

The History and Origins of Satan

A study by Lucas Sweeney

In Judeo-Christian tradition, there are many revered characters, especially in the Bible, that have helped to make Judaism and Christianity among the most practiced religions in the world today. Other than God himself, there are many other figures that illustrate exemplary behavior, such as Abraham, Moses, King David, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus of Nazareth. However, there are also figures that illustrate negative models, who lead God's people away from righteousness and into sin. Among all of these, none have the infamy and fear-inducing power of Christianity's fallen angel Satan. As the enemy of God himself, ruler of Hell, and source of all evil and suffering in this world, Satan has served as the inspiration behind some of humanity's greatest fears. His power is so great that in the Gospels of the New Testament, he is able to offer Jesus the world itself in return for devotion and loyalty. But how could a lowly angel, fallen from the grace of God, have become a demon capable of terrorizing all of creation? Even more importantly, how can the arch rival of God in Christianity not have played a major role in Judaism? To find the answers to these questions, we will explore the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament, to find the origins of Satan, the Prince of Darkness.

Of all the names given to him, Satan is perhaps the most used and most easily recognized. Other names, such as Belzebub, came from the downgrading of deities from other Near Eastern religions that were made into lesser "divine figures" under the Judeo-Christian God.¹ The name Satan, however, stems from the Hebrew word "*śāṭan*," a term whose definition includes "adversary" and "accuser."² In the Hebrew Bible, *śāṭan* was thus never used as a proper name and served merely as a term to identify an adversary. In the Hebrew Bible there was no Satan with a capital S, and in early Hebrew traditions, there was no devil, demons, or Hell. Evil and suffering in the world instead had another source; God himself. The Book of Isaiah 45:7 reads,

¹ Joan Comay and Ronald Brownrigg. "Satan" in *Who's Who in the Bible*. (New York: Bonanza, 1980), pp. 404 -405.

² Comay and Brownrigg. "Satan," pp. 404.

“I form light, and create darkness, I make weal and create woe: I the Lord do all these things” (NSRV). According to the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, God alone controlled all events and was responsible for all conditions within creation, both good and evil. This idea, however acceptable it was early in Jewish traditions, became confusing and frustrating, and led to the basic question of theodicy: How could a loving and benevolent God allow so much suffering and pain on earth?

The eventual answer to this question within the religion of ancient Israel was found during the Persian period, 539-332 BCE, the period in which Persia controlled the entire Near East, including Israel. Perhaps the earliest point in Satan’s history may have its roots in the Persian Empire, which in turn influenced ancient Judaism.³ The ancient religion of Persia was Zoroastrianism, based on the teachings of a religious philosopher named Zoroaster who may have lived around 600 BCE. Among his teachings was the compelling idea of dualism. According to dualism, evil does not stem from the good God or spirit known as Ahura Mazda, “wise lord,” within the faith. Instead, there existed a separate evil being known as Ahriman, “fiendish spirit,” also known as Angra Mainya, “evil spirit,” that created death, disease, and lies. People had to choose whether to follow Ahura Mazda on the path of good or Ahriman on the path of evil. The idea from Persia that God himself was separate from evil would have been an acceptable answer to the early Jewish theodicy question and would have explained how there could be such suffering in a world created by a loving God. From this was born the idea that God did not personally create suffering himself, but that he would instead use other lowly figures to complete such tasks with his approval. This idea would lay the foundation for Satan’s entrance into the world.

³ Gregory Mobely and T.J. Wray, *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil’s Biblical Roots* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2005), pp. 85-87.

If there was at first no devil, then who was called *śatan*? Within the Hebrew Bible, the term is found in ten instances. Six of these uses were not to describe a divine figure, but a mere human being. The first of these is found in 1 Samuel 29:4 where the term is used to describe David himself as he is on the run from Saul, the first King of Israel who feared that David will steal his throne and end his lineage. David spends time hiding within the Philistine army who was engaged against the Israelites, but is soon forced to leave when Philistine commanders feared that he might become a *śatan*, an enemy or perhaps here a “stumbling block” to their goal of conquering Israel. In the second instance, found in 2 Samuel 19:21-23, *śatan* is used to describe Abashai, David’s nephew and a member of his court. Abashai attempts to convince David to kill Shimei, a Benjaminite who actively spoke out against David in the times of Saul. Victor Hamilton suggests that David forgives Shimei in order to gain favor among the Saulide Benjaminites and that is why David refers to Abashai as an “adversary.”⁴ The third use is found in 1 Kings 5:4, where the great king Solomon, the son of David whose reign was mostly peaceful, reflects on having no more *śatans* or “adversaries” to fight. The next two uses are found in 1 Kings 11:14 and 23, where *śatan* is used to refer to two militaristic adversaries, Hadad the Edomite and Rezon, son of Eliada, stirred up by God late in the reign of Solomon. The final human adversary is mentioned in Psalm 109:1-6 where the Psalmist indicates that a slanderous opponent had been falsely “accusing” him of wrongdoing. In this last case, *śatan* is used to describe an adversary within a legal proceeding.

