

The Origin of Satan

by Geoff Linsley

In modern Christian cultures, Satan is said to be the infamous figurehead of all evil. He is popularly given many descriptions: he has horns, a forked tail, and a forked tongue. He's sometimes beast-like, hairy, repulsive, and fire-breathing. He is the commander of the underworld – the land of the dead – and causes death and destruction. We've been raised with this image and idea of who Satan is since birth. In the minds of many, this image may even instill a substantial amount of fear. A great many walk through life fearing Satan, and may even be swayed to modify their actions just because of the mere threat of him. Where did the idea of the existence of Satan come from? And what about his purported likeness? Did someone ever see him and tell people later on of his appearance? Have the Bible and the three monotheistic religions always carried the same idea of who Satan is?

Today's versions of the Bible, both Old Testament and New, are quite different than the texts read in the past. Many Christians believe that today's Christian traditions aid a biblical researcher in understanding what the Bible is supposed to mean; however, if a theologian follows this tactic, s/he can't always be entirely accurate. There is a lot of room for error in translating or trying to reword the Bible when these writers try to better communicate the texts to modern people. This creates the dilemma faced today by Biblical historians: they must always question whether or not the messages in modern Bibles accurately reflect what the texts were once supposed to mean. It's dangerous for a theologian to claim what a word in the Bible truly meant if s/he doesn't understand the context that it was written in, or, in the latter versions of the scriptures, to assume that the true meaning hasn't been changed in a translated version.

The lore of Satan is an excellent example of both biblical mistranslation and a change in meaning of what the Books once meant. One, however, wouldn't be able to understand that changes ever took place by reading modern Bibles. Authors of modern Bibles selectively picked which word they wanted to take place of words from other languages with the biased view that modern Christian folklore and tradition match the initial story.

The evolution of the satanic element in the Hebrew tradition can be easily understood by using the timescale of when historians and archaeologists believe the Books of the Bible were written and watching how the meaning of the word "satan" has evolved over time.

“Satan” is a derivation of the Hebrew root “s-t-n,” meaning *“adversary”* or *“opponent.”* In the earlier Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, the satanic being is referred to as *“hasatan,”* meaning *“the adversary”* or *“the opponent.”*

Before the destruction of Solomon’s temple (before around 586 B.C.E.), the Books of the Old Testament referred to “satan” as an agent of obstruction or of punishment, opposing the good guy in a Biblical story. This satan, a stumbling block, could’ve either been divine by nature or human, both sent by God. Instances of these first satans can be seen in: 1 Sam 29; 2 Sam 19: 17-24; 1 Kgs 11:4; 1 Kgs 11:23-25. Modern Bibles show the true meaning of this type of satan by replacing the respected “s-t-n” root word with “adversary.”

The times of 536 B.C.E. – 200 B.C.E, during the Second Temple Period, brought with them a different meaning of whom or what satan is: he became a solely divine entity who had the job of testing humans and reporting back to God about their righteousness. Examples of this transition are easily seen in Chronicles, where satan is the investigator of David’s ill-conceived census. In Chronicles 21, satan is a figure who authors a disaster and lures an honest man, King David, to embark on a tragic course that will lead to the deaths of thousands. In Zechariah Ch 3 (520 B.C.E.), *hassatan* plays the role of the devil’s advocate: “the accuser,” “the adversary.” More examples of this new evolution can be found in Num 22:30-33, which was written in the 500s B.C.E. The Book of Job (530-400 B.C.E.), written for a Hebrew dissident for wrestling with the question of if God had treated Israel justly during the Babylonian exile.¹ Job 1&2 contain the most developed and sustained appearances of this time’s *hassatan*.

The meaning of who and what satan is didn’t change dramatically until the Intertestamental Period (200 B.C.E. -200 C.E.), when all of his macabre glory emerged. One big change was that the authors of the later books of the Old Testament were raised with a different view of what “satan” is. The “satan” of the earlier books began to morph into the “Satan” of the later books. The “Satan” of the later books was highly inspired by other traditions and became a different kind of adversary; and people began to have different expectations of what both he and God were like. Some even rewrote old Biblical stories to fit their understanding of what God and Satan were like. For example, Sam 24:1 and 1 Chr 21:1 tell same story, but the author(s) of this part of Chronicles, which was added much later, switched God’s (YHWH’s) wrath with Satan’s wrath because he couldn’t accept a God who inflicts sin. This was one of the first instances of the use of “Satan” instead of “*hassatan*.”

