Satan

The name “Satan” derives from the Hebrew noun סָטָן, meaning “adversary” or “accuser.” In the Hebrew Bible, this term is applied to both human (1 Sam 29:4; 2 Sam 19:23 [EV 22]; 1 Kgs 5:18 [EV 5:4]; 11:14, 23, 25; Ps 109:6) and celestial figures. The term is generally translated diabolos (which can also mean “slanderer”) in the Septuagint, where unlike the Hebrew, it is often used as a proper noun. In the New Testament, Diabolos and the Greek transliteration Satanas are used interchangeably of the same celestial figure (see Rev 12:9).

Ancient Near Eastern Background.

Two ancient Near Eastern concepts contribute significantly to the developing understanding of Satan. First, the widespread ancient Near Eastern concept of the divine council (e.g., the “sons of El” in the Baal Cycle; cf. Ps 82) introduces the role of celestial figures in the legal maintenance of earthly justice. Second, with greater influence on pseudepigraphal and New Testament texts, is the combat myth, in which a heroic, often divine, figure defeats a powerful adversary, such as Marduk’s slaying of Tiamat in Enuma Elish or Baal’s similar conquest of Yam in the Baal Cycle (see Forsyth, 1987). For biblical references to this myth, though without an explicit connection between the opponent and Satan, see, Psalms 74:13–15 and Isaiah 27:1, 51:9.
The four passages that use the term *satan* to refer to a celestial figure all understand him primarily in terms of that first legal motif above, though they do not all necessarily refer to the same figure. In fact, with the exception of 1 Chronicles 21:1, the definite article accompanying the term likely indicates it was not considered a proper noun. In the earliest reference, the angel of the Lord “took a stand in the way as his adversary [šāṭān]” (Num 22:22; cf. v. 32) to block Balaam and his donkey on their journey so that he may remind him to speak only Yahweh’s words. In Zechariah 3:1–7, the celestial satan figure now opposes the angel of the Lord in a dispute apparently over whether Joshua is worthy to serve as high priest. Yahweh decides in Joshua’s favor and rebukes the satan (v. 2).

The third and most famous reference to the satan in the Hebrew Bible appears in Job 1–2. Here, a more developed satan character plays a similar accusatory role in the divine council. The satan appears among the “sons of God” as they present themselves before Yahweh and takes up his prosecutorial role by responding to Yahweh’s praise of his servant Job with the suggestion that Job’s fear of God is motivated only by his divinely bestowed material blessings. He proposes that Job’s piety be tested by removing them, and Yahweh agrees on the condition that the satan not afflict Job’s person. After a persistently pious Job passes this first test (<Job>1:21), the satan continues to question Job’s devotion, so God allows him to afflict Job’s body but not take his life. Job again responds submissively (<Job>2:10), and the satan is not mentioned again in the book. Here, the satan’s activity is subjected to divine control and Job’s pious responses to his affliction attribute the cause of his suffering to Yahweh alone, a view endorsed by the biblical narrator (<Job>2:10).
The final mention of a celestial satan occurs in 1 Chronicles 21:1. Though the parallel account in 2 Samuel 24:1 attributes David’s desire to take the illicit census that leads to the death of 70,000 Israelites to Yahweh’s provocation, the Chronicler blames “Satan” (the lack of the article here is generally seen to indicate a proper name, though Day [1988, pp. 127–145] disagrees). Though a desire to distance Yahweh from evil may have motivated this change, the Chronicler maintains Yahweh’s role in other morally troubling episodes (e.g., 2 Chr 18:22; cf. 1 Kgs 22:23). Instead, a desire to present David’s relationship with Yahweh more favorably may better represent a consistent motivation throughout his work.

Second Temple Judaism.

