

In Here or Out There

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How do we get a glimpse of Satan? Should we look “in here” or “out there”? Two theologians who have studied the Scriptures deeply weigh in and suggest the best place to start is in our own lives and communities.

“Satan has no real being; he exists always as a parasite on the being of humankind, just as theology tells us that he exists as a parasite on the being of God. Satan is imagined and symbolized as a person, as “someone,” because satanic power becomes attached to the victim as the victim mechanism does its work. The victim is viewed as a devil or demon... Satan describes primarily the mechanism of accusing and lynching a victim.”

James G. Williams (summarizing René Girard’s work)

“What I propose is viewing the spiritual Powers not as separate heavenly or ethereal entities but as the inner aspect of material or tangible manifestations of power. I suggest that the “angels of nature” are the patterning of physical things—rocks, trees, plants, the whole God-glorifying, dancing, visible universe; that the “principalities and powers” are the inner or spiritual essence, or gestalt, of an institution or state or system; that the “demons” are the psychic or spiritual power emanated by organizations or individuals or subspects of individuals whose energies are bent on overpowering others; that “gods” are the very real archetypal or ideological structures that determine or govern reality and its mirror, the human brain; that the mysterious “elements of the universe” are the invariances (formerly called “laws”) which, though often idolized by humans, conserve the self-consistency of each level of reality in its harmonious interrelationship with every other level and the Whole; and that “Satan” is the actual power that congeals around collective idolatry, injustice, or inhumanity, a power that increases or decreases according to the degree of collective refusal to choose higher values.”

Walter Wink

Let me (Pastor Jon) summarize. Both Wink and René Girard are suggesting that viewing angels, demons, and Satan as personal beings that go around targeting human beings fails to appreciate the power of these beings. They suggest that the only power these forces have is, essentially, the power we give them. But not only that, we may not consciously, individually give them these powers. They gain power when groups of people open themselves to fear, injustice, idolatry, etc. The spiritual forces are like viruses that are activated when we turn from God to lesser things. For instance, Satan’s power is in our indulgence of the guilt and shame from our sin. When we hide, we are empowering “The Accuser” to have the authority in our lives, believing “The Father of Lies” that we cannot be forgiven, loved, or healed, “The Tempter” is leading us from the hard road of confession and repentance and to the “easier” road of not facing our sins or weaknesses even though this road is ultimately destructive. Or maybe “The Tempter” is leading us to project blame for our own shortcomings on others or even play the role of “The Accuser” in another’s life to avoid dealing with our own stuff—and drawing others into this self-justifying scheme. Do you see how it is our own destructive patterns that give us a window into evil, rather than merely making evil some external and independent reality?

The Origins of the Evil One

The origins of Satan are rooted in a lot of imagination more than in the Scriptures. The Bible gives us little about the origins of the Evil One. In the Old Testament, there is very little about Satan. The story of Job being an exception, though even this story leaves a lot of open questions. The idea of Satan or a specific evil angel really developed in Judaism between the Old and New Testaments. This is the first place Satan or the Devil is connected to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. This informs much of what we see in the New Testament. But where does Satan come from? What’s his story?

Let’s see:

- ◇ Revelation 12: this text does speak to a rebellion in heaven led by Satan, but does not give us much in the way of a timeline.
- ◇ Isaiah 14 is where a lot of details seem to be filled in, and it’s where the name “Lucifer” comes from. But if we look again, we see that this text is really about the King of Babylon, and that the name Lucifer is really the Latin translation of “morning star” in v. 12. This was translated as a name in the King James Version, but was probably a title for the King of Babylon, not a name for the Devil, and has been correctly translated in more recent translation as such.
- ◇ Ezekiel 28:12-19: Another text where a prophecy against an earthly king (of Tyre) has been turned into an origin story for the Devil. There is reason, both in this text and Isaiah 14 to see the patterns of Evil, even the Evil One at work in these two earthly rulers, but it is a stretch to try to pull a biography of the Devil from these texts.
- ◇ What is consistent with what we see in the Scriptures and in Jewish and Christian imaginations is that there seemed to be a created, spiritual being that rebelled against God in some way got some reason. That might be the best we can do!