



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Mythbusters: The Satan
The Devil me do it!*

Scriptures from Chronicles to Revelation

By Pastor Greg Davidson Laszakovits

Message from February 17, 2019

777 South Mount Joy Street
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022
717-367-1000
www.ETOWNCOB.ORG

INTRO TO SERIES

As pastors—and those who study the Bible in some depth—we have come to understand that the Bible as a complex living document that has evolved over millennia. *And*, over the many thousands of years, there have also been layers of something like a wood finish, that has been applied to scripture. Some of these extra-Biblical layers have been like a wood stain that brings out the grain and beauty of the wood and help tell the deep truths that lie within the scripture. Sometimes these layers that were helpful in one time and place in history, but now are more like layers of paint that obscure the scripture and keep us from seeing the truth and beauty of scripture. This whole series we are working to strip away the layers and see for ourselves what the scripture holds. Today, satan and the devil.

INTRO TO SATAN

First, I want to give huge thanks and credit to Christina Bucher and John David Bowman for lending me their time and deep biblical knowledge this week. Chris is a Hebrew Bible scholar and the Religious Studies Department Chair at Etown College. John David is a New Testament scholar teacher of Greek, and former pastor here and elsewhere. Any errors here are certainly my misunderstanding of their expertise. All of that said, let's get down to the details of the devil!

SATAN IN POPULAR CULTURE, THROUGH THE YEARS

It's difficult to talk about Satan and the Devil without first addressing what we think he, they, it (?) is. The most common understanding of the devil is probably something like this:

Goateed master of the underworld or hell. Two horns, a pointy tail, trident, really bad sunburn. Would it surprise you to learn that none of that is mentioned at all in our Bible? Our public imagination has been guided strongly by a book that is going on 1,000 years old, called *Dante's Inferno*. And the correlating artists depictions like those from Botticelli.

So we have that notion of Satan and the Devil. We also know the Devil as the one who tempts us, competes with God for our attention and devotion. Biblically, we're getting warmer, with

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that depiction, so to speak, biblically. You know, as in “The Devil made me do it!”

These depictions too, not surprisingly, are not quite totally Biblical. So what is? Well, first let’s talk about Satan and the devil? One in the same, or two different entities? Yes. And no. Satan is the Hebrew word. When Old Testament Hebrew was translated into Greek, the noun *satan* was translated as *diábolos* along with correlating verbs. And here’s where things start to get interesting already.

Satan is both a noun and a verb. As a verb in the Hebrew Bible means “To antagonize” or “to oppose” or “to speak or act in an adversarial or hostile manner.” As a noun it is something like an accuser, adversary, or opponent. Let’s look at some of the places this word is used in Hebrew scripture.

EARTHLY SATANS

PSALM 109

Hold not thy peace, O God of my praise;

²For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of deceit have they opened against me:

They have spoken unto me with a lying tongue.

³They have compassed me about also with words of hatred, And fought against me without a cause.

⁴For my love they are my adversaries (satans):

But I give myself unto prayer.

⁵And they have rewarded me evil for good, And hatred for my love.

⁶Set thou a wicked man over him;

And let an adversary (satan) stand at his right hand.

This is not THE Satan, capital “S”. But rather these are satans—remember that just means an accuser or adversary. So here in this Psalm the satans are those who treat the Psalmist poorly. And the psalmist wants God to appoint a satan to give those satans a trial. They are both good guys and bad guys. Sometimes *satans* are human adversaries and trying attorneys. Other times that satan is even sent by God.

1 Kings 11.14

Then the Lord raised up an adversary (satan) against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite; he was of the royal house in Edom.

This adversary was Hadad the Edomite. Not only was this *satan* a human, but a God-ordained human! *Satans* can be earthly, sometimes plural, and even sent by God! But there's more...In four passages the word *is* used in reference to some sort of heavenly being¹, but, as scholars note, not necessarily the same heavenly being. Let's take a look:

SATAN AS GOD'S MESSENGER

In Numbers 22 we have one of my favorite Bible stories. Balaam (BAY-lum) and his talking donkey. All this time I've been so preoccupied by the talking donkey that I never realized God's angelic *satan* also plays a part in this scripture.

Numbers 22.22

God's anger was kindled because he (Balaam) was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the road as his adversary (satan).

Long story short, the donkey sees the angelic *satan* and veers off course three times, angering Balaam who proceeds to beat the donkey. The donkey literally asks him why Balaam would treat him so poorly. Balaam finally sees the *satan* who—after giving him a thoroughly threatening tongue-lashing for beating his donkey—explains why God sent him and what God wants him to do next. Here, the *satan* is an angelic messenger from God. Mind blown yet? Mine was.

THE SATAN AS MEMBER OF HEAVENLY COURT

Job might be the most well-known appearance of *satan* in the Old Testament, and finally we are at *the* *satan*. But not THE Satan.

