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Some say that the only evil in the world is the evil that resides in the human heart. The devil and his demonic minions are real only in the same sense in which the Grim Reaper is real, they argue. In today’s world of scientific knowledge, it is no longer reasonable to believe in the existence of supernatural evil—or so they say.

In addition to liberal theologians such as the ones who make up the “Jesus Seminar,” some groups and individuals who generally take a more conservative approach to the Scriptures reject belief in a personal devil. These include groups such as the Christadelphians and Megiddo Mission Church, and several individuals and groups within the Israel-Identity Movement.

They often argue that the biblical descriptions of the devil are really personifications of human sinfulness. The devil is equated with the “evil” that resides within, and encounters with the devil are said to be internal struggles against the sinful passions of the flesh. In some instances, human beings are “satans” and “devils,” since the biblical word for “satan” means adversary and the biblical word translated “devil” means accuser. Any adversary is a “satan,” and any accuser is a “devil.” Even God is a “satan” when He acts as an adversary, they claim.

But these arguments are misleading. The Scriptures—both the Old Testament and the New—clearly reveal the existence of a literal, personal devil, a supernatural being whose influence in this world extends from the beginning of human history to the present, and

will continue until the close of this age. He is not merely an adversary or an accuser; he is called the Satan and the devil in Scripture.

Evidence of a personal devil appears early in the Bible. The first two chapters of the book of Genesis tell of the original creation, preparation of the earth for the arrival of humankind, the creation of Adam and Eve, the first human pair, and God's instructions to them. Then, in chapter 3, we read of a cunning "serpent" who has the power to communicate intelligently. Obviously, this is no ordinary snake.

Most of us know the story. God put Adam and Eve (the first human pair) in a specially prepared garden—the Garden of Eden—"to tend and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). He told them that they could eat fruit from all the trees of the garden, except the one in the midst of the garden. It was called the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," and the penalty for eating of its forbidden fruit was death (2:17; 3:3).

The instructions were not confusing, and not difficult to obey. Adam and Eve had everything they needed, including joyous fellowship with their Creator. All was well—until an uninvited guest showed up on the scene...

Enter the Serpent

The serpent, we are told, "was more cunning than any beast of the field" (Genesis 3:1). This means he was crafty, shrewd, skilled in the ability to mislead and deceive. In many societies, such characteristics have been attributed to snakes. The inspired writer is not confirming this myth. He is merely using a common belief about snakes to show that the "serpent" who appears in the garden with Adam and Eve really does have seductive powers.

"And he [the serpent] said to the woman [Eve], 'Has God indeed said, "You shall not eat of every tree of the garden"?' And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, "You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die."' Then the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" (Genesis 3:1–5).

This scene does not portray an inner struggle with sinful human nature. The serpent is other than the woman. He is an external adversary, not an internal one. The woman was responsible for her own disobedience, but the thought of disobeying God's command came to her by way of an external source. Because of the serpent's deceptive influence, the woman "took of its fruit and ate," and "also gave to her husband with her, and he ate" (verse 6).

Thus sin entered the world of humankind—and with sin came the curse. The fact that Adam, Eve, and the serpent are cursed is revealing, for if the serpent were nothing more

than the personification of sinful human nature, the curse would pertain only to the man and the woman.

“So the LORD God said to the serpent: ‘Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.’ To the woman He said: ‘I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’ Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, “You shall not eat of it”: Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return”’ (Genesis 3:14–19).

Genesis 3 alludes to characteristics attributed to snakes as well as common attitudes about snakes (verses 14–15). But the “serpent” described in this chapter is no snake. He is none other than Satan the devil, whose “serpentine” features are appropriately described in terms of common beliefs about the ordinary snake.

The New Testament makes plain the identity of this serpentine creature. The book of Revelation portrays the “serpent of old”—an obvious reference to Genesis 3—as a “fiery red dragon” who “deceives the whole world” (12:9). The titles of “dragon” and “serpent” are used interchangeably in this chapter: “Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast out....So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth....And the dragon was enraged...” (verses 13, 15, 17).

The apostle Paul associates the serpent’s deceptive activity in the garden with Satan’s present work. He writes, “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). The corruptors are “false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself [the real source behind the corruption] transforms himself into an angel of light.

Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (verses 13,14).

Romans 16:20 is another obvious reference to the Genesis 3 narrative. This verse states, “And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.” Paul is obviously alluding to Genesis 3:15, which states, “And I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed [the “seed” of righteousness, ultimately fulfilled in Christ]; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”

Jesus says that the devil “was a murderer from the beginning,” and that “he is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44). This, no doubt, is a reference to the serpent who lied to Eve when he told her, “You shall not surely die,” and who committed murder by introducing sin (and therefore death, the penalty of sin) into the world of humankind.

The “serpent” of Genesis 3 is clearly not a mere personification of sinful human nature. Throughout the narrative, the tempter is an external reality, not internal. He is intelligent, capable of communicating with humans, and is responsible for his actions. And finally, Revelation 12 and other scriptures confirm that the serpent of Genesis 3 is an external, personal devil, not a mere personification of evil or symbol of man’s internal struggle with sinful passions.

Some claim that we should understand the serpent narrative the same way we understand the description of “sin” in Genesis 4:7. In this verse, God says to Cain, “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.” Here, “sin” crouches at the door, ready to attack Cain and bring him under its power. Cain is told that he must rule over it, meaning that he can master sin by controlling his anger (compare verse 5).

Sin is personified in this verse, but it is not presented as something other than sin. In fact, it is called “sin,” and is clearly related to the unbridled anger that led Cain to kill Abel (verses 5–8). Those who use this verse to “explain” Genesis 3 are mixing apples with oranges, exegetically speaking. Genesis 4:7 is easily—and naturally—understood as an internal struggle, but the serpent narrative of Genesis 3 is not.

The Devil Comes to Uz

Satan shows up again in the book of Job. This time he is not described as a serpent, but is simply called “Satan.”

“Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. And the LORD said to Satan, ‘From where do you come?’ So Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it.’ Then the LORD said to Satan, ‘Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?’ So Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!’ And the LORD said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person.’ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD” (Job 1:6–12).

In this passage, the term “Satan” literally means the adversary (or the accuser). It does not mean an adversary, or just any adversary, but speaks specifically of the adversary. The definite article indicates a particular adversary, and the writer of the text assumes that his readers will immediately know of whom he speaks.

Some argue that the adversary here is a human adversary, not a supernatural one. He came among the “sons of God,” who were God-fearing men presenting their sacrifices before the Lord, and there communicated with God. God then permitted the adversary to destroy Job’s children, servants, and livestock, and later to attack Job’s health. Yet, through it all, Job remained faithful to God.

The notion that Satan is a mere human adversary is absurd on several counts.

First, he comes among the “sons of God” when they “came to present themselves before the LORD” (1:6). The “sons of God” are elsewhere identified as the angels who “shouted for joy” when God made the earth (Job 38:7). Satan, then, came with the angels when they went before God. This is clearly not a human adversary, and the “sons of God” (in this text) are not humans participating in a sacrificial offering.

Second, this adversary performs acts that no human could do. He roams the earth (1:7), causes fire to fall from heaven (1:16), causes a great wind to destroy a house, killing Job’s sons and daughters (1:19), and causes the Sabaeans and Chaldeans, in two separate but simultaneous attacks, to kill Job’s servants and take his animals (1:15, 17). All these things happened at once, or within close proximity to one another. This could not have possibly been the work of a mere man!

Then, after Satan saw that his attempt to cause Job to turn from God had failed, he was permitted to strike Job himself. On this attempt (which proved unsuccessful), Satan “struck Job with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (2:7). Again, this is not the work of a mere man. The “Satan” described here is clearly a supernatural being.

The Advocate and the Accuser

Zechariah 3:1–2 is another Old Testament text that speaks of Satan. The scene is from a vision the prophet Zechariah was given concerning the restoration of Israel.

“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the LORD said to Satan, ‘The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?’”

The Angel of the Lord is presented throughout the Old Testament as a powerful supernatural being who acts on God’s behalf. In this text, Satan (as the accuser) stands opposite the Angel of the Lord, who acts as advocate for Joshua the High Priest. Satan is not a human adversary, just as the Angel is not a human advocate. Both are obviously supernatural beings.

