

Do You Believe in a Devil?

Bible Teaching on Temptation

MORE than 100 years ago these lines were written (by an unknown author) to accompany a drawing of "His Satanic Majesty":

*"This is he, with horns and hoof,
The parsons call the devil;
They tell us he lives in a sultry place
Where ghosts and imps all revel.*

*They say that he wears a great long tail,
And carries a three-pronged fork,
That he sometimes leaves his sultry home,
And through the earth doth walk.*

*They say he can assume with ease
The garb of an angel bright,
And then, for a change, he takes the form
Of a roaring lion at night:*

*That he's power to act and do as he likes,
Be in fifty places at once;
And that to fulfil his evil designs,
Can be wise as a sage, or a dunce."*

Today most people no longer think of the devil like that. But there are still many people who believe that the devil exists, that he wields immense power for evil (some say he is a fallen angel) and is constantly trying to destroy the work of God among men and women. They think it is the devil that secretly whispers in your ear and tempts you to evil.

Of course there are real difficulties about accepting such an idea. If the devil was a real angel to begin with, how ever did he come to revolt against God? And why does God allow a supernatural being to destroy His work in the earth? Where is the devil now, anyway? And how can he really work?

Where to find out?

One thing is clear: this is a religious question. So if we are to settle it, we must refer to the Bible, the great source of all that we know about God and Jesus Christ. Where else would you go for a serious answer on a question like this?

Now the Bible certainly does contain a number of allusions to the devil and Satan. And so to the Bible we turn. But let us get one thing clear right at the beginning: we must make every effort to understand what the Bible writers themselves meant by "devil" and "Satan". It is very easy for us, as we read Bible verses, to give to the terms devil and Satan the meaning which we prefer! And if that meaning is not the same as the Bible writer intended, then we are changing the true sense!

Many of us have had the experience of discussing the devil and Satan with others and have found that the discussion does not seem to get anywhere. And the reason is obvious: when Bible passages are read, devil and Satan are being understood by different readers in different senses. The conclusion is clear: if we are to arrive at the

truth about the devil and Satan, we must find out what the Bible writers meant when they used those terms. It is no good relying upon our own understanding or other people's. We must know what the inspired writers of the word of God understood about this important subject.

In a short work like this we cannot examine all the verses in the Bible which refer to the devil and Satan. But what we really need is a key – a basic understanding of what these terms mean. Armed with this, we should be able to unlock quite a lot of Bible passages.

First, Satan ...

To find the vital key it is important to begin with the Old Testament, and not with the New. To modern ears this may sound strange, but remember that the Old Testament was written first, many centuries before the New. And since they both really form one revelation from God, the New Testament writers knew the Old Testament very well indeed. They quoted from it and they used its terms; and among the terms they used is Satan. (In fact the term "devil" occurs rarely in the Old Testament and is used differently there from the way it is used in the New.)

So we begin with Satan, the Old Testament term. What does the word "Satan" mean? It is not hard to find out. Take the case of Balaam who lived in the days when the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness. He was a prophet who had been told by God not to go on a certain hired mission to curse the Israelites. But he wanted the money offered him as a reward, so he went. Riding upon an ass, he soon found his way blocked by an angel: "The angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary" (or enemy) (Numbers 22:22). [1]

Adversary or enemy

The word for "adversary" is *satan* (from which we get our "Satan") and that is just what it means. Notice two things: *satan* here is an ordinary word meaning adversary or enemy, and not the name of a person. The word occurs again only ten verses later: the angel said to Balaam, "Behold, I have come forth to withstand you" (verse 32), literally "to be an adversary to you".

This is the first time the word *satan* appears in the Hebrew record. Notice that this *satan* is a good angel, "the angel of the Lord", who is doing what God wants, and not an evil one! If we look up in a Bible concordance the way the word *satan* is used in the Old Testament, we shall find that it means an adversary and an enemy. For example: "Why," cried David, "should you (Joab and his brothers) be adversaries (*satans*) unto me?" (2 Samuel 19:22). And so in half a dozen other cases, where the allusion is usually to men.

Satan in the book of Job

Here we have one of the most frequently quoted cases in all the Bible. The first few verses of chapter one describe Job as living in the land of Uz, a God-fearing man who had many possessions. Then, verse 6:

"Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them."

