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The Devil in Ancient Myth and Jewish Tradition

A battle between Light and Darkness, between Creation and Destruction was the ancient picture of the universe as conceived by the human mind from the beginning of recorded times. The obscurity of Darkness and the clarity of Light were seen as two fundamental antagonists. The idea of this cosmic conflict gave rise to the religious myths of many ancient civilisations; and, connected with this idea, involved with it but not necessarily the same, was the conception of the battle within humanity itself, between the forces of good and the forces of evil.

Theologians and philosophers have long struggled to define and analyse the *meaning* of evil. But before any definitions had been evolved, this conception of a struggle between creation and destruction, between growth and opposition to growth had affected most religious interpretations of the world and coloured many philosophical theories.

The idea of universal conflict has been expressed in numerous different ways and has entered the stories and legends of peoples of all times and places. Myths describing the conflict belong not only to ancient and profound religious systems but also to primitive communities of all eras. Their experiences of the harsh forces of nature, forces they saw to be infinitely more powerful than themselves, caused them to people their world with evil spirits, who were trying to do them harm. The figures of demons have had a long existence in the human mind. For protection, men would turn to good spirits

or, more often, to the greatest of the good spirits, who, they felt, would surely fight for them. The chief adversary of this good spirit would then be conceived by them as the author of all the ills that beset their world.

It has been found that many of the myths belonging not only to great religions, but also to primitive peoples and to primitive societies of the present day, include a story of a wicked being coming into the world to destroy the work of the good being who had created it. It seems that human beings have in all ages and in all places been struggling to explain how so much that is evil has managed to insert itself into a world made and ruled by a supreme being who should be the object of worship.

From the earliest times known to history, up to and including the present, the problem of how evil could have entered a world created good has been pondered and discussed, dealt with in myth and metaphor, in theology and philosophy, and seems to be one of the greatest sources of religious doubt in people's minds today. How can the misery and wickedness to which all can testify exist in a world made by an all-loving God? Exactly what the focal point of evil is, and what its power, and how its existence can be explained, no one knows for sure, but what is certain is that the idea of an enemy of gods and men is a very ancient and all-pervasive one.

The concept of the Enemy as known to Western Europe has come to us mainly through the Scriptures of the Jewish people, whose terminology and imagery were influenced by the older civilisations that surrounded them. We have inherited this concept, so it is important for us to have an idea of how it was formed and how it developed.

In one of the civilisations with which the Jewish people came into contact – the Babylonian – there was a myth concerning the origin of our world. This myth is known as the Epic of Creation. It tells of the creation of the world out of the primeval deep and of the birth of the gods of light. The centre of the story is the struggle between the gods of light and the powers of darkness. Bel-Meridach, the hero-god, responsible for the earth, was in mortal combat with Tiamat, the Dragon of Chaos. The Dragon, the force trying to destroy the order of the universe, was the opposer of the Creator-God. If undefeated, he would reduce all world-order to chaos and nothingness. But Bel-Meridach conquers.

The myths and symbols of Babylonia greatly influenced the writings of the Jewish people. Words and images connected with Babylonian symbols can be found in the Old Testament. The most obvious of these is the Leviathan, the Dragon. 'In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish Leviathan, the piercing serpent, even Leviathan, the crooked serpent; and he shall slay the Dragon that is in the sea' (Isaiah 27:1). Out of these symbols grew much of the imagery formed round the later concept of the Evil One, the inducer of disorder and chaos.

Another ancient religious culture which was later to have a powerful and lasting influence on Jewish writers was that of Persia. It was from here that there came a theology entirely based on the opposing forces of good and evil. The dualism of this religion was to have an influence that lasted through the centuries.

Zoroaster was known in antiquity as the founder of the Magian System, the religion of the Magi, which became the accepted religion of the Persio-Iranian people. In this system, the principle of evil was wholly separate from the principle of the Divine. It was held that everything has a cause, and, since good cannot cause evil, therefore evil is a separate principle.

The natural world emanated from the wise Lord, Ahura Mazda or Ormazd, the primordial Spirit Being. His guiding spirit continually willed the good but was restricted by his own twin brother, the evil spirit, Ahriman. Ahriman was banished by the good spirit and now lives in Hell, from where he invades the world as the principle of evil, the arch-devil. The evil spirit existed in the cosmos from the beginning and has negative creative powers, bringing darkness, filth and death. The good spirit is the essence of truth and law. The history of the world is the history of the conflict between Ormazd and Ahriman, but it is their creatures, men and demons respectively, who must do the actual fighting. The world is the battlefield. Man is at the centre, and his soul is the object of the war. He has been given free will, which makes him accessible to the evil spirit, though he can call on Ormazd for help. The absolute independent principle of evil became personified in Ahriman, but the original conception in the Zoroastrian religion was probably not a complete dualism. Zoroaster had taught that the primordial Spirit Being was

above the two opposing spirits, and that their conflict existed only in the epoch of time which belongs to our world, and is of small duration when taken in the scale of universal history. At the end of this world, Ahriman will be overcome and cast into the abyss of Hell for ever.

