

Satan, the External Devil

by Anthony Buzzard

“Each one is tempted,” James, the Lord’s brother, says, “when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:14-15).

Here is a classic statement about the working of sin in human nature. Jesus was no less realistic in his view of the evil in man when he said: “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness” (Mark 7:21-22).

In view of these texts, some have concluded that the term “Satan” in the Bible is simply a symbol for the evil inherent in human beings. Satan, they maintain, is not a personality external to mankind but rather a synonym for the human tendency to sin which resides in all people.

The argument against the existence of Satan as a personal being often proceeds like this: Angels are immortal (Luke 20:36). If Satan is an angel, he also must be immortal. If that is so, there will be an evil, immortal angel in the universe forever. Since such would be unthinkable, it is reasoned that Satan cannot be an angelic being. He must be merely a symbol of the evil inherent within mankind.

There are some questionable assumptions in this argument. Every statement about angels in the Bible does not necessarily refer to both good and bad angels at the same time. Paul recognized that there are “elect angels” (1 Tim. 5:21), while Peter and Jude spoke of “angels who sinned” (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). What is inferred about the immortality of angels in Luke 20:36 cannot necessarily be applied to all categories of angels, especially to “angels who sinned,” without taking into consideration the rest of Scripture.

Sometimes students of the Bible will demand an explanation for the origin of Satan before they are prepared to believe he exists. No detail is given about the creation of angels, but Bible believers do not question their existence. Angels are simply there, for all to see, in the biblical text.

The same is true of Satan. He is presented in both Testaments as a being, a single personality, external to mankind. To see this clearly, one must approach the subject with a proper method: one must begin at the beginning.

The Bible, when taken as a whole, contradicts the idea that the term “Satan” is a synonym for internal human nature. In Genesis, the original serpent, “who is the devil and Satan” (Rev. 20:2), is an external opponent of Adam and Eve. Satan is certainly not a symbol of Eve’s sinful nature. Before she was deceived by Satan, Eve, in her innocence, had no sinful nature.

Moreover, in Genesis 3:14-15, Satan, as the serpent, is cursed as a being distinct and separate from Adam and Eve. Notice especially the last part of verse 15: “He [the seed of the woman] shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.” This portion of the curse is widely recognized as a prophecy, not about literal snakes or internal human nature, but about Satan’s ultimate defeat by Christ, the *seed* of the woman. Such a curse clearly demonstrates that Satan is a morally responsible personality who must answer for his actions. As a being distinct from Eve, Satan is guilty of a terrible sin against God. (See also John 8:44 in this regard.)

Other examples from the Old Testament also reveal that Satan is an external opponent. In Job 1 and 2, he appears as Job’s adversary, having the power to devastate Job’s life and inflict disease upon him. This was obviously not Job’s human nature at work; it would be impossible to find that in the account. Also, in Zechariah 3, Satan stands at the right hand of Joshua the high priest to accuse him. Here again, Satan is not Joshua’s human nature but a real, external enemy. The same is true in 1 Chronicles 21:1 when Satan stood up against Israel and provoked David to number Israel.

Certainly, there are other “satans” in the Old Testament. These are human or angelic adversaries who stand in opposition to various individuals. For example, in Numbers 22:22, “God was angry [with Balaam], and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as an adversary [satan] against him.” The adversary in this account is clearly not Balaam’s human nature.

In 2 Samuel 19:22, David said, “What have I to do with you, O sons of Zeruiiah, that you should this day be an adversary [satan] to me?” 1 Kings 11:23-25 also recounts that God stirred up an adversary [*a* satan] against Israel. This was a human enemy, Rezon the son of Eliada.

The point to be established from such Old Testament references is that in all occurrences of the word “satan” (either *a* satan or *the* Satan), an *external* enemy is in view. In no case does “satan” mean the evil within the human heart.

The same is true of the use of the word “satan” and its Greek equivalent *diabolos*, devil, in the New Testament. The first use of these terms in the New Testament is found in Matthew 4 in connection with the temptation of Jesus. (See the parallel accounts in Mark 1:12-13 and Luke 4:1-13.) Matthew introduces the Devil without explanation (verse 1), perhaps indicating that his readers already knew, based upon Satan’s Old Testament appearances, that the Devil is an external tempter. However, lest there be any doubt, Matthew reports that the Devil “came” to Jesus (verse 3, literally “came towards” or “approached”), and later the Devil “left” Jesus (verse 11). Matthew also reports that angels “came and began to minister to him.” No one has difficulty in understanding that the angels were external to Jesus. They came to him (verse 11), but so did Satan in verse 3.

Who then was this tempter who spoke to Jesus in the wilderness? If Satan is merely man’s own sinful nature, as some maintain, then Jesus must have produced twisted quotations of Scripture in his own mind. However, nothing in the account suggests Jesus was talking to himself. Also, Jesus himself was sinless, for only as the Sinless One could he atone for the sins of others. 2 Corinthians 5:21 declares: “[God] made [Jesus] *who knew no sin* to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

If Jesus' temptation did not come from within himself, then it must have come from some external source. The Gospels identify that source as Satan, the devil.

From Genesis to Revelation, Satan is alive and active as the external adversary and accuser of God and His people. Even though he is destined for destruction in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10), Satan presently "prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). To suggest, therefore, that Satan does not really exist as a personality is a dangerous proposition indeed, one that may lead to deception. Rather than downplaying Satan's personality and role, Ephesians 6:11-12 warns Christians to recognize the enemy and arm themselves against him. May we all heed this advice:

"Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood [i.e., human beings], but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."

From
[Restoration Fellowship](#)