"There you are", some people say, "Satan was in heaven among the angels! He must be a supernatural being!" But let us remember our vital rule: we must understand

Bible terms in a Bible sense. "Sons of God", for instance: it is true that once in Job (38:7) this term is used of the angels; but in the Bible as a whole it is often used of men and women who really worship God as contrasted with those who do not. God used it of Israel through the prophet Isaiah:

"Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, every one who is called by my name ..." (Isaiah 43:6,7)

So in the New Testament the Apostle John, referring to believers in Christ, wrote: "Beloved, we are God's children now" (1 John 3:2). So the "sons of God" among whom "Satan" came (in Job chapter 1) need not be angels in heaven; they could be people on the earth.

But how could they "present themselves before the Lord" if they were not in heaven? Again the Bible itself gives us the answer. Moses and Joshua were once told to "present themselves" in the "tent of meeting", where God would appoint Joshua as the next leader of Israel (Deuteronomy 31:14). Many years later Joshua called together all the elders of the tribes of Israel to Shechem, where "they presented themselves before God" (Joshua 24:1). Later still, Samuel in his turn told Israel: "Present yourselves before the Lord ..." (1 Samuel 10:19).

In the New Testament it is said that Mary, the mother of Jesus, shortly after the birth of her son, came to the temple in Jerusalem "to present him to the Lord ... and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord" (Luke 2:22-24). The "sons of God" in Job, then, who came to "present themselves before the Lord", had come together to worship God in the appointed place, and, of course, in the presence of the appointed priest at that time. This is a scene of worship upon the earth, not in heaven.

But what of "Satan" who came among them? Here the English translators have not really played fair with us, for all the Hebrew says is "the adversary". The capital S in Satan is the translators' own invention, for Hebrew makes no distinction between capital letters and others. Even in the margin the Authorised and Revised Version translators have printed "the Adversary", suggesting by their capital A (for which they have no evidence) that this is that special Adversary, Satan. All that the Hebrew justifies us in saying is "the adversary came among them".

God is all-powerful

But who could this adversary be? If this was a group come together to worship, he would be one of them; in other words he was a man; and he was an enemy to Job, because he was jealous of him and wished him harm. But how then could there follow a conversation between the Lord and the adversary? Again the Bible itself supplies the answer, for in Old Testament times men often received messages from God through the appointed priest at the time. David, for instance, more than once consulted the priest when he wanted to know what God's will for him was, and the priest spoke to him on behalf of God. So this jealous enemy of Job – perhaps one who posed as his friend – said to God through the priest, "Job only serves you for what he can get; just try bringing some trouble on him and then you will see". And God, because He had a great purpose with Job and desired to see him perfected, allowed the adversary to carry out his envious desire upon Job. But as the book clearly tells us, the power was God's and not the adversary's (Job 2:4-6).

So there is in this episode no need for a supernatural satan and no proof of one. All the expressions are commonly used of men. The Old Testament word satan means an

adversary; but as the example of Job shows us, there develops a natural tendency to use it of an evil adversary.

Peter – a Satan!

With this valuable background understanding we now look at an example of the use of "satan" in the New Testament. Peter had just made his great declaration of belief in Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" and Jesus had pronounced a blessing upon him as a result. But Jesus then went on to speak of his own fate; he would have to go to Jerusalem and there the leaders of the Jews would seize him and he would be killed, but he would rise again the third day (Matthew 16:21). Peter could neither understand nor accept this and began to rebuke Jesus: "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." In other words, "You must not think of such a thing". But Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan: you are a hindrance to me".

Why was Peter a "satan"? [2] Because he was being "an adversary" to Jesus; he was trying to persuade the Lord not to do what he knew had to be done in his obedience to the will of God. If Peter had had his way, Jesus would have rejected his Father's will and his great sacrifice for sin upon the cross would never have taken place. So Jesus had to tell this "adversary" (satan) to "get behind me". And then he adds a comment which is most important for our understanding: You are an adversary and a stumbling block to me, says Jesus in effect to Peter, for your mind is not on the "things of God, but the things of men" (verse 23, RV).

