



"See, touch and judge"

Handout: Satan in the Bible

The following reflections are taken mainly from Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1984.

Satan in the Old Testament

The earliest traditions of the Bible do not know Satan. Some early Biblical sources (e.g. the Eloist tradition) acknowledge the existence of other spirits or other Gods besides the God of Israel, but these gods were of little concern; they cannot be compared with the God of Israel who alone has the power to create and to deal with human affairs. God did not create an evil creature; everything he made was good. Gen 3 speaks of a serpent seducing Adam and Eve, not of a Devil; Satan is not mentioned in the early writings. The existence of spiritual agents apart from God is acknowledged (e.g. Gen 6:2), but such creatures did not play a major role in Old Testament theology. Both good and evil were seen as coming from God himself. Other gods or spirits had little or nothing to do with human affairs, unless they were sent by God. God himself for example sent an evil spirit to Saul (1 Sam 18:10). When the word Satan is used in this early Old Testament thought, it does not stand for an evil spirit, a demon or a Devil. The Semitic root *šṭn* (Ha-Satan) means "to be hostile", "to accuse". Ha-satan is not the personal name for a specific angel or devil, but stands for a function: to be an "accuser" or an "opponent". Ha-Satan possesses no demonic qualities in the Torah writings. It is attributed both to people and to spiritual realities. Human beings are sometimes mentioned to be "Satan": In 1 Sam 29:4 the Philistines (to whom David fled from Saul) did not want to have David accompanying them to battle against Saul, lest he may become an adversary in battle – the Hebrew text says: a Satan. In 1 Kg 11:14 and 23 Yahweh stirs up two human adversaries (the Hebrew again says "Satan") against Solomon: Hadad and Rezon. Even Yahweh himself can become a "Satan": in Numbers 22:22 the angel sent by Yahweh to Balaam is a "Satan" to Balaam. The English translation says that "... the angel of Yahweh took his stand on the road to bar his way", but the Hebrew text says in fact that Yahweh stood in Balaam's way as a "Satan" to him. In Old Testament thought, Yahweh had also a dark side, a fearful side, that could destroy man and bring evil if he persisted in foolish or misguided actions. (Amos 3:6; Is 45:5-7; Is 54:16)

Satan appeared as a proper name for an evil spiritual reality in the Old Testament only in post-exilic writings (later than 597 BC). During the Babylonian Exile and later under Persian rule, the people of Judah came in contact with peoples of different worldviews, which were shaped by dualistic religions, among them Zoroastrianism, with the belief in a good God and an evil God, who stand in enmity against each other. People saw themselves to be involved in this struggle between good and evil, and they followed either one or the other. It is quite surprising that during this time Jewish faith purified its faith in one God (Yahweh) even more, and that it never accepted any form of dualism. Popular thought, however, took up the idea of an evil spiritual kingdom with a prince of demons being in charge. Jewish theology however did not question the sovereignty of God. Jewish faith remained strictly

monotheistic. There was no God besides Yahweh; Satan himself was but a creation of God, and answerable to God. Yet theology allowed for a certain amount of independence of the spiritual beings.

A classical post-exile story of Satan is the story of Job. This book deals not with Satan as such, but with the problem of evil. When sinners suffer, the explanation is easy: they inflicted the sufferings on themselves through their sins, or God punished them. "You reap what you sow." This was easy theology. But how can you explain that even the innocent suffer? The book of Job took up the figure of "Satan" (with whom the Jews were well accustomed since the exile) and used Satan as a vehicle to introduce the topic of evil and misfortune for the innocent. It shows how God remains sovereign over all. Satan is one of the sons of God (angels) in the council of God. His task is to be the prosecutor in the heavenly council. He is there for quality control, to check people out for sins, and in that function he is allowed also to test Job. The problem with Satan is that he is over-zealous in his task. Even the faithful ones can hardly escape his sharp eyes for sins. He hates Job because he has no fault. He tests people to make them fall into sin. In his role as prosecutor he has no mercy. Nevertheless he cannot perform anything without the consent from God. He is not a second God, but remains part of God's salvific plan.