The essence of Ahriman was falsehood, and that of Ormazd was truth. It was this conception of eternal conflict as the central meaning of religion itself that had such great effect on religious teachings and doctrines of later times. And Ahriman, the deceiver, who was cast out of Heaven and thrust into Hell, is clearly akin to the Jewish conception of the Enemy, the Arch-deceiver.

The fact that religious myths of other civilisations influenced the Jews in the terminology they used, and, therefore, often in their concepts of the Enemy, does not mean that their theology of evil was a borrowed one. The development and growth of their religion was integral to the early history of the Jewish people, and this development was their great contribution to world civilisation. Because our ideas of the Devil have very largely come through them, it is important to find out more about early Jewish thought and tradition. The conception of the Devil, which we of the West have inherited from their thoughts and beliefs, has played its powerful part in our language and literature, in the history of nations and in the lives of individuals, however much we, today, may do our best to water it down.

Although the principle that there is an evil force in the universe, fighting against the good, appears in the myths of so many ancient civilisations, the earliest known religious writings of these civilisations often show a rather different conception of good and evil. In these accounts, everything comes from the hand of the Supreme Lord and Creator, and therefore, both what to us seems to be good and what seems to be evil are sent by him. The gods of ancient Egypt had this ambivalence. They all shared the majesty of a supreme god, who handed out both good and evil; being the author of all things. In their early myths, the god, Set, was identified with destruction, the death of the sun through the murder of Osiris; but he was also venerated as a great and powerful god-creator. In the myths of later Egypt, the story of Set was simplified, so that he became a purely wicked being, hostile to all men; in fact, he developed into the personification of evil. And this

conception may also have contributed to later biblical ideas of the Enemy, through the influence of Egypt on the Jewish people.

The absence of a single principle of evil is seen more especially in Hinduism, which is and has remained a very metaphysical religion. It is again a very ancient one, probably the most ancient of all known religions. Despite its huge pantheon of gods, Hinduism regards its deities as manifestations of the One, and ascribes to them powers of destruction as well as of creation, of death as well as of life. The greater part of Hindu mythology, as in many other mythologies, is concerned with a cosmic battle and the spiritual combat between Light and Darkness. But despite this central idea of universal conflict, there is no portrayal of a figure that is the focus of evil. Kali, the goddess of death who devours everything, is the obverse side of the mother goddess, who nourishes all living beings. The ferocious aspect of Kali has led, in popular worship, to her portrayal as the cruel black goddess of destruction and terror. But in Hindu mythology she is very far from being a concept of the Devil. There is no tendency to dualism.

The concept of the One Supreme God, was also the centre of the Jewish faith, and distinguished the early Hebrew religion from the religions of the neighbouring peoples, with their numerous tribal gods.

In the earliest Jewish scriptures, Yahweh was Lord of the Universe, and all happenings, good and evil, were caused by him. In Isaiah 45:7, written in the sixth century BC, God says, 'I form the Light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I, the Lord, do all these things.'

Later, it began to be felt that God, the author of all good, should not be described as the cause of evil; there must be a separate cause. The Persian religion, with which the Jews came into contact during the Babylonian exile, was clearly the influence behind this type of thinking. Evil was increasingly understood to come from an enemy, who opposed God and Man – the Adversary, which is the meaning of the Hebrew word 'Satan'.

In the Book of Job, Satan appears as the accuser and tempter of Man, but he is still seen as a subject of the World Ruler. He comes before the heavenly court as one of the sons of God and acts under the Lord's instructions.

In the Book of Samuel, compiled in the tenth century BC, it

is written: 'The Lord tempted Samuel.' But in a much later Old Testament book, 1 Chronicles (21:1) it is Satan who tempts David to disobey the Law and incur the wrath of God. The danger was now understood not to come through God but from the Enemy. By the second century BC, the two sides of God were no longer emphasised in Jewish religious stories and histories. It may be that in this period the ethics of religion seemed more important than the metaphysics: God should no longer be connected with anything other than good.

Yet, many centuries later, the ancient Jewish conception of Yahweh was again expressed. In the Cabbala (a medieval Jewish theosophical system), it was said that Yahweh, who was all, contained everything – good and evil. His right hand gave mercy, his left, destruction. But the destructive aspect broke away and became known as the Devil.