So this most important New Testament example teaches us some valuable lessons. First, this "satan" was a man; second, he rejected the will of God; third, what marked him out was that he desired to do the will of man instead – a most important clue, as we shall see later.

Let us remind ourselves what we have learned so far: a "satan" is an adversary, and nearly always an evil adversary. In the examples we have looked at, "satan" was:

an angel of God, doing His will;

a man posing as a worshipper of God;

other men who were "adversaries";

and now Peter, an apostle of the Lord, who was opposing the will of God.

With this general understanding of the meaning of "satan", we should find a lot of Bible passages much clearer.

And now the Devil

This is a Greek term, not a Hebrew one, and so it is found only in the New Testament. [3] Again we must try to discover what the term really means. We can easily do this, for there are passages where the translators themselves have shown us. Writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul says that "in the last days there will come times of stress"; in these times "men will be lovers of self, lovers of money ... slanderers, etc. ..." (2 Timothy 3:1-3). The word translated "slanderers" is the plural of the one usually rendered "devil" and is related to our English "diabolical".

Again, giving instructions on how believers are to behave as they meet to worship, he comes to the women members:

“Women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.”
(1 Timothy 3:11)

Again the word is the one usually translated “devil” though here it is plural. The translators in these two passages have given us the basic sense of the word. Notice once more: these “devils” are people.

But the great test passage for understanding “the devil” in the New Testament is in Hebrews chapter 2. As we read the early verses of this chapter, it is clear that the apostle is writing about Jesus and his followers; and he calls the followers “children”. Now, in verse 14, he comes to his great statement about “the devil”. We set it out here in full first, and then we shall go over it, phrase by phrase, to make sure of understanding it:

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil ...”

The first phrase says quite clearly that the followers of Jesus are “flesh and blood”, that is, they are ordinary men and women. No problem there.

Human nature

The second phrase says that Jesus shared the same nature, “flesh and blood”. The apostle must have been very anxious indeed that his readers should clearly understand that the nature of Jesus really was the same as that of his followers – human nature – for he emphasises the point: “he himself likewise took part of the same”. There was no need for the apostle to write in this emphatic way unless he had felt that it was particularly important for his readers to understand this vital truth: that Jesus was a man, in every respect.

The third sentence contains three declarations:

that Jesus destroyed the devil;

that he did it “through death”, and that can only mean through his own death, by dying himself; and

that the devil has “the power of death”.

Before we go any further, we must clear up one cause of misunderstanding. The English reader, seeing a phrase like “him who has the power of death”, is naturally led to assume that the devil must be a person, or a being. But this is not necessarily so.

In English we have a very simple system of indicating gender: all male persons are masculine, and are referred to as “he”; all female ones are feminine, and are referred to as “she”; all other things are neuter and are referred to as “it”. And at times we refer to things as if they were persons: a ship as “she” for example. This is called personification.

Greek, however (in which the New Testament was written), is different. It has three genders, but they are used in another way. Males are “he”, of course, and females “she”; but other things may be any one of the three genders, masculine, feminine, or neuter.

Now the Greek word for devil is masculine, and so the pronoun standing for it is "he". But this does not make clear whether the devil is a person or is not. The Greek does not indicate this one way or the other. If we wish to prove that the devil is, or is not, a person, we must get our evidence from somewhere else, not from this expression.

Destroying the Devil

We look now at our "three declarations" in this verse.

Jesus destroyed the devil. So the devil is "dead", or at the very least will be destroyed by the time the work of Jesus is finished. But there are two remarkable points about this statement in Hebrews 2:14. The apostle distinctly says that in order to destroy the devil, Jesus partook of human nature. Now is not this an astonishing thing? If Jesus' purpose was to destroy a powerful enemy, would he not have done far better to have had a strong, immortal nature like the angels? What was he doing sharing the weak nature of flesh and blood? Obviously there is a mystery here that needs explaining.

But that is not all. The apostle distinctly says that the way Jesus destroyed the devil was "through death". Now this can only mean through his own death. What an extraordinary way to get rid of a powerful enemy, by dying oneself!

From these two points, that in order to put an end to the devil Jesus first shared weak human nature and then had to die himself, it is clear that "the devil" of the Bible must be something quite different from the idea of the devil usually held.

