

Satan

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[Editor's note: You probably have asked unanswerable questions about Satan even as I have. If God is all powerful, created all things, and foreknew all things, why did he create an infinitely powerful evil personage or allow one to develop, continue to exist, bring death to every person, and evidently claim more victims than God rescues? This article will not answer all your questions, but it may give you some different insights. And they may be disturbing to you. It is borrowed with permission from Jerry's "Bible Study Group," an email forum for free expression. Each issue carries this editorial comment: "Although the thoughts developed here are set forth with a degree of conviction, they are not set forth in a spirit of dogmatism. This is a venture in Scripture research." This segment about Satan is in response to some questions. Read and weigh. -Cecil Hook)

MICHAEL says: Jerry, you said in your last Bible Study, "Satan really received a whipping at the Cross of Christ." I understand you to be a Preterist (preterists believe in realized eschatology). Many other Preterists believe that Satan no longer exists. Could you clarify your position?

JERRY says: Satan is not an individual person to be eliminated.

MICHAEL says: Then what is Satan, or "was" Satan, and does he, or "it" still exist in your opinion?

JERRY says: We must remember that there is one God who is responsible for the existence of good and evil; light and darkness; sweet and bitter; heaven and hell. If there is an individual that was created as Satan, God is responsible for the creative act of bringing Satan into existence. However, I must point out that the figure of Satan (devil) is one of the most mysterious in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, for the perception of the devil among ancient Hebrews changed over time.

My statement, "Satan is not a person" must be explained in a theological fashion. The name is Hebrew, but Satan rarely appears as a distinct figure in the Hebrew Bible. The name is much more common in the New Testament, written in Greek where it occurs more than 30 times and there denotes a being of enormous power and wickedness, the ruler of a demonic realm. The Hebrew word "*satan*" and the Greek word "*diabolos*", from which the English word "*devil*" is derived, are both common nouns that mean "*adversary*," "*accuser*," or "*slanderer*." These basic meanings are important in many references to the devil in the Bible, though they are often lost in the English translation. Unlike today's Christianity, among the ancient Israelites there was no conception of a personal supernatural force of absolute evil standing in opposition to God.

The word “*satan*” was used both in the ordinary sense of a human adversary and in the sense of a supernatural adversary or accuser. On the human level, for example, David was described as a potential “*adversary (satan)*” (1 Sam. 29:4) to the Philistines, and Solomon proclaimed that he faced “*neither adversary (satan) nor misfortune*” (1 Kings 5:4). One psalmist asked that “*an accuser (satan)*” (Psalms 109:6) might charge his enemy with some crime.

Then, on the supernatural level, the word *satan* is first applied to an angel sent by God to withstand the Mesopotamian prophet Balaam, who was hired by the king of Moab to curse the people of Israel. As Balaam was acting against Moab, “the angel of the Lord took his stand in his way as his adversary (*satan*)” (Numbers 22:22). In three other passages, the supernatural adversary or accuser stands in opposition to good individuals, and therefore is more like descriptions of Satan in the New Testament. Compare 1 Chronicles 21:1 with 2 Samuel 24:1. One passage says, “*Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to number Israel.*” The parallel passage says, “*the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he (the Lord) incited David against them, saying, “Go, number Israel and Judah.”* It seems that the author of the Chronicles felt uneasy with saying that God incited David to sin in numbering Israel and Judah and then punished Israel for his sin. This Satan was God.

Someone in the Bible Study Group will certainly bring up Job. So, I will say at this point... Yes, it seems that an individual named Satan was the instrument of Job’s suffering. The narrative describes “*a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them*” (Job 1:6). So, Satan (always in Hebrew with the article -- the accuser) stood in the heavenly court, and God interrogated him about a wealthy man of perfect piety and rectitude named Job. The accuser, true to his character, interpreted Job’s piety cynically, arguing that Job worshipped God because he was blessed with much wealth. “*But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has,*” *Satan argued, “and he will curse thee to thy face*” (Job 1:11). God gave Satan permission, and he destroyed all that Job possessed or loved.

Job recognized that these disasters came from God but did not sin by cursing God. Later, we find that in the suffering Job knew nothing of Satan’s role. Rather, he attributed both good and bad to God: “*Shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?*” (Job 2:10). Once the dialogue between Job and his friends begins, the book never again mentions Satan, and no attempt is ever made to blame Job’s plight on Satan rather than God (“The Devil made me do it.”).