In contrast to these six human *śatans*, the Hebrew Bible also uses the term four times for celestial servants of God. These figures are typically seen as angelic beings, or (in Hebrew) *benay elohim*, “sons of God.” According to Elaine Pagels, these adversaries were not necessarily evil by nature, but simply carried out a thankless task at the order of God, much like the Angel of

⁴ Victor Hamilton, “Satan,” in the Anchor Bible Dictionary (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, pp. 986

Death.⁵ The first of these cosmic adversaries can be found in the story of Balaam and the Angel in Numbers 22:22. God was angered by Balaam for travelling with the men of Moab who wished to attack Israel, a nation blessed by God. In his anger, God sends an angel bearing a sword to block their “perverse path.” However, this angel is completely invisible to Balaam and can only be seen by the donkey that Balaam is riding. The donkey, seeing this angel with a sword in hand, attempts to move out of the angel’s way to save Balaam’s life three times. Balaam strikes him each time. God then speaks to Balaam through the donkey, shaming him for his poor treatment of the animal, and allows him to see the angel that blocked his path. In this instance, *śatan* is seen as a fully loyal servant of God who follows his command without question; a far cry from the Satan we know today.⁶

Of the four cosmic adversaries in the Hebrew Bible, it is *haśśatan* ("the satan") in the Book of Job that plays the largest role of any “adversary” in the Hebrew Bible. This story begins as God is bragging about a man named Job, one his most loyal worshippers. *Haśśatan* approaches God and challenges him to let him lay waste to the man's property, livestock, and family, believing that Job is only loyal to God because he has a good and protected life. God accepts his challenge on the condition that he does not harm Job and *haśśatan* destroys all of Job’s possessions and kills his ten children. Much to *haśśatan*’s dismay, Job still remains loyal to God. After God once again begins to brag about Job, *haśśatan* offers another challenge. This time, he believes that if Job is physically hurt, he will turn from God. God again accepts his challenge on the condition that he does not kill Job and *haśśatan* strikes Job with boils, burns, and other injuries. Yet again, Job remains faithful to God and *haśśatan* seems to vanish from the story. According to T.J. Wray and Gregory Mobely, the Book of Job is symbolic. Job represents

⁵ Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York, Random House Inc. 1995), p. 39.

⁶ C. Breytanbach, “Satan,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, Brill 1999), p. 727.

the people of Israel who had dealt with much suffering, including the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylon exile that lasted from 586 to 539 BCE.⁷ *Haśśatan* in Job, although it is likely a direct ancestor of our modern Satan, is still not considered to be truly evil. *Haśśatan* is presented as a member of God's court and has a very specific role - the accuser, or a kind of prosecuting attorney, a role found throughout Near Eastern court systems. It is his job to observe the behavior of God's people and report any perceived shortcomings.⁸

The third celestial adversary of the Hebrew Bible is found in Zechariah 3:1-2, and here he reprises the role of "the accuser" or prosecuting attorney of Job. This passage recounts the vision of Joshua who sees himself standing before the heavenly court to be judged on his ability to serve as the High Priest of Jerusalem. In the vision, Joshua is wearing dirty clothes, an indication that the trial is nearing its end, and *haśśatan* has been able to make valid points against him. However, God, finding favor in Joshua, rebukes *haśśatan* and removes his dirty clothes, removing his guilt. This story solidifies *haśśatan*'s role as God's "accuser." However, what is most important from this story is the interaction between God and *haśśatan*, the one as prosecutor and the other as Joshua's defense. Although it is in a legal setting, this is the first time in the Bible that a character called *śatan* is the direct adversary of God. It is perhaps these *śatans* of Zechariah and Job that may have planted the seeds for the belief in Satan as a true opponent of God and the bringer of evil.

The final celestial *śatan* in the Hebrew Bible is found in 1 Chronicles, one of the last books of the Hebrew Bible to have been written (in around 300 BCE). The passage in 1 Chronicles 21:1 retells the story of David and his census already found in the Book of 2 Samuel, an earlier account of David's deeds; the main difference is that the census of 2 Samuel

⁷ Mobely and Wray, *The Birth of Satan*, p. 59.

⁸ Breytanbach, "Satan," p. 728.

is David's idea, whereas in 1 Chronicles, it is *śatan* who incites David to do it. In 2 Samuel 24 (the earlier account), David decides to take a census of his kingdom, an action that angers God. David is offered forgiveness from God in exchange for three days of pestilence over his kingdom brought by an entity called Mashit, "the Destroyer" sent by God. In this early version of the story, David appears to take the census on his own accord, but we are given a glimpse of a creature with destructive power - the Mashit, or Destroyer – who may presage something about the ability of the later, much-more developed concept of Satan to bring about suffering. Perhaps this is why, in the retelling of the story found in 1 Chronicles 21, it is *śatan* who incites David to take the census, and not David's own idea.

