“BETTER TO REIGN IN HELL, THAN SERVE IN HEAVEN”

SATAN’S METAMORPHOSIS FROM A HEAVENLY COUNCIL MEMBER TO THE RULER OF PANDAEMONIUM

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that Satan was not perceived as a universal malevolent deity, the embodiment of evil, or the “ruler of Pandaemonium” within first century Christian literature or even within second and third-century Christian discourses as some scholars have insisted. Instead, for early “Christian” authors, Satan represented a pejorative term used to describe terrestrial, tangible, and concrete social realities, perceived of as adversaries. To reach this conclusion, I explore the narrative character of Satan selectively within the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental literature, Mark, Matthew, Luke, Q, the Book of Revelation, the Nag Hammadi texts, and the Ante-Nicene fathers.

I argue that certain scholars’ such as Jeffrey Burton Russell, Miguel A. De La Torre, Albert Hernandez, Peter Stanford, Paul Carus, and Gerd Theissen, homogenized reconstructions of the “New Testament Satan” as the universalized incarnation of evil and that God’s absolute cosmic enemy is absent from early Christian Orthodox literature, such as Mark, Matthew, Luke, Q, the Book of Revelation, and certain writings from the Ante-Nicene Fathers. Using Jonathan Z. Smith’s essay Here, There, and Anywhere, I suggest that the cosmic dualist approach to Satan as God’s absolute cosmic enemy resulted from the changing social topography of the early fourth century where Christian “insider” and “outsider” adversaries were diminishing. With these threats fading, early Christians universalized a perceived chaotic cosmic enemy, namely Satan, being influenced by the Gnostic demiurge, who disrupts God’s terrestrial and cosmic order. Therefore, Satan transitioned from a “here,” “insider,” and “there,” “outsider,” threat to a universal “anywhere” threat.
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Introduction

An apology for the Devil: It must be remembered that we have heard only one side of the case. God has written all the books.

--- SAMUEL BUTLER, Note Books

The Satan of John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost* is a familiar character. He leads a group of angels in a rebellion against God which results in their expulsion from heaven. With the rebellious group of angels banished below to the dark void of chaos, Satan has now become the ruler over “Pandaemonium.” “Pandaemonium” is a term Milton coined by combining the Greek terms *pan* and *daimones* simply meaning “all,” or “every,” demons. In response to God’s punishment, Satan tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden; this, of course, leads to the “fall of man.” This portrayal of Satan has become the dominant perception of Satan within popular discourse. However, the notion of an “evil” figure within the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental, and early Christian literature is much more complex than Milton’s characterization.

I will discuss the narrative character of Satan in these ancient texts in order to show that Satan was not perceived as a universal malevolent deity, the embodiment of evil, or the “ruler of Pandaemonium” within first century Christian literature or even within second and third-century Christian discourses as some scholars have insisted.¹ For example, Jeffrey

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Burton Russell claims that the Devil within the New Testament is not a peripheral character and is not a symbolic representation in any manner. He states that Satan is God and Jesus’ chief opponent and the ultimate “principle of evil.” Peter Stanford claims that a central emphasis for the entire New Testament is the conflict and hostilities between Jesus and the Devil. Additionally, Gerd Theissen’s reconstruction of Satan relies heavily on the narrative of Jesus’ temptation within the desert. The dependence upon the temptation narrative to reconstruct Satan does specifically apply to Matthew and Luke, but other texts such as John and any of the Pauline letters lack any mention of the temptation narrative. Therefore, applying the temptation narrative to reconstruct an overall caricature of Satan is misleading. Scholars such as Russell, Stanford, Miguel A. De La Torre, Albert Hernandez, Paul Carus, and Gerd Theissen combine various narratives from different and diverse sources to form a conglomerate character. Their chapters, books, and essays about Satan within the New Testament do not differentiate between Satan in Mark, Satan in Matthew, etc. Therefore, their reconstruction of Satan within the New Testament is a homogenized one.