Thus, in the book of Job, Satan appears as an angelic being who views the motives and actions of the pious with a jaundiced and accusatory eye, but who acts within the limits permitted by God.

Now, you asked if I believed as other Preterists that Satan ended in the first century. During the first century before AD 70, throughout the New Testament, there is an awareness of the continual warfare of Satan against the message of the gospel of Jesus.

Christians were sometimes called to join the battle “*against the wiles of the devil... against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*” (Eph. 6:11, 12). We all understand that Satan’s ultimate doom had been sealed by Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, they were ever on guard, knowing that their “*adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8). The book of Revelation gives the ultimate dramatic and symbolic expression to the ongoing cosmic battle between good and evil.

At one point, a great war in heaven is described in which the archangel Michael led angelic armies against Satan: “*And 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 earth, and his angels were thrown down with him*” (Rev. 19:9). Through many twists and turns the battle continued as Satan marshals all his forces against God, but the outcome of the titanic struggle was never in doubt.

Ultimately, Satan, the great dragon and deceiver, was “*thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur ... (to be) tormented day and night for ever and ever*” (Rev. 20:10). Therefore, throughout the New Testament, understanding the figure of Satan helped believers to grasp the indescribably tremendous power of evil, violence and corruption in the world, and at the same time to have confidence that the forces of goodness and grace represented by Jesus would ultimately prevail.

It is my conclusion, as a Preterist, that the accuser of God’s people was stopped in the years following the cross to AD 70. This adversary was put out of commission. I would not be honest to my readers if I said that the Christian will never meet the attacks of an opponent or the accusatory eye of a group of “others.” And too, it is not realistic to blame our failures on God or a Satan-like tester. We must take responsibility for our situation and give God the praise for allowing us to be tested and tried. For, when it is all over, we will be like gold tried by fire. The stuff that should not be there will be gone. Sometimes this trying by fire and trouble will take a long time for the Christian to mature and say, “I have done the will of God.” (End of Bernard article.)

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No, all questions were not answered in the essay, nor has anyone done so. You may agree or disagree with the points made. Correct answers in this area are not essential. In seeking more answers to this and other matters, I would offer some additional thoughts about interpretation, not really meaning to try to “half-sole” Jerry’s studied treatise.

From the preterist perspective, we understand that “*satan*” was soon to be defeated at the coming of the Lord. Who, or what, was the “*adversary*”? It has been suggested that in those “*last days*” it was unbelieving Israel rather than a personage. In the events surrounding AD 70, both the nation and its system of religion were destroyed.

We must always be aware that all Biblical literature is not literal and factual. For example, there is evidence that the book of Job is a poetic literary piece, a drama, rather than a historical record. It deals with the universal problem of human suffering. Consider: Do people converse in poetic language like the characters in Job did? Must we understand that Job's ten children were restored to life or replaced after their destruction?

Too, we must recognize that much in Scripture is accommodative to common beliefs rather than being factual. There are many examples of this. God is said to have eyes, ears, hands, and a voice without being cautious in each instance to explain that God is Spirit and has no physical features. The writers speak of the sun rising and setting, of it standing still, and of stars falling to earth. The earth is said to have four corners, God and heaven are up, and hell is down. The sun, moon, and stars are addressed as intelligent. Among ancient people, the center of desire was thought to be the kidneys ("*reins*" KJV) and the compassion was thought to be in the bowels ("*bowels of compassion*" KJV). There is evidence that they thought of mental and emotional illnesses as demon possession. Neither Jesus nor the writers saw fit to correct such scientific misinformation. It did not detract from the instructive purpose at hand. They were emphasizing the power of Jesus rather than dispelling scientific misinformation.

In literature when a thing or abstraction is spoken of as a person or given human form, it is called a personification, like "*sin is couching at the door*" (Gen.4:7). In a metaphor, one person or thing is said to be another person or thing, like Jesus being called a lamb, a shepherd, or a door. These figures of speech are common.

James wrote: "*Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death*" (James 1:13-15). The evil desire in us is personified and called metaphorically the "adversary", the snake in Eden, the prowling lion (1 Peter 5:8), the flesh that opposes the spirit (Gal. 5:16-f), and the great dragon (Rev.19:9).

These thoughts only point to a much deeper study of this and other topics.

(Cecil Hook; February 2003)