Christ was tempted or not. Even if a temptation is presented to us by a source outside ourselves, that to which the temptation appeals is within, and it is within that the struggle against sin takes place.”<sup>79</sup>

Heaster's point is similar:

“Jesus “was in all points tempted, like as we are” (Heb. 4: 15), and: “every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed” (James 1:14). We are tempted by the “devil” of our own lusts or evil desires, and so was Jesus. We are not tempted by an evil being suddenly standing next to us and prompting us to sin - sin and temptation come “from within, out of the heart of man” (Mk. 7: 21). They “proceed” out of the heart, as if to stress that the heart really is their source. Jesus was tempted just as we are (Heb. 4:15, 16), and in this sense He becomes for us a legitimate example. Paul borrows the language of “the tempter” coming to Jesus and applies it to “the tempter” coming to Christians (1 Thess. 3:5). And we can note that Matthew alone records how Jesus fasted during the temptation period- and it is Matthew alone who records instruction to us about fasting (Mt. 16:16-8 cp. 9:14,15). Seeing we're not physically encountered by a literal personal Satan in our times of testing, it surely follows that neither was Jesus our example.”<sup>80</sup>

We could summarize the points of Burke and Heaster as follows:

1. Because Jesus was tempted ‘just as we are’ (Hebrews 4:15), and we are not tempted by a visible supernatural being engaging us in dialogue, neither must Jesus have been tempted by such a being.

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<sup>78</sup> Burke 2007: 32.

<sup>79</sup> Burke 2007: 42.

<sup>80</sup> Heaster 2012: 384-385.

2. Conversely, because we are tempted by internal lust, so must Jesus have been; thus the devil that tempted Jesus must have been internal.
3. Given that Hebrews 2:18 occurs in the context of the reference to the devil in 2:14, this is also no doubt viewed as supporting the interpretation of *ho diabolos* in 2:14 as a personified internal source of temptation.

### **3.3. Evaluation of Christadelphian Exegesis**

#### **3.3.1. Does Hebrews 4:15 exclude the possibility of temptation by a supernatural devil?**

We first need to address the argument that might be stated syllogistically as follows:

- 1) Jesus was tempted just as we are.
- 2) We are not tempted by a supernatural being.
- 3) Therefore, neither was Jesus tempted by a supernatural being.

The syllogism aside, conclusion 3) is immediately problematic because it directly contradicts the biblical accounts of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. One can hardly take a sentence from Hebrews and use it to turn the Gospel narratives on their head. An analysis of these narratives is beyond our scope here, but I have discussed elsewhere how they require us to understand the tempter as a supernatural personal being.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, premise 2) is simply a presupposition on the part of Heaster and Burke. They assume the very thing they aim to prove, namely that there is no external supernatural being capable of tempting people to sin.

However, we might grant premise 2) for the sake of argument with the adjectives 'visible' and/or 'audible' included, since it must be admitted that most Christians today do not experience visible or audible encounters with an angelic tempter. By contrast, the devil was certainly audible to Jesus in these temptations; whether he was also visible is less clear (though the demand for a physical act of worship suggests that he was). As such, there is admittedly a discontinuity between the wilderness temptations of Jesus and the temptations experienced by the vast majority of Christians.

The question is, does the statement in Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus was tempted "in every respect as we are" rule out the possibility of his being tempted by an audible supernatural being? There are good reasons for concluding that it does not.