This perception of Satan is more indicative of contemporary discourses as seen in popular films, books, music, and certain Protestant and Catholic theologies. For example, Russell writes: “the devil is a creature of God, the chief of the fallen angels... He is lord of this world, chief of a vast multitude of powers spiritual and physical, angelic and human, that are arrayed against the Kingdom of God.” Instead, I argue that for early Christian authors, Satan represents a pejorative term used to describe terrestrial, tangible, and concrete social realities, perceived as adversaries. Additionally, Satan is occasionally portrayed as a peripheral celestial tester and/or stumbling block to the narratives’ main characters, such as Jesus. I explore the narrative character of Satan within the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental literature, Mark, Matthew, Luke, Q, John, Paul, the Book of Revelation, the Nag Hammadi texts, and the Ante-Nicene Fathers. By examining each text separately, I can focus on how each portrays Satan.

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2 Russell, 247.
3 Stanford, 55.
4 See Theissen as summerized by Nienke Vos, 9.
5 Russell, 247.
Satan. The result of such an examination is that the Satan figure varies throughout various literary works.

Some scholars tend to ignore the Satan figure while conducting hermeneutical examinations of various periscopes. Others often project their contemporary notion of Satan onto the ancient literature they are examining. This type of anachronistic reading dealing with any type of critical assessment is problematic. Of course, scholars know that anachronistic readings are problematic, but somehow this problem still persists when it concerns the narrative character(s) of Satan. Henry Ansgar Kelly notes:

As an introduction to the New Testament, let me say that in spite of the fact that practically every Scriptural topic under the sun has been subjected to much critical evaluation, most exegetes are remarkably uncritical when it comes to satans and Satan. They are content to show that various sinister figures, like Belial and Beelzebub, were linked to a personal Satan in Jewish and Christian sources, never mind how late, and they assume that this Satan had become the all-evil enemy of God by the time that the Christian Scriptures were written, never mind how or when.6

In contrast, the data suggest that the narrative character of Satan within the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental, and early Christian literature was not the “incarnation of evil,” or God’s absolute celestial enemy. I will eventually suggest that this universalized notion of Satan developed within Christian discourse as a result of a changing social topography not until the beginning of the fourth century.

The first chapter will be dedicated to examining Satan’s possible “roots” within Near Eastern, Greek, and Germanic mythologies. In this chapter, I will discuss the characters of Humbaba from the epic of Gilgamesh; Mot from Canaanite mythology; Set or Seth from Egyptian mythology; Hades and certain elements of Orphism from Greek

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mythologies; and Angra Mainyu or Ahriman from Zoroastrianism. After examining these characters, I will suggest three common characteristics.

The second chapter will be an examination of various discourses surrounding Satanic figures within the Hebrew Bible and Intertestamental literature. This chapter will attempt to explain the discursive transition which enables Satan to eventually become a predominant representation of evil for Christianity. To begin, I will examine how the term “satan” is utilized within the Hebrew Bible, namely in 1 Samuel 29:4, 1 Kings 11, Numbers 22:22, 1 Chronicles 21:1, Zechariah 3:1-2, and Job 1 – 2. Then I will provide a brief outline of the social circumstances during the Second Temple period focusing on the Intertestamental Period. This background information is important because it was during this timeframe that the various discourses of “evil” appeared to transition into a single dominant discourse of evil centered on Satan. Next, I will discuss the numerous “evil” figures during the Intertestamental period, namely Semyaz, Azaz’el, Mastema, and Belial. For each “evil” figure, I will examine the meaning of their name, the texts they appear in, and the possible social discourses which shaped them. Finally, I will explore three possible explanations of how the numerous discourses of evil shifted towards a single predominant discourse of Satan being the ultimate personification of evil.