Satan is not presented as a literary device or personification of evil, but as an external adversary. The scene described here is similar to the prophet Daniel’s description of the

supernatural principalities and powers that work behind the scenes of the kingdoms of this world. Daniel writes:

“Then he [a powerful angel] said to me, ‘Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia. Now I have come to make you understand what will happen to your people in the latter days....’ Then he [the angel, or perhaps a second angel] said, ‘Do you know why I have come to you? And now I must return to fight with the prince of Persia; and when I have gone forth, indeed the prince of Greece will come’” (Daniel 10:12–14, 20).

Michael, called “Michael the archangel” in Jude 9, is “one of the chief princes” (Daniel 10:13), “your prince” (10:21), and the “great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people” (12:1). Just as Michael is Israel’s prince, other powerful beings are the princes of other nations. As the passage above shows, some of these “princes” act on God’s behalf, while others oppose God and His people.

Daniel’s descriptions of his encounters with heavenly beings shed important light on the scene presented in Zechariah 3:1–2. Clearly, the Angel of the Lord and the “Satan” who stands opposite him are two superhuman beings, one acting on God’s behalf, the other acting in opposition to God.

The Old Testament, then, presents a very real—and personal—devil!

Now, let’s turn our attention to the New Testament.

A Close Encounter of the Worst Kind

Some argue that Jesus’ encounter with Satan the Devil (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13) was nothing more than an inner struggle involving Jesus’ own drives and emotions. Others claim that this “Satan” was a human adversary, perhaps a messenger sent from Caesar to offer Jesus a place in the earthly kingdom in exchange for His loyalty.

Neither is correct! Let’s look at the details of the account:

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted [tested] by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, ‘If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.’ But He answered and said, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”’ Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: “He shall give His angels charge over you,” and, “In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot

against a stone.”” Jesus said to him, ‘It is written again, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”’” Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, ‘All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.”’ Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him” (Matthew 4:1–11).

The account does not read like a parabolic insert into an otherwise historical narrative. Rather, it is clearly a part of the historical narrative. Jesus really did go into the wilderness; He really did fast for forty days; He really did have an encounter with the devil.

Satan is not an anthropomorphic description or hypostatization of Christ’s own inner drives and emotions, but is a personal being who is other than Jesus. This is no imaginary description of an “inner struggle” against carnal appetites; it is a real encounter involving real persons.

The Jews of Jesus’ day believed in the existence of a personal devil. They would have naturally understood the “temptation” narratives of the Synoptic Gospels as accounts of Jesus’ encounter with the superhuman archdemon known as Satan the Devil—the same being who appears alongside the angelic “sons of God” in the book of Job, who stands opposite the Angel of the Lord in Zechariah 3, and who is depicted as a cunning serpent in Genesis 3.

If the Synoptic writers were veiling their language in the common myths of their day, then their narratives are misleading. They clearly support the common belief in a personal devil, and never hint that their temptation narratives are to be taken as anything other than literal accounts of Jesus’ encounter with the devil in the wilderness.

Throughout these narratives, Satan is an external adversary, not an internal one. He converses with Jesus, quotes Scripture, and leaves Jesus after testing Him. The adversary is also contrasted with the ministering angels that came to Jesus once this close encounter had ended (Matthew 4:11; Mark 1:13). Satan is plainly other than Jesus.

Some who reject belief in a supernatural devil concede that the adversary in this narrative is a personal being. But since their belief system rules out a supernatural devil, they usually claim that this “Satan” must be a human devil, perhaps an unnamed Roman official.

This interpretation won’t do, either. First, as noted above, the original readers of the Synoptic accounts already believed that Satan was a supernatural being, not a mere literary device, so they naturally understood the temptation narrative as an encounter between the Son of God and a supernatural devil. Second, if the “Satan” of this narrative were really a Roman official wielding the authority of Caesar, the writers would have said so. They were not afraid to speak of Roman rulers in a negative light (see Matthew

2:1–22; 14:1–11; Mark 6:17–28; Luke 3:19), so the idea that “Satan” was a Roman official is utterly absurd.

The truth is indeed plain. Satan the Devil is neither a literary device nor a human adversary, but is a supernatural being—the enemy of both God and man. He is the adversary and accuser, the evil one, the god of this world, the great deceiver, and father of lies. Denial of his existence is the fruit of his labor!