When you come across a Bible passage difficult to understand, it always helps to find another one saying much the same thing, though in different terms. The two passages will throw light on one another. Now there is such a passage to help us in this case. The same apostle, in the same letter, in Hebrews chapter 9, is writing about the work of Christ. He refers to his first coming (which led to his death on the cross) like this:

"But (Jesus) ... has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." (verse 26)

We notice at once that one of the things said here is the same as in Hebrews 2:14. "By the sacrifice of himself" clearly means the same as "through his own death". So probably the other terms mean the same thing. Let us set them out side by side:

Hebrew 2:14 Hebrew 9:26

through (his own) death = by the sacrifice of himself

he might destroy the devil = put away sin

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.

The power of sin

We now have a valuable way of testing this understanding, for Hebrews 2:14 declares that the devil "has the power of death". Now what in the Bible is said to have this power? The Apostle Paul gives us the answer in two very helpful passages in the Letter to the Romans:

“As sin reigned in death ... so through Jesus grace might reign to eternal life.” (5:21)

Here sin is regarded as a king who is ruling over his subjects; and the effect of his power over them is death.

Again:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life.” (6:23)

Here, sin is a master who pays his servants wages; he rewards them for service to himself – with death.

Both these passages are examples of personification: that is, something is spoken of as if it were a person when in fact it is not. In both of them sin is personified, and in both clearly it is sin that “has the power of death”.

And so the Bible is telling us that the real devil is sin.

What is the real enemy of God?

We break off our consideration for a moment to ask a very important question: What does the Bible say is the great enemy of God? Is it some fallen angel? Is it some mysterious spirit being trying to undo God’s work in the earth? Not at all. From the first page of the Bible to the last there is one stubborn enemy of the purpose of God – the human heart and mind, the will of men and women everywhere to satisfy their own desires.

We have had a hint of this already in Christ’s rebuke to Peter: “Get thee behind me, Satan ... thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:23, RV). He had said much the same to the Jews who were rejecting him:

“Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts (or desires) of your father ye will do.” (John 8:44, AV)

We have only to ask: What are “lusts” associated with throughout the Bible? The answer is clear: it is always with human nature.

The natural tendencies of our nature are set out very strongly by the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans. He is contrasting the life of service to God (the spirit) with the life spent satisfying natural desires (the flesh), and declares:

“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” (8:6)

So there are two ways we can choose to live: trying to do the will of God, or doing our own will. About the second Paul now has this shattering comment:

“The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God.”

So here is the great enemy of God: human desire. And what a determined enemy it is! For Paul goes on:

“For it (the mind of the flesh) does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot.” (8:7)

He had said the same thing in writing to the Galatians: “Walk in the spirit” (that is, live in God’s way) “and do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (notice that “the flesh” demands to be satisfied). He then adds:

“For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other”, and the result is “to prevent you from doing what you would.” (Galatians 5:16,17)

Temptations within us

There is no doubt then where we must look for the great enemy of God: it is in our own hearts and minds. So James tells us where we must look for the source of our temptations to do wrong. Are we led astray by some supernatural spirit whispering in our ear? Not at all; for, he says,

“Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire”.

So our own “desire” is the origin of our temptations; and James tells us what is the result:

“Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death.” (1:14,15)

The long history of mankind in the Bible shows how true this teaching is. The first pair of human beings preferred their own desire to obedience to God, and sinned. The human race fell away into “corruption and violence” and God had to judge it at the Flood. Israel, rescued by God from slavery in the land of Egypt and given a special opportunity to be God’s people, turned away and preferred to worship idols and to behave in immoral ways like the godless peoples around them. Jesus, the Son of God, demonstrated his Father’s truth and grace among men; they rejected and crucified him. And in the centuries following, men have abandoned God’s teaching and perverted His ways. Yes, the great enemy of God is men and women rejecting His authority and fulfilling their own natural desires.

How Devil and Satan are used

So then the devil and Satan are personifications of sin; that is, they are words used to represent sin.

The personification is sometimes in a single individual. We have seen how Peter was “Satan”. To the disciples Jesus said, “Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?” (John 6:70). And that one was Judas Iscariot who betrayed him. In this class comes the serpent in Eden, who suggested to Eve that what God had told her was not true. So “the serpent” becomes a symbol in the Bible for the power of sin.