This shows a rather interesting development of the concept of Satan within the Jewish tradition. It was becoming a more accepted idea that some kind of divine adversary had existed for a long time. But perhaps most startling for us is that in 1 Chronicles, Satan is used as a proper noun for the first time in the Bible.⁹ This seems to suggest that *śatan* had finally grown from being a simple term used to describe any kind of adversary, human or angelic, to a major source of malice or evil. This concept of Satan would continue to develop outside of the Jewish canon, in the period known as the intertestamental period

The intertestamental period refers to the 300-400 years between the completion of the Hebrew Bible (what Christians would call the Old Testament), and the beginning of the New Testament that saw a flourishing of religious writings, especially apocalyptic ones. The apocalypticism of the intertestamental writings included an attempt to further explain why there was such great suffering in the world. This was a period that saw the invasion of the Greeks in 332 BCE and the advent of Roman control of the Near East starting in 63 BCE, and the diminishment of independent Jewish control over their own lands around Jerusalem. The

⁹ Mobely and Wray, *The Birth of Satan*, pp. 66-67

Jewish population was divided between those who accepted and those who rejected the Hellenization of society. Roman occupation also led to an increase in violence which ultimately led to a major assault on Jerusalem, a great famine against the Israelites, and the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE. According to Elaine Pagels, this onslaught of violence and conflict left the people of Israel in both chaos and division.¹⁰ It is during this period that Satan's final development takes place before he emerges in the New Testament as God's greatest adversary.

The first passage from this time that we will examine, the Life of Adam and Eve 17:4, retells the story of Adam and Eve, but with important changes. Primarily, it changes the serpent that tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit into Satan. While the idea that the serpent of Eden was Satan is now a rather common assumption, it was relatively new in the 1st century C.E., primarily because Satan himself was still a new idea. In an earlier passage, found in the Life of Adam and Eve 12:3, it is revealed that Satan and his followers were cast away from heaven for refusing to worship God and Adam, the image of God, as they were commanded. This passage attempts to explain the origins of Satan as an outcast angel from primordial times.

A similar attempt can be found in 1 Enoch, which was written somewhere between 200 to approximately 60 B.C.E. This book expands on the idea of the angelic beings known as the "Watchers" referred to in Daniel 4:13, 17 and 23 and attempts to connect them with the obscure and puzzling account from Genesis 6:1-4, in which angels descended to earth to reproduce with women. According to 1 Enoch 7, a group of "lust-filled" watchers under the leadership of a creature called Azazel descended to earth to mate with human women. This created a race of giants known as the nephilim who brought demons into the world. For their treachery, God cast the perverse watchers into the fiery pit. In the final chapters of the book, Azazel's name is changed to Satan, showing the name's growing popularity within the Jewish culture. A similar

¹⁰ Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, pp. 3-6

story is told in the Book of Jubilees, which was written around 160 to 140 B.C.E. In this version, the watchers, under the leadership of Mastema, descend to earth to teach justice and righteousness as commanded by God. However, they soon abandon his command and, as in 1 Enoch, mate with human women, creating a race of nephilim, which in turn brings demonic spirits into the world. While God does cast most of these watchers into the fiery pit, Mastema is allowed to keep one tenth of his followers. Both of these stories show that the adversarial force against God had a hand in creating suffering on Earth and is a leader of a multitude of opposing forces.¹¹

The final book which we will examine is 2 Enoch 29: 1-4, which contains what is probably the most well-known origination story of Satan – the fall from grace into a pit. Much like the previous books, it pulls from earlier scripture, specifically Isaiah 14:12 and Ezekiel 28:17-18. Satan appears as a high ranking officer in the cosmic army named the *saba'ot*, “angelic hosts.” With his followers, he attempts to overthrow the Kingdom of God to gain his own power. However, the rebellion fails and he is cast out of heaven and is said to fall endlessly over the “bottomless pit.” This passage draws from Isaiah the allusion to a Canaanite myth about an ancient rebellion led by “Day Star,” or “Morning Star,”¹² from which arose the coinage of a popular name for Satan, that is the name Lucifer, the Greek form of Hebrew “Day Star.”

In conclusion, the writing of the New Testament would bring to an end the early development of Satan and bring him center stage in Christianity as the most powerful opponent of God, Jesus Christ, and humankind. Much like many concepts within Judeo-Christian tradition, the development of Satan was a slow and gradual process. It took hundreds of years to make him

¹¹ Mastema from the Book of Jubilees is also blamed for other actions of evil, including the testing of Abraham by almost burning his son Isaac, the worshipping of the Golden Calf while Moses spoke with God on Mount Sinai, and provokes Gentiles to ridicule Jewish law; Hamilton, “Satan,” pp. 987-988

¹² Mobely and Wray, *The Birth of Satan*, pp. 110-111

the merciless King of Hell who, as the New Testament book of Revelation has it, will ultimately fall to God at the end of time. Even today Satan still plays an important role in our American society that has been much influenced by Christianity, inspiring many works of literature, music, film, and art, and references to him are meant to deter God's faithful away from sin for fear of eternal damnation in hell. Whether Satan is real and truly as Christians believe him to be or simply the product of centuries-worth of speculation over the nature of evil, Satan's presence on earth is very much real and alive.

Resources

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