Some Objections Examined

Article XXII of the 1877 Statement of Faith, a document adopted by the Christadelphians, states that “there is no such thing as a supernatural personal devil, the devil of Scripture being a personification of sin in its several phases and manifestations among men.” Matthew 16:23; John 6:70; Acts 5:3–9; Hebrews 2:14; Revelation 2:10, 12, 13; and Revelation 12:3, 17 are cited as scriptural texts supportive of this statement. Let’s examine each of these.

Human Adversaries

Those who claim that the devil of Scripture is not a supernatural being emphasize the few texts that apply the terms “Satan” and “devil” to humans. For example, they are fond of pointing out that Jesus called Peter a “Satan” (Matthew 16:23; Mark 8:33), and Judas a “devil” (John 6:70). But these texts should not be used to define all other biblical descriptions of Satan. On the contrary, passages that describe the devil as a supernatural enemy of God and man should shed light on these texts.

Christ called Peter “Satan” because Peter was acting like Satan. He called Judas a “devil” because he was doing the devil’s bidding. By the time of the last supper, “the devil” had “already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot...to betray Him” (13:2). During the supper, “Satan entered him [Judas],” and he went out right away to betray Jesus (13:27–30). No wonder Jesus said, “one of you is a devil” (6:70).

Satan and Ananias

In Acts 5:3, Peter asks, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...?” The verses that follow show that the guilt belongs to Ananias and his wife Sapphira (who plotted with him). This supposedly shows that Satan, in this account, is nothing more than a personification of the sin that arose in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira.

But that’s not what the text says—or even implies. The text simply reveals that Satan influenced Ananias. Peter inquires as to why Ananias, who should have known better, allowed himself to give in to the devil’s influence. Peter would have said nothing about Satan had he believed that no outside influence was involved. Satan is clearly other than Ananias.

Satan and the Power of Death Hebrews 2:14 reads, “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He [Christ] Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.” This text supposedly shows that the devil is synonymous with sin, since Christ came to “put away sin [which produces death—Romans 5:21] by the sacrifice of Himself” (Hebrews 9:26).

But that’s reading too much into the text. The passage says that the devil holds the power of death, but does not say that he is synonymous with sin. The devil gained this power when he seduced our first parents to commit sin. The point of Hebrews 2:14 is that Christ, through His death, strips the devil of the power of death.

Satan’s Throne

In Revelation 2:10, Christ tells the faithful at Smyrna that “the devil is about to throw some of you into prison.” In verse 13, He says that “Satan’s throne” is in Pergamos. Supposedly, any “Satan” or “devil” that throws people into prison or sits on a throne is not a supernatural being, so the “Satan” and “devil” here must be manifestations of the sins of men.

Such arguments are foolish. These expressions are merely ways of saying that the devil was behind the persecutions against the faithful in Smyrna and Pergamos. Yes, men were the persecutors, but Scripture reveals that Satan works through evil men.

The Seven-Headed Dragon

In Revelation 12:3, Satan is described as a “fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.” Verse 17 tells us that this dragon “went to make war with... [those] who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” Since we know there are no seven-headed dragons, this one—according to the “no personal devil” school—must be a symbol of an anti-Christian system such as a future “one world government” or last phase of the “Holy Roman Empire.”

Of course there are no seven-headed dragons. And yes, the book of Revelation—chapter 12 not excluded—is rife with mysterious symbols. Nevertheless, the text itself, in some cases, interprets the meaning of its own symbols—and this is one of those cases. The seven-headed, ten-horned “fiery red dragon” is “that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world” (verse 9).

If Satan the Devil is a symbol of evil, then the dragon is a symbol of a symbol of evil. Why would John need to symbolize a symbol? He wouldn’t! Satan is described as a seven-headed, ten-horned creature because of his close association with the seven-headed, ten-horned “beast” of Revelation 13:1. This beast represents the Antichrist system Satan uses in his attempt to destroy the saints. The similarity in appearance indicates that Satan the Devil is the “power behind the throne” (compare with Daniel 10:10–21; 12:1; Ephesians 6:12).

