

Introduction

Time future: The Accuser of our comrades, who accuses them day and night before our God, has now been thrown down.

The Revelation to John, 12.10

Time present: I, Jesus, am Lucifer.

The Revelation to John, 22.16

I offer the above quotations from the Apocalypse as emblematic of the following history of Satan. The first shows that Satan has the function of Celestial Prosecutor against Humanity, a position from which he is to be ousted some time in the future, according to this visionary prophecy. The second, from the last page of the New Testament, has Jesus calling Himself the Bright Morning Star, or, in Latin, Lucifer ("Light-Bearer," the name of the planet Venus when it appears in the East). It was not until post-Biblical times that Lucifer was associated with Satan, or that Satan was thought to have been cast out of Heaven before the creation of Adam and Eve, or that Satan had some connection with Adam and Eve.

I want to set the record straight, detailing exactly what is in the Bible and what is not in the Bible. In calling my book *Satan: A Biography*, I am obviously alluding to Jack Miles's *God: A Biography* (1995).¹ In so doing, I wish to indicate that, like him, I intend to deal with each "appearance" of Satan on its own, without being influenced by later contexts. But whereas Miles uses a literary approach, giving a character-analysis of God as presented in each book of the Hebrew Bible, and in the traditional order of these books, I aim to take a more chronological and historical approach (though with a reduced scholarly apparatus).

I will discuss the possible origin and development of each occurrence of Satan in the Bible and in interpretations of the Bible. I will

¹ Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

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be alert to the likely assumptions or presuppositions of individual Biblical authors. But the opinions of later authors will have to wait their turn. The bane of all historical writing is the impulse to retro-fit past events with present-day theories – that is, to interpret the past in the light of later knowledge. Sometimes such “proleptic” or anachronistic theorizing is done consciously, sometimes unconsciously. In the latter case, we accept someone else’s latter-day explanation as actual fact and take it from there.

The most significant retro-fitting that has occurred in the history of Satan is the thoroughgoing re-interpretation of the Satan of the New Testament, identified with the various satanic figures of the Old Testament, as a rebel against God. More than any other, this interpretation has bedeviled the history of Satan, transforming him from a merely obnoxious functionary of the Divine Government into a personification of Evil – a personification that really exists as a person.

But if Satan is not God’s enemy in the New Testament, what is he? Is he not called “the Evil One” in the Gospels? My response is, not exactly. In due course, I will object to using the word “evil” in this context, but we can all admit that Satan is considered “bad news,” specifically in contrast to the welcome news of the *Euangelion* – a word that, like its English translation, “Gospel,” means “good news.”

Satan identifies himself as having been put in charge of the Kingdoms of the World (Luke 4.6). His fall from power is predicted by Jesus (Luke 10.18), but in the meantime he keeps the same position as accuser of Humankind in Heaven as was exercised by “the satan” of the Book of Job in the Old Testament. Satan’s wished-for ouster from Heaven, optimistically foreseen by John the Divine as a future fight with Michael and his Angels (Rev. 12), was transformed into a battle and fall that took place before the beginning of time.

Let me explain what I mean by “the satan” of Job. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word “satan” is a common noun, meaning “adversary,” translated into Greek as *diabolos*, “devil.” However, there is a linguistic peculiarity in each language: both Hebrew and

Greek have definite articles, but they mean the opposite thing. In Hebrew, “the *satan*” designates a common noun, “the adversary” in the sense of “an adversary.” But *satan* by itself, without the article, can either mean “a *satan*” (“an adversary”) or stand as a proper name, “Satan.” In Greek, on the contrary, a proper name is signaled by the *presence* of the definite article: “the *diabolos*” means either “the devil” (that is, “a devil”), or “Devil,” a proper name. It’s the same with God: in Greek, *ho theos* can mean either “the god” or “God.” In modern English, we signal the difference by capitalization: “the superman,” “a superman,” “Superman.” In the pages that follow, whenever *diabolos* is used as the proper name of Satan, I will signal it by small caps: DEVIL. I will not use the definite article: saying “the DEVIL” to refer to Satan is like saying “the God” to refer to “God.”

Here’s an example of these grammatical distinctions. In the Hebrew Book of Job, one of the Angelic “Sons of God” who appear before Yahweh is “the *satan*,” thus, “an adversary,” who proposes some tests for Job. However, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (for convenience, ascribed to the Jews of Alexandria around 200 BC), this Angel’s function as “a devil” is rendered as “the devil,” and it seems clear from the context that it is used as a proper name: “DEVIL.”

In some cases, it’s not clear whether a proper name is intended. An instance can be seen when the First Book of Chronicles recapitulates King David’s sin of numbering his people. The stimulus for the sin in the earlier account (2 Samuel 24) is “the Anger of Yahweh,” while in Chronicles it is “*satan*.” Now, does this mean “Satan,” or “a *satan*,” and, if the latter, is it an Angelic adversary or a Human adversary? The Septuagint decides that it is “an adversary” (*diabolos* without the article), but it does not indicate whether this devil is Angelic or Human.