The third chapter will consist of an examination of Satan within first century Christian literature. For this examination, I will discuss the Satan narratives within Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, John, the Pauline letters, and finally the Book of Revelation. Each text represents Satan in a different manner. For example, in Matthew Satan is predominantly associated with the Pharisaic social group whereas in Paul he is more of a hindrance and obstacle to Paul’s proselytizing. However, it is evident within every text I examined that Satan is not considered a primary threat to the authors. In general, within first century Christian literature, Satan is not the primary antagonist and, for the most part, the authors do not concern themselves to develop or emphasize him.

The fourth and final chapter will be dedicated to second and third-century Christian representations of Satan. To begin this chapter, I will discuss the Nag Hammadi texts and the Gnostic notion of the demiurge representing a Satan-like figure. Lastly, I will examine Satan within the literature of the Ante-Nicene Fathers. This section will not consider all the representations of Satan in all the Ante-Nicene fathers; instead, it will offer an overall general frame of their rhetoric about Satan as directed against
perceived “outside” and “inside” threats to their ecclesiastical institutions, structures, and their desire for Christian unification.

To conclude, I will argue that certain scholars’ homogenized reconstructions of the “New Testament Satan” as the universalized incarnation of evil and God’s absolute cosmic enemy are absent from early Christian literature. Using Jonathan Z. Smith’s essay *Here, There, and Anywhere*, I will suggest that the cosmic dualist approach to Satan as God’s absolute cosmic enemy resulted from the changing social topography of the early fourth century where Christian “insider” and “outsider” adversaries were diminishing. With these threats fading, Christians, influenced by the concept of the Gnostic demiurge, universalized a perceived chaotic cosmic enemy, namely Satan, who disrupts God’s terrestrial and cosmic order. Therefore, Satan transitioned from a “here,” “insider,” and “there,” “outsider,” threat to a universal “anywhere” threat.
Chapter 1

Near Eastern Narratives which Influenced the Development of Satan

All things truly wicked start from an innocence.

---Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast

Without question, the biblical character of Satan did not originate within a vacuum; external mythic narratives aided in the discursive development of this character. Mesopotamian, Canaanite, Egyptian, Greek, Persian, and perhaps even Germanic mythologies all encompass some form of a mischievous, trickster, or malevolent deity, demi-god, or monster. I am not suggesting, however, that these mythologies provide the only characters or conceptions that contribute to the development of Satan.\(^1\) I am selecting these mythologies due to the fact that the cultures that produced them were extremely influential as “Israel’s closest

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\(^1\)For example, the character of Mara in Buddhism is seen demonic tempter of Siddhartha Gautama. James W. Boyd, “Symbols of Evil in Buddhism,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 31.1 (Nov., 1971), 63-75 argues that Mara is employed for the purpose of understanding the notion of evil within Buddhism (desire, rebirth, attachment, etc.). Mara is seen as a personification of human hindrances causing suffering. Another example being the Asura “demons” from post-Vedic literature. The Vedas describe certain deities, such as Agni and Indra, and Asura. Later, however, as demonstrated by Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), “the elder gods, the Asuras, were defeated and overthrown by the Devas, who became ‘the gods’ and relegated their ancient enemies the asuras to the level of demons.” (104).
neighbours.” As a result, Israel and/or Judea’s, social contexts for the composition of the literature contained in the Hebrew Bible would have had significant dealings with these cultures. In this chapter, I will discuss the characters of Humbaba, Habayu, Mot, Set or Seth, Pan, Hades, Orphism, and Angra Mainyu or Ahriman within Mesopotamian, Canaanite, Egyptian, Greek, and Persian narratives respectively. I will examine these characters to identify common elements found in discourses surrounding Satan. After examining these characters, I will suggest three common characteristics.