Temptation to Sin

James 1:14–15, though not mentioned in the 1877 Statement of Faith, is frequently cited by those who deny the existence of an external, personal, and supernatural devil. The passage states that each person “is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.” The text says nothing about an external devil causing temptation; rather, temptation occurs when a person is drawn away and enticed by his own desires. This supposedly means that there is no external tempter.

The fact that sinful behavior arises from within does not in any way rule out the influence of an outside party. Jesus said that after the Pharisees won a proselyte, they made him “twice as much a son of hell” as themselves (Matthew 23:15), showing that one party can influence another to greater sinfulness.

Jesus also said, “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6). If the process that leads to sin never involves an outside party, Jesus would not have made this statement. Clearly, one person’s influence can be at least a part of the cause of another person’s sin. In many cases, particular sins would not have occurred had it not been for an external influence.

If one human can so influence another, how much more can the devil influence those who allow their own selfish desires to override their better judgment? This is precisely the problem James has in view when he writes, “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). James is not personifying sin when he speaks of “the devil.” Rather, he is saying that the way to remove the devil’s influence is by submitting to God through denying the self the pleasures of sin (read the context: verses 1–10).

Origin of the Devil

If everything God created was “very good” (Genesis 1:31), how do we account for the existence of the devil? Was Satan—the “serpent” of Genesis 3—one of the “very good” things the Creator had made?

Satan appears early in the book of Genesis, but the text does not tell us how he came to be. For that information, we must look elsewhere.

One place that gives us a clue on how the devil came to be is Isaiah 14. The first part of this chapter is a “proverb,” or taunt, against the king of Babylon (verse 4). While this section is primarily about the corruption and fall of the human king of Babylon, the descriptions of the king’s prideful reign and ultimate descent from greatness reflect the fall of the superhuman ruler who was surely at work behind the scenes during the reign of the king of Babylon.

“How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer [or “Day Star”], son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God...I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High’” (Isaiah 14:12–14).

This description of the king’s prideful self-exaltation and resultant ruin is also a description of the pride that transformed a supernatural “Day Star” into the ruler of darkness. Similarly, Ezekiel’s description of the prideful reign and ultimate fall of the king of Tyre is also a description of Satan’s former glory and ultimate rebellion.

“You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God...You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God...You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you” (Ezekiel 28:13–15).

This ruler had been in “Eden, the garden of God,” is called “the anointed cherub,” and was “perfect” the day he was “created.” While all this is a poetic description of the former glory of the human king of Tyre, it alludes to the original state of the now fallen “god of this world,” Satan the devil. The one who became the devil truly had been in Eden, and was one of the angelic beings God had created. Like the other angels, he was perfect before he allowed pride to lift him up and lead him astray. His title of “anointed cherub who covers” suggests that he held a high position within the celestial hierarchy.

Like the human rulers who mirror his fall from glory, the anointed cherub possessed the freedom to choose whether to abide by the will of God or deviate from it. He chose the latter. Thus, the anointed cherub became Satan the devil, not by an act of God, but by his own act of rebellion against the Creator.

The human rulers of Babylon and Tyre, because of their own iniquity, were brought to ruin. Similarly, the devil was thrown out of heaven and will ultimately be stripped of all his power. Jesus “saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18), and John, by way of divine revelation, foresaw the time when the devil’s influence will finally—and forever—be removed from planet earth (Revelation 20:10).

Job 38:4–7 indicates that God created the angels at some point before He “laid the foundations of the earth.” The “anointed cherub,” who would later become the devil, was one of those created beings. When he appears in the Garden of Eden, the transformation from anointed cherub to Satan the devil had already occurred. The primordial “fall of Lucifer” may have taken place many centuries before God prepared the uninhabitable planet earth for the arrival of humankind.

Names and Titles of the Devil

Satan’s roles as adversary, accuser, and deceiver come across clearly in the various texts describing his activity in this world. Belief in his existence was common to the Jews of

the time of Jesus, and Jesus and His disciples confirmed the reality of his evil presence and destructive activity in the world. By the time of the apostles, the devil's long history of seduction and destruction had earned him several pertinent names and titles. Let's look at some of them.