The subject of this biography is Satan, or DEVIL, as he is spoken of in the New Testament. Previous histories of “the devil” (lower-cased) have taken a broader idea of their subject. For instance, in

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Jeffrey Burton Russell's four-volume, thousand-page survey (1977–86), fewer than thirty pages are dedicated to the New Testament,² and the similarly long treatment by Gustav Roskoff in the previous century (*Geschichte des Teufels*, 1869) spends a grand total of only thirteen pages on the Christian Scriptures.

I, however, have no time for “devil-analogues” or “Satan-look-alikes.” Similarly, I do not like to characterize Nazis as “Fascists”: Fascists were Italians, not Germans. The German members of Hitler's party are properly called Nazis, and though they had some similarities to the Fascists, they also had many differences from them.

To me, the only true devil is the Christian devil, that is, DEVIL, in his various evolutions. The proverb has it that “the devil is in the details.” I propose taking a very close look at the details, proceeding inductively to conclusions. My conclusions will be very important to all “people of the Book,” those who believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, whether they are adherents of the “Scripture Only” school of Christianity or the “Scripture and Tradition” approach. For even the Scripture-Only adherents have unwittingly accepted a doctrine of Satan which is based on a tradition that has displaced Scripture and disguised itself as Scripture.

My thesis is that the deterioration in the character of Satan that is in the Bible is simply the natural result of “unfavorable media attention,” the sort of thing that happens to any unpopular character. The further deterioration that occurred in post-Biblical times, when Satan was finally construed as a rebel and outcast from the beginning, and eventually as a virtual anti-God, is merely an extension of this internal development.

I should acknowledge, however, that an alternative explanation has often been put forward, which is that the character of the satan in the Old Testament and Satan in the New Testament was darkened

² The four books by Jeffrey Burton Russell (all published by Cornell University Press) are: *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (1977); *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (1981); *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (1984); and *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (1986).

because it was affected by an alien religion, beginning as early as the Babylonian Exile, namely, Zoroastrian dualism, the belief that in addition to an all-good God, Ahura Mazda, there also existed an uncreated spirit of total evil, Angra Mainyu or Ahriman. However, the idea of Zoroastrian influence on the evolution of Satan is in limited favor among scholars today, not least because the satan figure is always subordinate to God in Hebrew and Christian representations, and Angra Mainyu does not function as an accuser or prosecutor. Moreover, the literary sources for Persian dualism are late. Of course, influence from this direction cannot be totally discounted, especially if it is simply a question of “the coloration of character,” but in this study we will leave it at the level of possibility rather than probability.

The account of Satan that follows can be characterized as a “serial and incremental biography,” which will account for the development of the usual Christian understanding of Satan, what I call the **New Biography** of Satan in chapter 9 below. It is a “trajectory study” tracing the ways in which the popular understanding of Satan has been formed out of very disparate elements. The advantage of this approach is that it clarifies exactly what is in the Bible and what has been added to the Bible. And it presents a clear challenge to those who believe that the Bible demands belief in the existence of Satan. The challenge is this: does one believe in the Satan of the Bible or in a figure that has been invented from later misunderstandings of the Bible?

Or, if one is inclined to reject the existence of Satan, one must consider whether it is the Satan of Tradition or the Satan of Scripture who is being discounted. For Tradition has trumped Scripture in this matter. In the book that follows, we will be able to see how this trumping happened, as exactly as is possible under the circumstances of the historical evidence that has survived. We will see for ourselves the ingredients of the Satanic motifs that appeared in the individual books of the Bible and then, after the Bible was closed and canonized, what interpreters made of those ingredients. Specifically,

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we will see how a new master narrative appeared, weaving the story of the rebellious Satan along with all of the Biblical motifs into its net, like a gigantic spider producing a unified and coherent web from its entrails. Sounds Diabolical, doesn't it?

I am mainly interested in ideas of what Satan is "in reality" (that is, what people believe he really is) and less interested in imaginative or artistic ideas that are admittedly fanciful or fictional. Thus, I will be more concerned with what Milton says about Satan in his treatise *Christian Doctrine* than with his portrayals of him in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, except insofar as these poems reflect his beliefs and doctrines.

The translations of Biblical passages are often my own, but I will be guided by the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of 1989, as incorporated into the *OAB: The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (3rd edn., 2001). This translation is relatively conservative, from a grammatical point of view. However, one way in which I consistently differ from this version and follow that of the *NJB*, the *New Jerusalem Bible* (2nd edn., 1985), is to use the name "Yahweh" where the NRSV only signals this sacred name of God by printing "the LORD" and "GOD" in small caps (in the latter case, the only give-away is the "D" instead of "d"). By this practice, of course, no disrespect is intended to Jewish readers. It is simply in keeping with the goal of presenting the Biblical text as it is, without altering it on the basis of later devotional or doctrinal conventions. As will be seen, the practice of substituting "Lord" for Yahweh is to be found as early as the third century BC, among Greek-speaking Jews, as witnessed by the Septuagint. For the same reason, I will be sparing in following the NRSV's attempts to achieve gender balance and to avoid linguistic sexism. For instance, when St. Paul addresses the Christians in Rome as *adelphoi*, the NRSV renders it as "brothers and sisters," with a note that only "brothers" appears in the Greek. For the sake of authenticity, I render it simply as "brothers."