Before the Babylonian exile, the Old Testament didn’t describe satan in detail, beyond being the adversary in situations. There was also no indication that the satans mentioned in the older Books were actually the same being. Rather, they appeared to be different, unrelated adversaries to the early protagonists of the Bible, supporting the Hebrew definition of the noun “satan” (“adversary.”) After the exile, especially three to four centuries afterwards,

the adversaries of the Bible became a more generalized, unified force of evil. Also, Satan began to possess distinct visual characteristics. Both were products of folklore: they were ideas that were grafted onto the Hebrew tradition from other religions. Similar satanic figures existed in many other religions, and the characteristics of these figures became characteristics of Satan. Humbaba of Mesopotamian lore, from the battle with Gilgamesh, was an adversary labeled "the beast," who breathed fire and death. Canaan's Mot had a demon-like appearance and was the god of the underworld. Canaan's Habayu, who was also from the underworld, had horns and a tail. Habayu was also known for defiling another of Canaan's lore, El, with excrement and urine. Egypt's Set had a forked tongue and a forked tail. Greece's Hades was odious, ugly and fearsome. He was a god of the land of the dead who brought death to the surface. Perhaps the biggest influence on God's and Satan's relationship came from Zoroastrianism. According to the Zoroastrian tradition, there is a leader of good spirits named "Ahura Mazda" and a leader of bad spirits named "Ahriman." The role of Ahriman is nearly identical to the role that Satan came to have in Christianity during the Intertestamental Period. Like Ahriman, Satan is a fearsome demon and is the god of the underworld, who causes death and destruction, and is in a perpetual battle with the "good" forces of the universe. Combining all of these different attributes, stolen from the evil leaders of nearby religions, there emerged Israel's Satan: a horned, fork-tailed, fork-tongued, hairy beast who is the commander of hell (a.k.a. the underworld.) He causes death and destruction, is feared by all, and battles Jesus for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Another very telling addition to the lore of Satan is 1 Enoch's Book of Watchers, which illustrates how the benay elohim, "the sons of God," fell from their divine posts within the heavenly court (in this book, Azazel is Satan in chapters 1-36, and afterword he is referred to as Satan.) The Dead Sea Scrolls, written by the Essenes in the First Century B.C.E., carried on the story of this cosmic battle. Also, in 1 Enoch and in Jubilees, Satan adopts the name "Lucifer."

After the Books of the Old Testament were written, the New Testament made additions to the lore of Satan. The main additions took place in the Book of Revelation, which combines the descriptions of the "Devil" gathered throughout the history of the Old and New Testaments into a story of how the end of times will come. An example of one of its additions was the connection of "the serpent" to Satan (Rev 12:9; 20:2.) Before the Book of Revelation, the serpent was mentioned in Genesis (written 300-700 years prior,) but Genesis never mentioned Satan. John, when writing the Revelation, tied the "evil," adversarial force from Genesis to Satan. Since the Book of Revelation, the lore of Satan has been fairly well preserved and little has been added, perhaps with the exception of the popular adoption of the content in Dante's Inferno, which lent a new description of what hell, Satan's domain, is like.

The lore of Satan is a compilation of many details adopted over the long history of the Old and New Testaments. Satan is a Biblical character that is loosely based on early Jewish lore and closely based on the lore of other religions. Why were these ideas adopted? When both trying to gain followers of a religion and when people interpret new religious ideas based on their existing religious beliefs, it is both advantageous and consequential that ideas are mixed in order to better tell and sell a story. For example, a Greek who fears Hades won't fear the early Jewish tradition's Satan the same way unless Satan becomes more than just an adversary. The Greek will give Hades more respect for being really scary than he will give Satan for being a stumbling block, so Satan must become really scary, too. The situation is reminiscent of two kids in a schoolyard arguing about whose dad can beat up whose. If one's adversary isn't as big, scary, and powerful as another, then there is no reason for the believer in the other religion to fear him, thus creating the need to modify the lore in order to gain followers. This was the origin of Christianity's antagonist, who many followers fear more than anyone or anything. This was the origin of Satan.

¹ - (William Safire, *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today's Politics*, NY: Random House, 1992)