Satan

In the New Testament, the word translated "Satan" is the Greek *Satanas*, a derivative of the Hebrew *Satan*. While the term is sometimes used of a human adversary, it is most often used in reference to Satan the Devil, the supernatural adversary. The name means adversary, and underscores his role as accuser and slanderer. He is the adversary of God and Christ, of the Church of God, and of mankind in general. He attempted to thwart God's plan for humankind by leading Adam and Eve into sin and its consequences; accused Job of exhibiting righteousness for the sake of reward; stood ready to present his case against Joshua the high priest; challenged Jesus on His divine Sonship; and worked through religious and secular leaders in his centuries-long chain of attempts to destroy the church.

The Devil

The New Testament word for "devil" is *diabolos*, which describes an accuser or slanderer. Like "Satan," this term can be used of human accusers and slanderers, but most frequently refers to the supernatural evil one. The term carries essentially the same meaning as "Satan."

The Accuser

Satan is called "the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night" (Revelation 12:10). The Greek term is *kategoros*, and is properly translated here. Like "Satan" and "devil," this term underscores the adversary's accusatory nature.

The Adversary

Peter admonishes, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). The Greek word for "adversary" is *antidikos*. According to *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, by W.E. Vine, this term refers to "an opponent in a lawsuit," but "is also used to denote an adversary or an enemy, without reference to legal affairs" (p. 26). Some expositors believe that 1 Peter 5:8 has the latter meaning, but others think the first definition fits best, especially when placed beside Revelation 12:10 (see the above discussion on "The Accuser").

Beelzebub

On one occasion, the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons "by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons" (Matthew 12:24). In His reply, Jesus equates Beelzebub with Satan,

and asks, “And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out?” (verses 26–27). While the spelling is different, Beelzebub is almost certainly a variant of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron (2 Kings 1:2). By the time of Jesus, Beelzebub was considered the “ruler of the demons.” This underscores Satan’s power in the realm of supernatural evil.

Belial

In showing that God’s people ought not be “yoked together” with the ungodly, Paul asks, “And what accord has Christ with Belial?” (2 Corinthians 6:15). This word originally indicated utter ruin or worthlessness, but also referred to a wickedness leading to destruction. It became a proper name for the devil during the period between the Old and New Testaments. The name emphasizes Satan’s extreme wickedness, as well as the fruit of his destructive activity in this world.

The Serpent

Satan is the serpent who “deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). He began his work of deception in the Garden of Eden, and has not stopped. The description of the serpent as the deceiver of the world calls attention to just how cunning the adversary is.

It seems that most people are satisfied with their cherished opinions and comfortable beliefs, never pausing long enough to ponder whether they may be under a blanket of deception. Think of it: the devil deceives the whole world. His influence is not restricted to a handful of hate-mongers in some foreign land, but reaches deep into every society—even into the world of Christendom—and may have reached you and me!

The list of “Christian” heresies is endless. From the time of the apostles to the present, one wave of heresy after another has rolled across the sea of Christendom.

Of course, no heretical movement proclaims itself to be a work of deception. Many heretics, both ancient and modern, have claimed “apostolic” authority for their unbiblical doctrines. Some have claimed special revelations through visions or from angels; others have introduced false teachings under the guise of some “restoration” movement.

But remember Paul’s warning: “Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Corinthians 11:14–15).

Yes, Satan has ministers. They appear “holy” and lace their speech with “spiritual” talk, but their works—both their sinful lifestyles and their unbiblical doctrines—reveal what they really are. They are “false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ” (verse 13).

How many today would rather remain in deception than honestly examine their beliefs under the light of the infallible Word of God?

The Dragon

In Revelation 12 and 13, Satan is described as a “great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns” (12:3). The “beast” seen “rising up out of the sea”—the Antichrist and his kingdom—also has “seven heads and ten horns” (13:1). Why are Satan and the “beast” system described with almost identical symbols? They are similar because the beast bears the image of its “god,” Satan, who is the beast’s principal source of power. “The dragon gave him [the sea beast] his power, his throne, and great authority” (13:2).

As we have seen, Satan is the chief of the evil principalities, powers, rulers of darkness, and spiritual hosts of wickedness that work behind the scenes in this world’s political entities (see Daniel 10:12–21; 12:1; Matthew 2:16–18; Ephesians 6:11–12). The sea beast, representing the Roman Empire (the political entity as well as the kingdom in the person of its leader) through its successive stages in history and final appearance in the end-time, is inspired and empowered by the dragon.