Job 1.6-7a

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and (the) Satan also came among them. The Lord said to

¹Job 1–2; Numbers 22.22; Zechariah 3; 2 Chronicles 21.1

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(the) Satan, "Where have you come from?" (The) Satan answered...

So, you're wondering, what's up with the *the*? The Hebrew here is *ha-satan* or *the satan* or The Accuser. But not *the* Satan. In Job *ha-satan* is written as a servant of God, not a fallen angel, not a rival to God. But as a tool for God.

Last example from the Hebrew Bible. If you've ever read through the Bible start to finish and thought, "Wait, didn't I read this part already?" you may have been right. The books of Samuel/Kings and Chronicles serve as parallel narratives of many of the same stretches of Israel's history. You can read the same stories from two different perspectives. Simply put, Chronicles is the cleaned up version that makes the Israelite kings look better (another reason to be very careful if you subscribe to Biblical Literalism, which Pastor Pam will talk more about next week). For our study today, let's compare a parallel passages from Samuel and Chronicles.

2 Samuel 24

Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he (The Lord) incited David against them, saying, 'Go, count the people of Israel and Judah.'

1 Chronicles 21

Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel.

Wait, what?! Did Satan incite David or did God incite David? Two versions of the same story. Clearly, the use of "satan" here is not as a demonic being, but rather, as Chris says, "a personification of divine anger."

So to sum up...In Chris Bucher's words: There is not "Satan" in the Old Testament, if by that we mean a figure known by that name or title." ²Passages in the OT that have been read as referring to *the* Satan did not originally have that intent.

² And *satan* is not the serpent in Genesis, a fallen angel, etc.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT?

I mentioned before that the word *satan* (adversary, accuser) got translated as *diabolos*. In Greek they chose a word that had similar meaning. *Diábolos* is something like a slanderer or accuser (*dia-* “across, through” + *ballein* “to hurl”^[63]). In our English versions, the devil. Though some New Testament writers also used the word *satanás*.

But here’s where we have a big gap in our understanding of the Bible. Something clearly happened in the time between the two testaments. In the time between when these Hebrew scriptures were written and when Jesus was born and lived, Jewish understanding changed. A demonology developed. Satan seems to have gained a new role. Sadly, our time doesn’t let us get too deep into this but let’s quickly look at a few mentions of the Devil and Satan in the New Testament.

Three of the gospel writers have Jesus tempted by the Devil in the desert—The devil is the adversary in the true sense of the word.

Mark 1—And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Again, the devil as adversary. In the New Testament the devil has a reputation as a tempter. Which leads us to one of the most quoted *satan* scriptures...

Matthew 16.21–23—From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

In the New Testament the devil is those things that keep us from the Reign of God. Peter was not Satan, but he was

6 preventing Jesus from the fulfillment of God's kingdom. All things that keep us from living into God's kingdom are of satan. Kind of gets us back to where we started—they are adversarial to what we are really about.

And what about Satan in the book of Revelation? I would first say that the image of Satan in Revelation gets far too much press. Our simple study today shows a much fuller view. That said, in Revelation, which is John of Patmos's dream or vision, Satan is a ringleader of evil who summons the anti-christ, rules for a while, then in the end is destroyed. And we remember that in the Bible dreams need interpretation. And we know the value of metaphor. In John's dream, Satan can be a metaphor. Just like Jesus as a lamb in Revelation is a metaphor. We know Jesus is not an actual lamb.

Whew! So where does all of that leave us.

WHAT I THINK...SATAN DOES HAVE HIS PLACE. METAPHORICALLY.

It is clear that the concept of satan/Satan has evolved over the many thousands of years in our scripture. Does that mean that Satan does or doesn't exist? Now that you know more of what the Bible says, you can decide.

For me, I know is this: temptation is real. Evil is real. I don't really buy Flip Wilson's the "Devil MADE me do it" as if we have no role. That's why Flip Wilson's bit is so funny—the character portrayed takes no responsibility for her actions. "Don't look at me, it was the Devil." But we know, we have a choice.

So maybe Satan is the representation of all that would keep me and us from seeking God's reign here on earth. For me the Devil is all that stuff that gets in the way of following Jesus. Satan is a symbol of temptation, the epitome of which for me is depicted the temptation of Jesus in the desert. One writer describes Jesus' temptations the universal temptations that we all face day in and day out. The temptations to have (in Jesus' case bread); to do (demand a miracle); to be (ruler of all).

I would love to talk to you more about this. I would love to hear who you think the devil is. Temptation exists and we know that the end point is never good.

I leave you with this word of encouragement. It's the same one that I gave the kids. When you feel beset by temptation and evil is knocking at your door talk to a friend, pull in a loved one, pray to God. We can overcome those temptations. Certainly with God and certainly with one another.

