

Book Review

A Theology of the Dark Side: Putting the Power of Evil in Its Place, Revised Edition

Nigel Goring Wright,

Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003. 204 pages

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Readers seeking a theological discussion of George Lucas' *Star Wars* movies will not find it in this inappropriately titled book. Instead, they will find a stimulating, though not always convincing, theoretical and practical consideration of evil, demonology and spiritual warfare. Books on this topic are especially relevant in Pentecostal-Charismatic circles today, given the increasing attention given to deliverance ministry and so-called "strategic-level" spiritual warfare directed at "territorial spirits." Wright has pointed things to say to those who have become enthusiastic about such things.

The book is a "sustained reflection" on the idea that "while it is wrong to reject the existence of the powers of darkness . . . it is equally wrong to believe in them in the wrong way" (28). His suggestion for thinking the right way about the devil is that we should "disbelieve in the devil." By this he does not mean that Christians should deny the existence of the devil, but that they should not "believe in" the devil in the same way they "believe in" Christ. Wright is concerned about what he sees as an unhealthy fascination among certain Charismatics with demons and the devil, believing such fascination has led them to become a bit demonic themselves. In advocating "disbelief" in the devil, he

hopes to help them begin to jeer, scorn and flout the devil instead of rendering to him a form of faith. He insists that the devil is not a person, but rather a sub personal entity.

In his efforts to depersonalize the concept of the devil, Wright offers a detailed theological analysis of evil and the devil. Indeed, the book's most valuable contribution is Wright's survey of views on evil that such thinkers as Barth, Moltmann, Perry, and Wink, have offered in recent years. He is always fair to other theologians, consistently calling attention to useful aspects of their thought, but he consistently rejects the final validity of their proposals on the basis they have failed to make an adequate exegetical case for their speculations. Ironically, Wright's own proposal for the origin and nature of the devil fails for precisely the same reason. There is not a shred of biblical support for his speculation that evil is a "psychic force" created by human sin and that "Satan language . . . is a 'mythic' personification of collective human evil" (79).

Wright makes a convincing case that there is no airtight exegetical case for the traditional Christian belief that the devil is a fallen angel. Still, there is far more biblical, theological and traditional

support for this most ancient Christian tradition than for his radical new proposal—one which should be rejected by, and has virtually no hope of gaining traction among, the demon-conscious Charismatics Wright seeks to correct. A curious feature of his proposal is his acceptance of the language of “psychic energy,” “psychic reservoir,” and the like, which have been adopted by the “Christian Exorcism Study Group” to discuss demonic possession. Given that he recognizes that “scientific definitions of the psyche do not have much place for what [he] is calling ‘the psychic,’” (122) it is difficult to see why he finds such vocabulary to be compelling. Further, it is hard to see why he finds his new mythology of the creation of evil and the devil through the build-up of some kind of reservoir of psychic energies that “constellate themselves” in a non-personal, non-being, nonetheless-real Satan. How does this departure from Christian tradition constitute an advance on the biblical language the Christian theology has used to discuss evil and Satan?

Despite serious problems with Wright’s doctrine of evil, Satan and demons, he does offer some helpful advice for dealing with deliverance ministry, and he has important things to say about spiritual warfare that are worth hearing. Many American Christians will be rightly offended by his declaration that just as “Hitler tried to domesticate the church in the interests of National Socialism, . . . the same trend can be discerned in the United States, where Christianity and Americanism are closely associated.” He goes on to state, “Christianity is in danger of losing its power by being harnessed to the interests

of the nation, perpetuating a myth of national purity and righteousness, a kind of imperialistic fundamentalism that is incapable of self-criticism.” Such highly charged rhetoric is deeply offensive even when it may contain a grain of truth. Trotting out the Nazis is an almost certain sign that a writer prefers sensation to reason in the issue under discussion. Overall, the book is worth cautious consideration by those who are interested in exploring recent Christian theology about evil, but it will require a few hard swallows of “disbelief” for American Pentecostals and Charismatics.