

Satan, YHWH's Executioner

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In recent decades, scholars have taken great care not to assume that “the *śātān*” of Job 1–2 and of Zechariah 3 is supposed to be the archenemy of God and the opponent of good, as is *Satan* in later Jewish and Christian literature. Nevertheless, scholars have yet to eliminate anachronistic assumptions from their discussions of this figure as he is presented in the Hebrew Scriptures, maintaining that the *śātān* in Job and Zechariah holds the office of heavenly “prosecuting attorney” or “accuser.” After surveying the uses of the noun *śāṭān* and the verb *śāṭān* in the Hebrew Scriptures, this article argues that these words never denote “accusation” in this literature but refer exclusively to physical “attack.” This article further contends that in legal contexts the noun *śāṭān* can refer specifically to an “executioner” and that “the Executioner” is the proper understanding of *śāṭān* in Zechariah and Job.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. (Rev 12:10)¹

Who is Satan? What does Satan do? According to popular imagination and centuries of Christian theology, Satan is the archenemy of God, the opponent of all that is good; Satan does evil. Bible scholars, to their credit, now recognize that the biblical authors conceived of the nature and activity of this figure somewhat differently from later theologians. According to the present scholarly consensus, the early literature portrays Satan (or *the śātān*, *śāṭān*, as he is referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures) as “the Adversary,” or, more specifically, “the Accuser.”² He serves God

¹ English translations of the Bible in this article will follow the NRSV, except that the noun *śāṭān* will occasionally be transliterated as *śātān* rather than translated, and *śāṭān* will be rendered “the *śātān*.” Any other deviations from the NRSV will be noted as they occur.

² See, e.g., Gerhard von Rad and Werner Foerster, “διαβάλλω, διάβολος,” TDNT 2:73–75 (von Rad); T. H. Gaster, “Satan,” IDB 4:224–25; Peggy L. Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: śātān in the Hebrew Bible* (HSM 43; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 25–43; Victor P. Hamilton, “Satan,” ABD 5:985–86; Bruce Baloian, “*śāṭān*,” NIDOTTE 3:1231; C. Breytenbach and P. L. Day, “Satan *śāṭān*”

as a sort of prosecuting attorney in the heavenly court. This conception of the early *śātān* tradition is based on an understanding of the Hebrew root שָׂטַן, which appears both in the nominal form שָׂטָן and as the verb שָׂטַן.³ The noun שָׂטָן is typically taken to mean “adversary” or “accuser.” The verb שָׂטַן likewise is understood to refer to acts of “opposition” or “accusation.”⁴ If the standard translations of these words are correct, then so is the scholarly consensus that the *śātān* of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Adversary or the Accuser.

In this article, however, I contend that scholars have misunderstood the words שָׂטָן and שָׂטַן. Although near the end of the first century C.E. John would speak of Satan as “the Accuser [ὁ κατήγωρ] of our comrades” (Rev 12:10), there is virtually no evidence that either שָׂטָן or שָׂטַן ever refers to accusation in the Bible. Instead, these words denote physical attack. The noun שָׂטָן should be translated “attacker,” and in some legal contexts “executioner.” The title שָׂטָן־הַ in the Hebrew Scriptures, therefore, should be understood as “the Attacker” or, more likely, “the Executioner.”

This study consists of four main parts. (1) I will begin by establishing the semantic range of the noun שָׂטָן as it is used in narrative texts, since the literary contexts provided by these narratives leave little room for doubt as to what the word denotes. (2) Next, I will look at both the noun שָׂטָן and the verb שָׂטַן in the book of Psalms, where their meaning, though not entirely unclear, is slightly more elusive than in the narratives. Psalm 109, which contains four occurrences of the root שָׂטַן and is often cited in conjunction with Zechariah 3, will require special attention. (3) In light of the preceding semantic analysis, I will examine the nature and activity of “the *śātān*” in Zechariah 3. (4) Finally, “the *śātān*” of Job 1–2 will be considered. Some brief concluding remarks and a short excursus dealing with the noun שָׂטָן will bring the article to a close.⁵

Σατάν, Σατανᾶς,” DDD (2nd ed.), 726–32; J. H. Walton, “Satan,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom. Poetry and Writings* (ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 714–15; Chad T. Pierce, “Satan and Related Figures,” *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1196–97. Exceptional is the viewpoint articulated by Friedrich Horst, that the idea of Satan as “the Accuser” does not appear in the Hebrew Scriptures but arises in the postbiblical period (*Hiob* [BKAT 16; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968], 1:13–14). See also G. Wanke, who says that שָׂטָן does not refer to “accusers” but merely to “opponents in legal matters” (“שָׂטָן *śātān* adversary,” *TLOT* 3:1268–69). Similarly, although Nielsen acknowledges that שָׂטָן can denote a specifically legal kind of opposition, she stops short of saying that the word can mean “accuser” (“שָׂטָן *śātān*; שָׂטַן *śatan*; שָׂטָם *śātam*,” *TDOT* 14:73–77).