Mesopotamia

The extant copy of the Epic of Gilgamesh was written on twelve clay tablets in Akkadian. During an excavation at Megiddo, a fragment of the epic, which was dated to 1550-1150 B.C.E., was discovered in addition to the twelve tablets. There have been numerous debates regarding the Gilgamesh epic. Certain scholars, such as Morris Jastrow and Noah Kramer, do not find Gilgamesh appealing and disregard it because they view the narrative as too pessimistic, meaning Gilgamesh fails to achieve immortality. However, disregarding an ancient piece of literature because it is too pessimistic is indeed puzzling. By contrast, other scholars such as Hope Nash Wolf, Gerald K. Gresseth, and George F. Held “make Gilgamesh appear to be a heroic and humanistic figure of exemplary significance.” Jonathan Z. Smith states that the Gilgamesh epic “is not the possibility of ‘everyman’ escaping death … Rather, the question is whether Gilgamesh … might escape the common lot of humankind, a question already explicitly formulated and negatively answered in the

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3 Wray & Mobley, 76.

4 Wray & Mobley, 76.


6 See Ray, 303.
Sumerian ‘Death of Gilgamesh.’” Benjamin Caleb Ray provides another plausible scenario; he states that

The Gilgamesh story never became standardized and was constantly altered through contact with a continuing oral tradition. ... The general purpose for which the Gilgamesh epic and its folk-tale elements existed in both oral and written form appears to have been entertainment in the contexts of royal courts, private houses, encampments along the desert caravan routes, or aboard ships sailing the rivers of the Indus Valley.

For my purpose, I will focus on the character of Humbaba in the Gilgamesh story. Humbaba is described as a terrible ogre, with unusually large eyes and nose, who “had been appointed by Enlil, the lord of the gods, as the guardian of a distant and almost boundless cedar forest.” A combat myth occurs within a narrative when a “hero’s victory over a powerful monster typically embodies a triumph of good over evil, order over chaos, civilization over nature.” When Gilgamesh and Enkidu encounter Humbaba, a combat myth motif is present. According to Bruce Louden, “monsters are typically figured as representing, or integrally connected with, a natural, uncivilized state of existence.” Louden illustrates “the combat myth” by comparing Odysseus’ encounter with Polyphemos, or the cyclops, in Homer’s epic the Odyssey to Gilgamesh’s clash with Humbaba. Overall, Louden argues that “Odysseus’ victory over Polyphemos and Gilgamesh’s defeat of Humbaba share a

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8 Ray, 305.
11 Louden, 180.
12 Louden, 185.
13 See Louden, 180-196.
considerable number of common motifs, occurring in roughly the same sequence.”

T.J. Wray and Gregory Mobley suggest that the epic of Gilgamesh makes three contributions to the development of Satan. First, there is a motif of a supernatural opponent to the hero. This is important because the Gilgamesh epic is “one of the oldest examples of a supernatural adversary in literature.” Additionally, there are Humbaba echoes in Genesis 3:24 where YHWH assigns a frightening cherub to guard the gates of Eden; it states “he drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.” The second contribution is the epic’s “description of the permeability of the border that separates out the terrestrial landscape from a terrifying and fantastic netherworld.” The third contribution of the Gilgamesh epic is witnessed through the trickster character of Enki/Ea. Enki displays a motif of a divine council member “with a mind of his own, artfully adept at circumventing the divine will.” This motif is strikingly similar to the Satan’s role in Zechariah 3:1-2 and Job 1 – 2.

It is also worth mentioning that Humbaba is not the sole supernatural threat to Gilgamesh and Enkidu. In the Akkadian version, the goddess Ishtar also threatens them. Ishtar requests that the other gods and goddess release the Bull of Heaven against Gilgamesh and Enkidu. However, the impact of this request would disrupt the fragile cosmic order. An upset cosmic order violates the demarcations of the established cosmic realms resulting in social (and perhaps heavenly) chaos. Another myth surrounding the goddess Inanna/Ishtar (Sumerian an Akkadian version respectively), specifically deals with the realm of the dead, or the underworld. Both versions (especially the Akkadian one) deal with fertility,

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14 Louden, 183. See Louden, 184 for his extensive list.
15 Wray & Mobley, 77.
16 See Wray & Mobley, 77.
17 Wray & Mobley, 77.
18 Wray & Mobley, 78.
19 I shall discuss Zechariah 3:1-2 and Job 1-2 in Chapter 2.
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