A better-known mythological explanation of how the evil principle entered our world had its first appearance in the Book of Enoch, an Apocryphal book, written about 200 BC. This was the story of the Fall of Angels – the entrance into our world of the Prince of Darkness.

The story of how Satan was cast out of heaven comes, as far as we know, from the Jewish Apocryphal books. These were writings circulating among the Jews during the centuries just before and just after the beginning of the Christian era. The most important of these was the Book of Enoch.

The Book of Enoch was, in fact, a collection of literary works, appearing under the name of Enoch, but written by many different writers. It was apparently well known until the eighth century, and then it seems to have completely disappeared. Centuries later, at the end of the eighteenth century, one version was found in Abyssinia. It was written in the Ethiopian language and seems to have been a translation from a Greek original which has never been discovered. Another version, known as 'The Secrets of Enoch', was found in Russia in a Slavonic text, and translated into English in the nineteenth century.

The story of the Fall of Angels is not properly a scriptural doctrine, in that it never entered into the orthodox body of Old Testament writings. And yet it was to form the main basis of later teachings about Satan and his place in our world.

In the Apocryphal story, the history of the angels was revealed to Enoch. He was shown how, from the heavenly

court, a group of angels, encouraged by their leader, descended to earth. There they 'lusted after the daughters of men' and rejected heaven, becoming evil fallen beings, the Watcher Angels, who produced a race of giants from the 'daughters of men'. This part of the story seems to be connected with Genesis 6.

The Watchers taught men arts and sciences, but also vice. Their offspring 'spread iniquity on earth' till God caused the Flood, as punishment for sinful human beings, and chained the angels to the dark places of earth until the Last Judgement. But the giants had produced offspring, evil spirits, who remained, and continued to lead men astray. Four protector angels of whom Michael was one, were sent to fight for men.

The other book, the Book of the Secrets of Enoch, written probably in Egypt at the beginning of the Christian era, tells of Enoch's journey through the different courts of Heaven. He is shown the Grigori in prison. They were rebel angels who, with their prince, Satanael, had rejected the Holy Lord. And the Lord says, 'One of these in the ranks of Archangels . . . entertained the impossible idea . . . that he should be equal in rank to my power. And I hurled him from the heights.'

The Apocalyptic books, written between the first century BC and the first century AD, were primarily prophetic revelations of the future of Israel and the world. In these books, teachings about the Evil Angel grew ever more specific.

In the Book of the Twelve Patriarchs, one of the Apocryphal books, Belial is the name of the chief of the Fallen Angels. He is the antagonist of God and competes for the allegiance of men. He says, 'Do you choose light or darkness, the Law of the Lord or the works of Belial?' In the Apocalyptic Book of Jubilees, it is told that the Watchers came to earth and then sinned, but that their prince, Sammael, was allowed by Jehovah to harass humankind.

Gradually, the numerous names used to describe leaders of the rebel angels coalesced into the name of one spiritual being, personifying the origin and essence of all evil. Satan, the adversary, became the most important and the most often used of all names for this being.

In the story of the Fall of Angels, the great archangel who rebelled had been a good and mighty being. Through his own rejection of good, he brought evil into the universe.

How this evil was to enter the world of men has been

portrayed in another story – that of Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man. This story is certainly part of the Jewish Scriptures. The first and second books of the Old Testament, Genesis 1 and 11 (by Jewish tradition ascribed to Moses), describe Man in his primeval position in the Garden of Eden, living as he was meant to live. Sin intervened in the form of the Serpent, who told Eve that, through eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, she and Adam, as human beings, could be equal with the Elohim who had made them. Then they would see that living for their own personal satisfaction was the ultimate purpose of their creation.

For the early Jewish writers, the Serpent was a symbolic representation of tempting power. It was later that he was made equivalent to Satan. But the story again shows beings created good, and, through their own fault, falling from their primal state. From that moment on, it is written in Genesis, there would be permanent conflict between humankind and the Serpent; sin and death had come into our world.

In order to express ideas about cosmic happenings on a huge scale, of which it is impossible to have direct knowledge, all great religions, without exception, have had recourse to myth. It is the only way. So the fact that similar myths, describing a universal struggle between good and evil, appear in many religions, and the fact that, in Hebrew Scriptures, there are stories especially devised to give an explanation of the coming of evil does not mean that the Devil himself is necessarily a work of human fantasy. That a conception of him has appeared in all periods and in innumerable places neither proves nor disproves anything about him.