Sometimes a body of people, a government for example, could be referred to as the devil or Satan. There are two interesting examples of this in Revelation chapter 2. In his letter to the believers at Smyrna the Apostle John passes on the words of Jesus like this:

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested ... Be faithful unto death.” (verse 10)

This was written in the first century AD, when the believers in Christ were suffering persecution, because of their faith, at the hands of the Roman pagan government. That was “the devil” which would put some of them in prison: fitly called “the devil” because it was an enemy to the servants of God.

Or verse 13, in the Letter to Pergamum:

"I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is."

So Satan reigned in Pergamum! This one did certainly; no doubt it was the headquarters of the Roman government for that part of the province of Asia.

Peter refers to the same time of persecution in these words:

"Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour."

That he is indeed referring to the Christians being persecuted is clear from what he says next:

"Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world." (1 Peter 5:8,9)

The Roman pagan government was the devil here.

Jesus' temptations

Sometimes the "devil" or "satan" stands for the principle or power of sin, however it may be manifested. In this sense we can understand the Gospel record of the Temptation of Jesus. We have seen already how Jesus shared in full our human nature (Hebrews 2:14). As a result he felt all our temptations, for the scripture tells us, "In every respect he has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning". In his temptation in the wilderness "the devil" is the personification of that human urge to gratify his own desires; he utterly conquered it and remained sinless.

When the disciples returned to Jesus, delighted because they had been able to cure diseases, he said to them: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18); that is, he foresaw the time to come when not just disease but all the power of sin and evil, summed up in the term "Satan", will be thrown down from its ruling position in the world; it will be "dethroned" and replaced by the power of God, when Christ returns to establish God's kingdom in the earth.

This, then, is the simple key which unlocks the problem passages about the devil and Satan: look for the source of it in the power of sin shown in the desires, the weaknesses and the actions of men; and the majority of passages will become plain.

Why it matters

Does it really matter whether we understand this? Yes, it does, for two reasons at least.

First, if the Bible is really teaching us that the devil and Satan stand in general for human sin in all its activities, then that is what God wants us to know. It is a truth revealed in His word, the Bible, and we ought to want to understand it; we ought not to be content to be misled by false ideas common in the world.

Second, the reason why God has expressed this truth in His word is that it makes a great difference to us. Consider a moment: if we have the idea that our weaknesses and failures in the sight of God are due to the subtle influence of some supernatural evil spirit outside of ourselves, are we not going to be tempted to make excuses for ourselves? Shall we not be inclined to say, "Well, it wasn't my fault – the devil tempted me ..."?

Putting the blame for our sin on to somebody else is something the Bible never allows us to do. It is absolutely essential that we should understand our natural state in the sight of God. As the Apostle Paul put it so powerfully: "... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). To understand the Bible teaching about the devil and Satan is a great help in accepting this truth.

The precious truth

But then – think of the benefit! If we really do understand that we all have a powerful impulse within us to ignore God's will and to follow our own desires and seek our own satisfactions, then we are well on the way to realising how great is our need to be delivered from this pressure towards sin, so that we may receive forgiveness of sins from God and have a hope of eternal life in the kingdom that God will establish through His Son. The more we realise our own desperate need of deliverance from the natural state in which we live, the more we shall appreciate how precious is the Gospel which Christ preached. How can we value an offer of life if we do not know we are dying – for ever? To a man who knows he is drowning, a rescuing hand is life indeed. And this is our case: God is offering us life in place of eternal death.

Have we to fear a devil, then?

Most surely we have – but not the devil of popular belief. Our devil is inside ourselves, in our own hearts and minds. But once we understand that and accept it, we shall be able to rejoice in the great offer of life which God makes to us in His word through the sacrifice of His Son.

FRED PEARCE

[1] Bible quotations are mostly from the Revised Standard Version.

[2] The Greek manuscripts of the New Testament show no difference between words beginning with capital letters and those that do not – the letters are all capitals.

[3] The word "devils" in "casting out devils" etc. is a different word, which really means "demons" (see, for example, Mark 1:32 in the RSV).