Like Herod, Nero, Diocletian, and other cruel Roman emperors who persecuted the saints, the end-time beast, motivated and empowered by Satan, will attempt to destroy God’s people. “It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them....Here is the patience and the faith of the saints” (Revelation 13:7, 9).

The Evil One

Satan’s title “the evil one,” or “wicked one,” appears several times in 1 John. John commends the young men for having “overcome the wicked one” (2:13–14); says that Cain, who killed his brother Abel, “was of the wicked one” (3:12); assures his readers that “the wicked one does not touch” those begotten of God (5:18); and says that “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (5:19).

Again, we see the extent of Satan’s power. Those who do evil are children of the evil one. In fact, the whole world is under the evil one’s sway. Only the children of God—those who abide in the truth and keep God’s commandments—are able to escape the snares of the wicked one.

The Father of Lies

Speaking of Satan, Jesus said, “When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44). The devil’s first lie was in the Garden of Eden. God had warned Adam and Eve that they would die if they ate the forbidden fruit, but the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die” (Genesis 3:4). This lie led to the first human sin. The devil has been lying ever since—and continues to foster his deceptions off on an unsuspecting humanity today.

God of This Age

Paul writes, “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Corinthians 4:3–4). This title reminds us of two important facts: First, like his other titles, this one reminds us of the vastness of Satan’s influence. He is the “god” of this present age—evidence of his work can be seen everywhere. Second, it reminds us that there is coming an age when Satan will no longer be able to deceive the nations (see Revelation 20:1–3).

The passage above—2 Corinthians 4:3–4—also reminds us of the key to remaining free of Satan’s deceptions. Only those who believe can see the light of the gospel, which exposes Satan’s deceptions. But “believing” involves much more than mere intellectual assent. Even the demons “believe” in that sense (James 2:19). The “believing” of which John speaks means being faithful. Once we understand a truth from God’s Word, we must faithfully abide in it. If we do not, we will lose the truth we have, and will return to a state of spiritual blindness and fall under the sway of the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30). That’s the general condition of this world.

Prince of the Power of the Air

Paul writes, “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:1–2). Paul describes Satan with a title similar to that of one of the “gods” of the “mystery” sects. Some of these sects performed rituals for the purpose of causing a “god” called the “lord of the air” to come into them and possess them. Paul describes Satan similarly. The devil is the “spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience.” By calling him the “prince of the power of the air,” the Ephesians, who were familiar with the mystery religions, could readily relate the activity of the devil with the works of iniquity.

The Tempter

Satan is called “the tempter” in Matthew 4:5. He came to Jesus in the wilderness to tempt, or test, Him. He tested Adam and Eve in Eden, and Job in the land of Uz. Here, he meets Jesus in the wilderness to put Him to the test. The apostle Paul was concerned that “by some means the tempter had tempted” the Thessalonians, causing them to abandon the faith (1 Thessalonians 3:5). Such testing can come in the form of trials difficult to bear (as in the case of Job), or temptations to succumb to sinful desires (as in the case of Adam and Eve). The tempter uses both types in his efforts to seduce the faithful to commit sin.

A Call to Battle

Peter exhorts, “Resist him [the devil], steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world” (1 Peter 5:9). A person

resists the devil by remaining steadfast in the faith regardless the suffering he may endure.

The implication here is that the devil is, to some extent, responsible for the troubles Christians are called upon to endure. But suffering, as undesirable as it is, does not always have a bad result. In fact, God uses our trials and tribulations to mold and refine us, enhancing our faith and creating Godly character within us. All He asks is that we remain faithful throughout the time of trial.

Ironic, isn't it? The devil brings suffering upon God's people in order to destroy them, but God "turns the tables" on the devil by using our trials and tribulations to purify and refine us. No doubt, Satan will be one angry devil when he sees the outcome of his efforts—when he sees that the hardships he brought upon us were used to make us better!

As long as the devil "walks about...seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8), God's people will experience difficult times. To successfully come through these times and experience the character refinement God wants us to have, we must prepare ourselves for battle; we must resolve to be faithful—no matter how great the suffering or how difficult the trial.

The apostle Paul puts it this way:

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:10–18).

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