Another classical post-exilic narrative with the figure of Satan is found in Zechariah 3:1-10. In Zechariah's vision, the high priest Joshua, dressed in rags, finds himself in the heavenly court with God's angel and with Satan at his side: one to defend him, and the other one (Satan) to prosecute him. Both the angel and Satan are agents of God and represent the judgement of God. Joshua's dirty clothes represent the sinfulness of the people of Israel. The angel of God rebukes Satan for making Joshua appear so dirty before the Lord. The prosecutor would have won the case (Joshua is guilty indeed), but the angel of Yahweh orders that Joshua be dressed in clean clothes: his sins are forgiven. The people of Israel are not saved because of their righteousness, but because of God's mercy. Again, Satan is not an evil spirit or a Devil; he symbolises God's judgement for sin, that is overturned by God's mercy.

In the Books of Chronicles, Satan is seen as an evil spirit who tempts people into sin. Evil desires are seen no longer as coming from God himself, but from the evil spirit. In 1 Chron 21:1 Satan tempts David to count his people, while in the original narrative (2 Sam 24:1) Satan is not mentioned at all; David has the evil desire by himself, but in the re-writing of the story in 1 Chronicles 21, the evil desire comes from Satan. Why is that? The books of Chronicles tend to vindicate king David from his sins in order to present a fitting example for Jewish kingship. It is less a teaching about Satan (he is just taken for granted by then as an agent of evil) than about the meaning of kingship. The Book of Wisdom, finally, sees in Satan an enemy of Israel and an enemy of God. Satan brought death into the world (Wis 2:24). The Book of Wisdom was written by Jewish people living in the Greek Diaspora, probably in the first Century BC. It was written in Greek, not Hebrew. As it was written in a Greek environment, it made much use of Greek ideas. It shows that in the Middle East 100 years before the birth of Christ the idea of Satan or the Devil was generally taken for granted.

Angels in apocalyptic writings

The Devil was tempting people, leading them into personal sin. The apocalyptic writings of the Bible (especially in Daniel and later in the book of Revelation) acknowledge that whole nations can be under the influence of spiritual powers, that events take place in history that cannot be attributed to a single human being; spiritual forces are at work in history that go beyond the mere sum of individuals. Already in Deuteronomy we find the idea that nations are given angels to lead them; the people of Israel however do not receive an angel, since God himself is taking care of them. (Deut 32:8-9; 10:13.20-21;12:1) As the nations are divided here on earth, so the heavenly angels are also divided, each one with special tasks to look after their nations. As such they also gain a certain independence.

In the book of Daniel chapter 10, Daniel is frightened after he received a vision from God about a terrible war that is about to start. He prays and fasts so that God may spare his people. After 21 days the angel Gabriel comes to him with a message: "God has heard your prayers, but it took me 21 days to arrive, because I was delayed by the angel of Persia." The angel Michael came to help Gabriel, so he could slip through and deliver his message to Daniel. The angel Gabriel was sent by God, and yet he was delayed by the angel of Persia: being the mightiest nation on earth, also its angel seemed to be the mightiest angel in heaven. It was looking after the interests of Persia (narrowly defined) and stood in the way of God's plan. The text shows a reciprocal relationship between the strength of a people on earth and the strength of its angel in heaven. The angel of a nation is directly related to the concrete manifestation of the cooperative actions of its people. It influences the behaviour of its people, as it is also itself influenced by the behaviour of the people.

This idea is common in apocalyptic writings. In Rev 1-2 we read about the angels of the churches; indeed, part of the book of Revelation is addressed to the angels themselves. When the churches need repentance, their angels need repentance too. The heavenly patrons are linked to a concrete physical reality on earth, but transcend them, go beyond ordinary experience. They are personal forces, yet at the same time they stand in relationship with the identity of a church (or of a nation, or of an institution), or the spirit of a church. As institutions make people act in certain ways (rather than the other way round), so the angels also share in the responsibility of the actions of a church as a whole. Yet they are more than metaphors or symbols for a national identity or for the spirit of a community; they are also seen as personalised forces with their own wills and actions.

Satan in the Jewish apocrypha

In the time between the last book of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, a number of books were written that did not enter the canon of the Old Testament (that is why we call them apocrypha, meaning "outside books"). These books testify to the development of popular Jewish thought. Some books are very dualistic. The three **books of Enoch** developed a systematic "angelology" or "demonology", meaning an account of demons and angels. Demons and angels are given specific names, and they are seen now as being hierarchically ordered. In the first book of Enoch, demons are subject to Satan, though there are a number of "Satans" changing positions. Demons are said to have sex with human girls, and they reveal secrets to women how to seduce men with perfumes and cosmetics. Angels from God and archangels are fighting these demons and protecting righteous people. Also the **Book of Jubilees** (sometimes also called the **Testament of Moses**) presents an

hierarchical order of angels and speaks also of guardian angels. Different types of angels have different functions. Different spirits rule the nations and lead them astray, while Yahweh rules Israel and leads him on the right path. The **Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs** speaks of hellfire in which all the evil spirits will perish. These books have not been accepted into the Biblical canon, but they were read, and they reveal the popular understanding of angels and demons that was common at the time of Jesus. Satan represents now the demonic enemies of God who stand in rebellion to God.

