

# SATAN

There is no “official” position or dogmatic teaching on the subject of Satan, nor does Satan appear in any of the Christian creeds. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 assumes the existence of devils and mentioned devils to the effect that they are not the source of all evil and they are subordinate to God.

However, there is a presupposition or a traditional view, accepted by many, that has developed over the centuries and it goes something like this:

- Satan is a spiritual creature like the angels.
- Satan was created good by God.
- Satan freely chose to sin and thus is responsible for his own alienation from God.
- Satan is subordinate to God.
- Satan has limited power in the world, but Christ has overcome his power.
- Humans may experience the power of Satan, but it is indistinguishable from the power of the results of human sin.

This outline of Satan comes close to answering the question: What do Catholics think about Satan?

## History

The history of the concept of a devil or Satan within the Judeo-Christian tradition is long and somewhat complicated. In the OT and NT literature this Satan or devil is also known as Belial, Beliar, Mastema, Sammael, Asmodeus, Apollyon, Beelzebul and “ruler of the world” in John’s Gospel (12:31). An alternate Christian name is Lucifer from the Latin *lux* meaning “light” and *ferre* meaning “carry”, thus the name “light-bearer”. This usage is based in part on Luke 10:18 where Jesus says that “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven”.

Now some history. The following is only a brief outline.

Old Testament - The Hebrew for Satan can mean either “accuser” or “adversary”. The title Satan is found only three times in the OT and then only in those OT books written after the exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC. First, Satan appears in Chapter 1 and 2 of Job as one of “the sons of God” who, with other angelic beings, is a member of a heavenly court who have access to the presence of God. Satan’s function as a member of this heavenly court is to walk “to and fro on the earth” to observe humans and their activities and search out their sins so as to accuse them in the heavenly court. Thus God gives him power over Job and his possessions. With God’s permission, Satan acts as an adversary to initiate suffering on Job in order to test his faith. Here Satan is seen as only acting with the permission of God and is thus not depicted as an evil power that opposes the will of God.

Secondly, Satan appears in Zechariah 3:1-2 also as an accuser or prosecutor. In a vision

Satan seems to have made some accusation (not mentioned) against Joshua the high priest, but is rebuked by The Lord. Like in Job, Satan is under the power of God.

Lastly, Satan is mentioned once in I Ch. 21:1 as an adversary who successfully tempted king David to “number” or take a census his people. David was judged to have sinned in “numbering” the people, because in the ancient understanding, this knowledge was a source of power that was restricted to God alone. This notion is odd to modern thought, but it is related to the ancient notion that knowing someone’s name gave one a certain power over that person, thus the Hebrews would not pronounce the name of God -- Yahweh -- and replaced it with *adonia* - translated Lord. Here Satan takes on more of the character of an independent evil force that tempts humans to resist the will of God.

It is interesting to note that this same event of David numbering the people is mentioned in an earlier work -- 2 Samuel 24:1 -- , but here, oddly enough, it is God who tempts or incites David to number the people. David commands Joab - his nephew and best general - to take charge of numbering the people, but Joab objects. Nevertheless, David commands that it be done. Later in 24:10 David expresses his guilt for the sin of numbering the people and later God punishes him for this sin!

It was only in later years that Christian writers identified Satan with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. This was often based on a reference to Revl. 20:2. The creation stories in Genesis make no such identification. Since serpents were used in pagan worship at the time of the writing of Genesis, the serpent is seen as tempter and one who would lead Eve into sin and is thus cursed by God.

The OT concept of angels and devils probably came through contact with the religion of Zoroastrianism while in exile in Babylon. Zoroastrianism was a dualistic religion with good pitted against evil, light against darkness, etc. In most dualistic religions, the powers of good and of evil are separate, unrelated entities with near equal power. In the Judeo-Christian traditions evil spirits are created by the good God and are subordinate to him. They become evil by their own choice.

New Testament - There are references (34) to Satan in all the Gospels, in Acts, in the Epistles and in the Book of Revelation. Some examples: Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness (Mk 1:13), Satan enters Judas to turn him against Jesus (Lk. 22:3; Jn.13:27) and Jesus calls Peter Satan (Mk. 8:33; Mt. 16:23). Satan is often linked to physical and mental diseases which Jesus can cure.

There also developed a “myth” of a great war in which Satan (the dragon) and his angels war against Michael and his angels. Satan and his angels lose and are thrown out of heaven onto the earth (Revl. 12: 7-17). As in the OT, Satan and his followers are always subordinate to the power of God. They have revolted against God, but their power is broken (Jn. 16:11, Col. 2:15) and their final defeat is insured (1 Cor. 15:24-25)

Many modern biblical scholars view Satan as the personification of systematic evil in the world and not a separate spiritual being.

## **Demonic possession**

The word demon comes from the Greek *daimon* meaning “spirit” - both good and bad. In later OT times and in the time of Jesus, all demons came to be seen as evil. The Greek word *diabolos* is translated “devil” and is seen as evil and as an enemy of God. Again, the notion of good and evil spirits arose within the dualistic religions of the Near East - Babylonian and Persian - and influenced NT and OT thought and thus Christian thought throughout the ages.

The notion of demonic possession is the belief that the psychic power of a demon can take over the personality of a human being so that he or she is not capable of voluntary action. The behavior that results is often bizarre and both mental and physical. Demons also cause physical ills.

The NT cites a number of cases in which Jesus expels demons from people possessed. Neither Paul nor the Gospels of John relates any such stories and Paul does not list the ability of exorcise spirits as one of the gifts of the Holy Sprit. The two cases of possession related in Acts refer to non-Christian people.

In ancient times there were no scientific explanations of aberrant human behavior -- epilepsy, amnesia, schizophrenia -- or natural disasters - storms, crop failures, plagues. Therefore, demons were often cited as the cause and various rituals were implemented in an attempt to expel them.

In the Catholic tradition demonic possession is recognized as a possibility and a special rite of exorcism (to expel demons from persons or places) can be preformed by a priest authorized by the bishop. Such rites of exorcism are rare, but they do take place even in modern times. The Church takes great care in allowing an exorcism. A physical and psychological examination is required before an exorcism can even be considered.

At one time the order of exorcist was one of the so-called minor orders -- porter, lector, exorcist and acolyte -- that developed in the third and fourth century. Gradually, by the 16th century, these orders were restricted to candidates for the priesthood and with the major orders of subdeacon, deacon and priesthood comprised what was referred to as “Holy Orders”. In 1972 the four minor orders were suppressed and are no longer part of the system of Holy Orders.