First Chronicles 21:1 may suggest the beginnings of Satan’s convergence with the Devil, the apotheosis of evil and supreme supernatural opponent of God, which is continued in the texts from later Second Temple Judaism (Sacchi, 1990, p. 223). The foisting of Yahweh’s more questionable activities on a demonic figure is more explicit in the book Jubilees (second century BCE), where a figure named Mastema (as a noun, the word means “hatred”; cf. Hos 9:7) is given responsibility for ordering Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Jub. 17:16; cf. Gen 22:1) and attacking Moses on his way to Egypt (Jub. 4:2; cf. Exod 4:24), among other things. Mastema is one of a host of demonic figures that infest texts from this period. These include Satan, now definitely as a personal name and connected explicitly with evil (Jub. 10:11, 23:29; cf. As. Mos. 10:1); Shemihaza or Asael, who leads the rebellious watcher angels in the book of Enoch (third century BCE); and Belial/Beliar (“the Worthless One”) in the Qumran literature (e.g., 4QFlor 1:7–13, 1QS 2:19; cf. 2 Cor 6:15), who developed from an abstract concept into the personification of evil identified with the Angel of Darkness, who opposes the Prince of Light (1 QS 3:20–21). The
growing interest in demonic opposition to God during this period may result from the influence of Persian Zoroastrian dualism.

The watcher myth, which appears with variations in *1 Enoch* (6–16) and *Jubilees*, offers an elaborate version of the myth of fallen angels, in which a group of angels lusts after human women and descends to have intercourse with them. The entry of evil into the world and divine judgment for the angels both result. Some version of the watcher myth is evident in Genesis 6:1–4, where “the sons of God” are said to bear children by “the daughters of man.” For allusions to this myth in the New Testament, see Jude 6, 2 Peter 2:4, and Revelation 12:4.

The metaphysical dualism of apocalyptic literature raised the question of whether history was within the scope of human responsibility or merely a battleground for supernatural powers (Forsyth, 1987, p. 148). Sirach (ca. 180 BCE) testifies to an opposing trend, an internal ethical dualism, in which Satan is treated as a metaphor for impious instincts. Thus, Sirach 21:27 declares, “When an ungodly person curses an adversary [or “Satan,” *ho satanas*], he curses himself.” This tendency is taken up in rabbinic Judaism, in which Satan receives little emphasis as a personified opponent to God, instead generally replaced by an internal conflict between the inclination to good (*yeṣer hātob*) and the inclination to evil (*yeṣer hara*).

**New Testament.**

The tension between metaphysical and ethical dualism is reflected in the New Testament. Satan rules over a kingdom opposed to God. He is identified with Beelzebul, “the ruler of the demons” (Luke 11:15–19, Matt 12:24–27, Mark 3:22–26), and is called the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11; cf. 1 John 5:19), “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4), and “ruler of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2). The implicit hostility between God and the satan in Zechariah 3 and Job 1–
2 is explicit in the New Testament. Satan is called an enemy (Matt 13:39), the evil one (Matt 13:38), an adversary (1 Pet 5:8), a murderer, and the father of lies (John 8:44) and is associated with heresy (Rev 2:24). He and his demons have the power to “enter” people, as Satan does with Judas (Luke 22:3, John 13:27, cf. Mark 5:12–13, Luke 8:30–32), and drive them to evil and destructive behavior. Satan even appears to have rights that limit the power of God, such as an obligated release from his chains to stage a final rebellion (Rev 20:3).

However, when Paul emphasizes Adam’s sin (Rom 5:18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:21–22) and not the fall of the angels, as in Enoch and Jubilees, as the cause of human suffering, he shifts responsibility for evil on to humanity (Forsyth, 1987, p. 278). Believers, therefore, are obliged to resist Satan (Eph 4:27, 6:11–13; Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8–9) and given a message that has the authority to rescue people from Satan’s power (Acts 26:18). That power is limited. Several texts present Satan as subject to God’s will. God uses him for discipline (1 Cor 5:5, 1 Tim 1:20), and though Satan asks to “sift” Peter, Jesus’s intercession is able to deliver him (Luke 22:32). Satan has been judged (John 16:11), and he will eventually be defeated. Mixing much of the earlier imagery used for Satan together, including both the celestial accuser and primeval combatant from the ancient Near East, Revelation 12 depicts a battle between the archangel Michael and a great dragon: “The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him [[[the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down]]” (vv. 9–10; cf. Rev 20:2, 10; Matt 25:41).