Satan in the New Testament

Satan is often used in the New Testament and plays a dominant role, much in contrast to the Old Testament.¹ He does not stand for one single concept, but one can discern different strands of meanings: some going back to the Old Testament, and others to the apocrypha or to popular thought. In the temptation narratives (Mt 4:1-11) Satan is the setter of choices. He wants to lead Jesus away from God's plan, but instead Jesus becomes even stronger because of the struggle with temptation. After the temptations Jesus is ready to start his ministry. Because of the Devil, Jesus clarified his objective to live for God alone. The Devil, in spite of being evil, can have a positive effect.

In other narratives, Satan seems to be a member of the heavenly court (like in Job). Jesus for example tells Peter that Satan asked God to "to sift him like wheat" (Lk 22:31), but Jesus prayed for Peter, knowing that Satan is overzealous in his task as prosecutor and that humans are weak. Jesus knows the weakness of his disciples and teaches them to pray not to be led into temptation.

Like in the Old Testament, Satan can mean any human being who stands in the way of God's plan or who is an obstacle. Jesus calls Simon Peter a Satan (Mk 8:33).

Other images are near to the apocrypha and to dualistic popular thought. Demons are hierarchically ordered, Beelzebub being the one in charge (Mk 3:22). Devils afflict people with all sorts of illnesses, and Satan in particular is held responsible for some specific sicknesses (Lk 13:16). Satan is the evil one, opposing God's will, strongly present in the world (Lk 8:28-34; Mk 4:15; Mt 13:28; Lk 22:3), but Jesus is stronger (Mk 3:27). Satan is doing all he can to put obstacles in God's way. In the time of Jesus people took it for granted that an evil spiritual being exists. The devil is just there, and his job description is to do all sorts of bad things and to put all kinds of obstacles and sicknesses on our path. Jesus'

¹ The New Testament uses the following words for an evil force opposing God's will: Διάβολος = devil (37 times, for example in the temptation narratives of Mt and Lk, in John in which he is called a liar and a killer, and in 1 Peter 5:8); Σάτανάς = Satan, the enemy, the adversary, the one who is against me (36 times, for example in John 13:27; Lk 10:18; 11:18; 13:16; 22:3,31; Acts 5:3; 26:18; 2 Thess 2:3-12); Δράκων = dragon, a power of death (13 times, this term is used only in Rev.); Κατηγορος = accuser (4 times); Βελιάρ = Belial, meaning rascal, scoundrel, rogue, evil (1 time, in 2 Cor 6,15); Κάτηγορ = accuser (1 time, in Rev. 12,10); Οφίς = serpent (1 time, in Rev 12,9). Five of these names are found in Rev 12,9-10. Other expressions for the evil force used in the New Testament are Αρχων του κοσμου (the ruler if this world, the prince of this world) in Jn 2,31; Αρχων της εξουσίας του αερος; (the prince of the power of the air) in Eph 2,2; Πονηρος (the evil one) in Eph 6,16 and Θεος του αιονος τουτου (the god of this age, or of this world) in 2 Cor 4:4). (*Nouveau Vocabulaire Biblique pp. 331 ff*).

teaching, parables and miracles take the devil for granted, but they offer no explanation why the devil must be there or where he comes from. Satan entered Judas and led him to betray Jesus, but Jesus goes to the cross not because of the devil but because of the will of God. Jesus does not eliminate evil nor destroy the devil; he liberates people from the devil and opens their hearts for God. Evil remains present, because God allows it to be present. God reigns supremely over all, including the devil; the Gospels invite us to have trust in God rather than speculate about the devil.

In 1 Peter the Devil is “prowling around like a roaming lion looking for someone to devour” (5:8). We are warned to be vigilant and God gives us the strength to resist. We are also told that the Devil flees from us when we resist him. In James, moreover, temptation is seen as coming from our own evil desires which we have to control (James 1:12-18).