The focus of this statement (and the similar statement in Hebrews 2:18) is on Jesus' experience of the frailties of human nature,<sup>82</sup> that is, the internal aspect of temptation rather than the

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<sup>81</sup> Farrar 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Jesus' nature is a matter of theological controversy in a conversation between a Christadelphian and an orthodox Christian. However, theologians as eminent as Karl Barth have affirmed that Christ assumed a fallen human nature while remaining within the fold of orthodoxy. Writers such as Kapic (2001), MacFarland (2008) and Davidson (2008) have recently chronicled the theological debate over whether Christ's human nature was fallen or unfallen, with MacFarland arguing that it is "dogmatically permissible to affirm Christ's assumption of a fallen

external circumstances. The point is that Jesus' humanity ensured that he can empathize with our experience of temptation. The comparison cannot be extended to the external circumstances of the temptation. It is not part of ordinary human experience to be confronted by a supernatural being, or to be tempted to turn stones into bread, jump off a building to prove one's invincibility, or worship someone in order to receive absolute political power. Do these differences disqualify Jesus from empathizing with our experience of temptation? Not at all; they enhance his qualifications. What the Gospel narratives tell us is that Jesus faced 'temptation, and then some'! From an internal point of view his temptations were typical, being prompted by urges such as hunger and the desire for influence. From an external point of view the temptations were quite atypical! In summary, if the writer of Hebrews was aware of the wilderness temptation narratives, he cannot possibly be saying in 4:15 that Jesus' temptations were just like ours from an external point of view. As such, Hebrews 4:15 is consistent with there being major differences between our temptations and Jesus' temptations in terms of the external circumstances.

It only remains to ask whether it is plausible to believe that, whereas Jesus was tempted by the devil by means of a personal visit and dialogue, his disciples are tempted by the devil in ways which are not visible or audible, such as by influencing our external circumstances or infiltrating us through our *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). I believe we can answer this in the affirmative.

Consider, by way of analogy, the baptism of Jesus (recorded just prior to the temptation narratives, in Matthew 3, Mark 1 and Luke 3). The Gospels tell us that after Jesus' baptism, an voice from heaven declared, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" and the Holy Spirit descended upon him visibly like a dove. Clearly this is not typical of a Christian baptism. Because our baptisms are not accompanied by visible and audible signs from heaven, should we conclude that they are not modeled after Jesus' baptism, or that God is not pleased with them? Of course not. The bottom line is, *Jesus is unique*. We are called upon to follow in his footsteps, but this does not imply that our walk with God will exactly mirror his.

If a supernatural devil did exist, is it plausible that such a being would go to extraordinary lengths to tempt the Son of God, i.e. beyond his usual *modus operandi* for tempting people? If we allow that the devil realized what was at stake in Jesus' life, then we would virtually expect him to make an exceptional effort to derail Jesus from his mission.

### **3.4. Proposed Interpretation**

Hebrews 2:18 and 4:15 affirm that, from an internal point of view, Jesus faced the same frailties and inclinations that we face. He was tempted as a human being. These texts are not saying that

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human nature" (MacFarland 2008: 401). Even theologians who hold that Christ's human nature was unfallen can hold a strong view of Christ's susceptibility to internal temptation. MacLeod writes, "Whatever the constitutional susceptibilities of human nature, Jesus had them all" (MacLeod 2001: 47). McKinley argues that Jesus "truly was tempted just as the rest of us are, by struggling with internal desires that relate to external circumstances. Like us, he was not shielded by deity or sinlessness from suffering the deeply internal pull of temptation as an attack to be resisted from the inside" (McKinley 2012: 60). Both MacLeod and McKinley argue that Jesus did not use his divinity to achieve sinlessness (MacLeod 2001: 47; McKinley 2012: 66). In view of this, we may assume for the sake of argument that Jesus was subjected to internal as well as external temptation (a view this author holds in any case), without jeopardizing orthodox Christology.

the external circumstances of Jesus' temptations were the same as ours, which would contradict the testimony of the Gospels.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The devil only receives one brief mention in the Epistle to the Hebrews. One cannot infer from this single reference more than it actually contains. Nevertheless, what the text does state about the devil is consistent with the Old Testament, the worldview of apocalyptic Judaism and the witness of the rest of the New Testament. There is no warrant for inventing a new doctrine of the devil out of this text. Furthermore, the teachings in Hebrews concerning Jesus' experience of internal temptation do not negate the testimony of the Synoptic Gospels that he was tempted by the devil, an external personal being.

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