**Patristic Literature.**
This assimilation of various traditions into the depiction of a single powerful opponent of God continued in the early church. However, the church fathers faced a theological challenge: give Satan too much power and risk setting up an independent rival evil force in the cosmos (the Gnostic heresy) as well as removing ethical responsibility from humanity, but give Satan insufficient power and risk making people responsible for their own salvation (the Pelagian heresy) and God liable for evil. These early interpreters developed a narrative solution to this dilemma by gradually developing a full “biography of Satan” (Kelly, 2006; cf. Forsyth, 1987, p. 403) through pulling together the various biblical references to Satan and filling in the gaps with further biblical passages and vestiges of extrabiblical traditions.

First, Satan was associated with the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 and was thereby involved in their sin. This link, though suggested by recurring imagery in several passages (e.g., Rom 16:20, Rev 12:9) and Satan’s reputation for temptation (e.g., Matt 4:1–11), is nowhere explicitly made in the Bible. Justin Martyr and Tertullian initially claimed that Satan’s involvement in the first couple’s fall caused his own. Later, however, Cyprian and Irenaeus claimed Satan’s initial transgression was an earlier jealousy of Adam (cf. Wis 2:24), a view developed in The Life of Adam and Eve (ca. fourth century CE) and the Koran. By associating Satan with the “Lucifer” (lit. “Day Star”) of Isaiah 14:4–20, however, Origen suggested Satan’s original sin was pride. Though this text originally referred to the king of Babylon (v. 4), the mythological description of a figure who had “fallen from heaven” (v. 12) made it easily transferrable to Satan. Ezekiel 28:11–19, originally addressed to the prince of Tyre (v. 2), was similarly considered a description of Satan’s pride. Interpreted this way, it also placed Satan in the garden of Eden (v. 13) and affirmed that he was initially created good (v. 15). This double fall, first of Satan and his angels and then of humanity through Satan’s deception, enabled
God to be the creator of both all things and only good things since Satan fell of his own volition, as did Adam and Eve, though influenced by Satan’s temptation. Thus, Augustine writes, “Who made the devil? He himself, for the devil was made not by his nature but by sin” (Gen. Man. 2.28). However, lest this emphasis on choice lead to a Pelagian optimism in human nature, Augustine also affirmed that after Adam’s fall, all humans were infected with sin and thus under the power of Satan, only to be delivered through the ransom paid by Christ’s death.

Later Interpretation.

Though the traditions associated with Satan continued to accumulate in the centuries which followed, including the addition of Satan’s role as punisher of the dead in hell (Kelly, 2006, pp. 229–241), his basic biography was generally consistent in the church until the Enlightenment, when belief in Satan began to decline, gradually replaced with biological, sociological, and psychological causes of evil (Russell, 1977, pp. 26–31). The horrors of the twentieth century appear, however, to have created a new openness to the existence of transcendent evil (Russell, 1977, p. 32), as demonstrated by several recent polls indicating that over 70 percent of Americans believe in the existence of Satan (De La Torre and Hernández, 2011, p. 3).

In recent research, several scholars in a “quest for the historical Satan” (De La Torre and Hernández, 2011) have attempted to untangle the various aspects of the Satan figure that were intertwined in his development. A range of “Satans” have resulted, which include Satan as the shadow of God (Russell, 1977), the opponent in the combat myth (Forsyth, 1987), the “demonization” of internal opponents (Pagels, 1996), the prodigal son of God (Nielsen, 1998), the accuser (Kelly, 2006), and the trickster (De La Torre and Hernández, 2011). This variety points to the complex mix of diverse traditions, biblical and otherwise, that contributes to the
theological conception of Satan, who “collects in himself very reasonable demands of human thought confronted with the problem of evil” (Sacchi, 1990, p. 231).

[See also Devils and Demons; God and Gods; Good and Evil; and Underworld and Hell.]

Bibliography


Will Kynes