Some later writings of the New Testament (the letters of John and the book of Revelation) have been strongly influenced by the Jewish Apocrypha. There is an Antichrist, and there are battles to be fought. The devil is defeated several times, locked up, but nevertheless he continues to roam around and to lead people astray until his final defeat, when he will be thrown into the lake of fire. The image of Satan in these later writings is much more dualistic than the teachings of Jesus and the letters of St. Paul. The Book of Revelation was written when the church was persecuted and when the frontiers were clear and hard. Christians experienced very destructive powers at work. In this context the message of the book of revelation acknowledged the difficulties of the present times of prosecution while giving the firm hope of the victory of Christ over evil. The images of chapter 13 have greatly influenced the images of today’s Satanism: the devil is thrown from heaven onto earth where he resides on the sand of the sea, from where he is misleading and deceiving the earth with his demonic powers. The “beast” probably refers to the Roman Empire as experienced in the persecutions of Christians in Asia Minor (where the book was written) in the time of Emperor Domitian. Satan is quasi the angel of Rome: the angel identified with the wickedness and cruelty of the mighty empire. And he becomes beyond Rome associated with wickedness and rebellion against God: Satan sums up all the wickedness in individuals as well as in nations and institutions. Satan is the personification/ the angel of wickedness all over the world. The book acknowledges the powers of the devil, but it is written largely to assure us of the victory of Christ. We are told that all Christians will encounter persecution because of the Christian message, but that Christ’s victory is coming at the appointed time. Already the first chapter gives the key for understanding what is going on: Jesus Christ was dead and yet he lives, and he holds the keys to the underworld and he reigns over all powers.

The Devil in Islam²

In Islam, the primary devil or evil demon is Iblis (Arabic إبليس). Iblis is a *Genie* (or *Dyinn*), a species that has been created before the creation of human beings out of smokeless fire, and that possesses semi-free will, in contrast to the angels, who were created out of light and who do not possess free will. Iblis had been elevated to become the leader of the angels. Later God created Adam, and ordered all the angels to bow down before him. All the angels did, except Iblis, who was proud and argued that he was superior to Adam, since Adam had

² taken from www.wikipedia.org/Satan

been created out of modified clay, while he himself was made out of smokeless fire. For this God damned Iblis to Hell for eternity, but gave him respite till the Doomsday at his request. Then and there Iblis swore that he would use his time to lead all people astray to burn in hell. God replied that there would always be followers of God, and that the paradise of heaven was available for them, while those who followed Iblis would go with him to Hell. In the Qur'an, Shaitan (شيطان, from the root شطش) is an adjective (meaning "astray" or "distant") that can be applied to both man and angel, while Iblis is the personal name of the Shaitan. In Islam, "the Devil ... has no power other than the power to cast evil suggestions into the heart of men. The Qur'an does not depict *Shaitan* as the enemy of God, for God is supreme over all his creations and Iblis is just one of his creations. All good is from God Himself and only He can save humanity from the evils of his universe and His creations. All bad deeds are done by our choice. Satan's single enemy is humanity. He intends to discourage humans from obeying God. Initially, the Devil was successful in deceiving Adam, but once his intentions became clear, Adam and Eve repented to God and were freed from their misdeeds and forgiven. God gave them a strong warning about Iblis and the fires of Hell and asked them and their children (humankind) to stay away from the deceptions of their senses caused by the Devil. Thus, humankind is warned to struggle (*jihad*) against the mischiefs of the Satan and temptations he puts them in. The ones who succeed in this are rewarded with Paradise (*jannath ul firdaus*), attainable only by righteous conduct."³

Conclusion

The figure of Satan as an evil spirit is acknowledged in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the Middle East, popular thought was influenced for a long time by "Iranian dualism", meaning the belief in two Gods, one good and one evil, who are fighting against each other. This belief was never accepted in Jewish, Christian nor in Islamic thought. All three religions accept the figure of the Devil but they don't accept any form of dualism. They integrate the devil-figure in different ways under a supreme and sovereign God. Islam gives a clear answer about the origin of the Devil, his make-up, his aims, and his destiny. The Bible does not give such a clear picture. Instead, different images stand side by side. There is not one single concept of Satan for the whole Bible. Over the centuries, different concepts developed and stood side by side. Maybe it is to teach us that one single image of the Devil cannot contain the whole truth about the mystery of evil. However, it was mostly the Book of Revelation interpreted in a rather dualistic way that came to determine the image of Satan in the subsequent history of Christianity.

³ *ibid.*