Another point: when I quote terms from the Hebrew, Greek, or Latin, I will sometimes cite a noun-form even though the original text has a verb-form. Thus, I will quote the Greek noun *peirasmos*, “test,” even though the text uses the corresponding verb *peirazein*, “to test.”

In the interests of easy reading, I have been very sparing with source-references in what follows, except for parenthetical citations of Scripture and the like. More specific references can be found in my early history, *The Devil, Demonology, and Witchcraft* (1968 and 1974, updated in 2004), and in Jeffrey Russell’s volumes, noted above.³ I will point out English translations of the works I cite, when available, to allow readers to seek out the context of the excerpts presented here. But these excerpts, like my quotations of Scripture, are given more often than not in my own translation.

Here is an outline of the book.

Part I deals first with three books of the Old Testament that date from the sixth century BC, namely, Numbers, Job, and Zechariah, and “the satans” who appear in them. Then we move to the third or second century BC, with the Greek Septuagint Bible (**chap. 1**). Next we take up the Inter-Testamental Books of *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees* and the Dead Sea Scrolls (**chap. 2**).

Part II is dedicated to the New Testament. We first look at St. Paul’s authentic writings (**chap. 3**). Then the four Gospels (**chap. 4**), and the Epistles attributed to Paul but probably not written by him, followed by the remaining Epistles (**chap. 5**), except for John’s, which are treated in the chapter on Revelation (**chap. 6**). Then there is a final chapter summing up what can be found about Satan in the New Testament, studying it in the order of the books as we now have them (**chap. 7**). In **Part II**, therefore, we see that Satan is a functionary of the Divine Government, charged with testing and disciplining Mankind.

³ My book, *The Devil, Demonology, and Witchcraft*, first published by Doubleday in 1968, came out in a revised edition in 1974. The 2004 reprint (Wipf and Stock, Eugene OR) has a new Appendix, being the English translation of my entry on “Teufel” in *TRE (Theologische Realenzyklopädie)* 33.1/2 (2001) 124–34.

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He is suspicious of everyone, including Jesus, and hostile to the followers of Jesus, constantly trying to trip them up and then bringing complaints against them before God. His tenure as Chief Tester and Accuser is repeatedly threatened, but he maintains these posts until well into the apocalyptic future. All this makes up the **Original Biography** of Satan.

Part III deals with the early Fathers of the Church and their identification of Satan with the Serpent of Eden, according to which Satan's jealousy of Adam is the cause of his own fall and also the cause of Adam's fall. These ideas are elaborated in the fourth-century work *The Life of Adam and Eve*, which is repeatedly drawn on by Mohammed in the Koran (**chap. 8**).

Part IV documents the thesis of Origen of Alexandria (d. ca. AD 254) that Satan originally sinned not because of Adam but because of pride. He held that Satan is metaphorically depicted in the passage of Isaiah that likens the King of Babylon to the arrogant Morning Star (*Lucifer*). The Bible is then reviewed from this point of view, which constitutes the **New Biography** of Satan: Satan now functions not as God's assistant but rather as God's enemy. We will then see that Satan, in his guise as the Chief Pagan God, is formally renounced in the ceremonies of Baptism (**chap. 9**).

Then we deal with the Patristic (Church Fathers') theory that when Adam and Eve sinned, they and their descendants were bound in slavery to Satan, until bought back (redeemed) by the death of Christ. On a more popular level, in *Lives of the Saints*, Satan came to be seen as the Great Loser, a figure of ridiculous frustration. A later development in Satan's job-description is then discussed: he comes to be in charge of punishing the damned souls in Hell (**chap. 10**).

The thirteenth-century Scholastic view of Satan, specifically that of Thomas Aquinas, is next presented, and then we trace Satan's connections with Sorcery – and his non-connection with witchcraft (**chap. 11**)! Next comes a chapter on literary, dramatic, and visual treatments of Satan, with an eye to discovering the “theology” that the writers and artists depended on (**chap. 12**).

Part V deals with beliefs in Satan as practiced down to modern times, first with reference to Diabolical temptation, and then to Diabolical possession and exorcism (**chap. 13**). Next we will discuss the lessening importance of Satan in Christian theology, focusing especially on the revisionist reading of the Bible by Reformed Protestants, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher. We will continue with a survey of beliefs and non-beliefs in Satan in the twentieth century (**chap. 14**), and conclude with a summary of Satan's history and some thoughts about his future prospects.

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Excerpt
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Part I Hebrew backgrounds

Then he showed me the High Priest Jesus standing before the Angel
of the Lord, and DEVIL was standing at his right hand to accuse him.

LXX Zechariah 3.1