It is not only simple people who confuse the meanings that a myth is used to convey with the actual events in the story; even the most learned tend to do this. The debates and discussions about evil and the focal point of evil that have continued throughout history show how often this takes place. There has always been a tendency to confuse belief in the principle embodied in a religious myth with belief in the actual events that are said to have happened. They are obviously not the same. This confusion has led to many sterile arguments and to many attacks on religious belief in general, equating it with superstition. The danger of this confusion constantly appears in questions concerning the Devil. All that has been written about him in religious systems and in countless legends and

stories makes it difficult to separate metaphor from what is meant to be description of fact.

The story of Adam and Eve describes how the evils of sin and death came into the world, and it also shows how the Enemy can attack each individual. If Man has free will, he is able to listen and possibly to succumb to a tempter. The idea of a battle between good and evil on the stage of the world had appeared in many religions, but the portrayal of an attack on individual human beings gave to Jewish scriptures another dimension in the story of the Devil.

In Buddhism, which had its beginnings in the sixth century BC, the Evil One is shown primarily as the Tempter. In some of the writings telling of the life of the Buddha, Mara, the great Tempter, is said to have appeared to him in the sky and to have tried to stop him from renouncing his worldly life and setting out to become a wanderer. The words of Mara had no effect, but the story adds that as a shadow always follows the body, so he too, from that day, always followed the Blessed One, striving to throw every obstacle in his way towards the Buddhahood. At the crucial moment of the Buddha's life, when seated in meditation beneath the Sacred Bo Tree, Mara appears again to tempt him and persuade him to give up his mission. The Buddha has to struggle and overcome."

Mara is also called Varsavati, 'he who fulfils desires'. For the desire or thirst for pleasure, for power, even for existence links human beings to the ever-turning wheel of life and prevents escape to true being, or Nirvana. In the Dhammapada, a fourth or fifth century collection of Buddhist ethical verses, Mara is the personification of evil: 'He who is looking for pleasure only, his senses uncontrolled . . . Mara will certainly overthrow, as the wind throws down a feeble tree.'

Buddhist teachings spread as far as Persia and so the conception of Mara, the Tempter, though by no means central to Buddhism, entered the Zoroastrian religion and thus reached the Jews in Babylon – yet another influence on their thinking. The Jewish writings of the post-exilic period show the Tempter and the Adversary as one. Earlier, Satan, in his role of Tempter, was described, in a certain sense, as working under the power of God. Now, in post-exilic times, the meaning of Satan as 'adversary' included all his attributed functions, and these were said to oppose the aims of God and Man.

In the Apocalyptic books of the centuries just before the

Christian era, appellations of the Enemy were beginning to coalesce. The serpent of Genesis was for the first time in literature identified with Satan, the Devil. Our word, 'Devil' is derived from the Greek 'Diabolos', accuser or assailant. When, between the years 285 and 247 BC, the Old Testament was translated into the Greek version, known as the Septuagint, 'Diabolos' was the word translated from the Hebrew word, 'Satan', meaning 'adversary'.

Beelzebub and Belial were other names used for Satan in the Apocalyptic period of Hebrew scripture. The name Beelzebub is mentioned only once in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings 1, the King of Israel sends messengers to enquire of Beelzebub, the god of Ekron, whether he would recover from his sickness. The angel of the Lord tells Elijah to rebuke the king, saying: 'Is there no God in Israel to enquire of his word? Therefore thou . . . shalt surely die.'

'Baal', 'lord' was the title given to a local deity; 'zebul' means 'flies'. Beelzebub, therefore, could be: the Baal to whom flies are holy – the Lord of the Flies. Divination by means of flies was known to be practised in Babylon.

In some versions of the New Testament, the name 'Beelzebul' is used. The word 'zebul' appears in Kings, expressing height; 'beth-zebul' is the high house, or temple, so Beelzebul could be 'Lord of the High House'. Matthew 10:25 has: 'If they have called the Master of the house Beelzebul, how much more shall they call them of his household?'

But whether he is written as Beelzebub or Beelzebul nothing is known as to how or when this particular pagan god became the 'prince of devils' (Mark 3:22), though it was very usual for the Jews of Old Testament times to regard the heathen gods of their neighbours as representations of the Evil One.

The name, 'Belial', though absent from the literature of the orthodox Jewish Rabbis, figured often in Apocryphal literature as the Prince of Evil. By the beginning of the Christian era, all these names belonged to one figure – Satan, the Prince of Darkness – and he was the Tempter, the Accuser, the Adversary.

Despite his long ancestry and his continual appearance in the Apocryphal and Apocalyptic books, the Old Testament itself has relatively little in it specifically about the Devil. Nevertheless, the Jewish people were clearly familiar with the idea of his existence, as can be seen in the New Testament. In

the New Testament, the Devil figures prominently, and it is from the sayings in the New Testament that the idea of the Devil and his minions was developed. This idea entered into the Christianity of succeeding ages, and so into the life and legend of the West.