³In this article, I employ the Hebrew script שָׂטָן when speaking of the word itself but make use of the transliteration *śātān* to designate the figure to whom the word refers.

⁴In addition to the works cited in n. 2, see, e.g., *HALOT*, 1316–17, s.vv. שָׂטַן, שָׂטָן.

⁵The root שָׂטַן, although it will not be dealt with in this article, is also sometimes discussed in conjunction with שָׂטָן. The root שָׂטַן can be seen in the verb שָׂטַן (Gen 27:41; 49:23; 50:15; Job 16:9; 30:21; Ps 55:4 [3]) and in the noun שָׂטָן־הַ (Hos 9:7, 8), which *HALOT* defines in terms of “enmity,” “hostility,” or “persecution” (pp. 640–41, 1316).

I. רִיב IN NARRATIVE TEXTS

רִיב in Biblical Hebrew can be used with reference either to a human or to a superhuman being, and its particular nuance can vary depending on the context in which it occurs. Generally speaking, the translation of רִיב as “adversary” or “opponent” is not altogether incorrect. This translation does, however, lack precision. רִיב in the Hebrew Scriptures denotes not opposition or adversity generically, but specifically violent, physical attack. This attack is at times of a military kind and is often, if not exclusively, supposed to be lethal. This meaning can be observed in 1 Sam 29:4.

But the commanders of the Philistines were angry with him; and the commanders of the Philistines said to him, “Send the man back, so that he may return to the place that you have assigned to him; he shall not go down with us to battle, or else he may become a *śātān* to us in the battle. For how could this fellow reconcile himself to his lord? Would it not be with the heads of the men here?”

In this passage, the Philistines with whom David has aligned himself express fear that the famed Israelite warrior might turn on them in the midst of battle and become a *śātān* to them, slaying the Philistine soldiers in order to ingratiate himself with Saul. A similar use of רִיב is found in 1 Kgs 5:18 [Eng. 5:4], which describes the early part of Solomon’s reign as a period of peace in which there was “neither *śātān* nor misfortune.” David was unable to build the temple because his reign was occupied with securing the land. Solomon, on the other hand, unthreatened militarily by any *śātān*, is in a position to build the temple. Later on in Solomon’s reign, on account of the king’s involvement with the worship of foreign gods, YHWH raises up Hadad the Edomite and a marauder by the name of Rezon as “*śātāns*,” foreigners who attack Solomon and Israel.⁶

A technical, legal usage of the noun רִיב can be observed in 2 Sam 19:22–24 [Eng. 21–23]. As David is returning to Jerusalem following Absalom’s failed coup, he encounters the Benjaminite Shimei. At their previous meeting, as David was fleeing Jerusalem on account of Absalom’s revolt, Shimei cursed David and hurled stones at him. Fearful for his life now that David is being restored to the throne, Shimei hurries to meet the soon-to-be-reinstated king and to beg him for mercy. But Abishai, one of David’s commanders, is not swayed by Shimei’s plea for pardon. Abishai calls for the Benjaminite’s life: “Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the LORD’s anointed” (19:22)? David responds to Abishai’s demand for Shimei’s execution as follows: “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should today become my *śātān*? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day” (2 Sam 19:23)?⁷ This passage is consistent with the others we have

⁶ See 1 Kgs 11:14, 23, 25. Gerhard von Rad’s argument that Hadad and Rezon are “accusers” of Israel is not persuasive (“ διαβάλλω , διάβολος : The OT View of Satan,” *TDNT* 2:73).

⁷ The words “that you should today become my *śātān*” in this verse translate the Hebrew

considered up to this point, in that *שׂוֹפֵר* seems to refer to physical attack. Given the context, in which Shimei's crime would justify his being put to death, "executioner" would be an appropriate translation of *שׂוֹפֵר* in this verse.⁸

Conversely, Peggy Day contends that *שׂוֹפֵר* in 2 Sam 19:23 is used in a forensic sense, meaning "accuser."⁹ "Accuser," however, is far less compelling as a translation of *שׂוֹפֵר* in 2 Samuel 19 than is "attacker" or "executioner" for several reasons:

1. Abishai is not, correctly speaking, an "accuser" in this passage, but is one who would execute Shimei for his treason. Shimei's guilt is not in question, so no prosecution is necessary for establishing his guilt. What is in question, given Shimei's guilt, is whether he will die for his crime. Abishai calls for Shimei to be put to death. David responds to Abishai's suggestion with two related rhetorical questions: "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should today become my *śāṭān*?" and "Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day?" David then assures Shimei of the answer to these questions; Shimei will not die. Abishai's speech in this passage should be understood in light of his speech at an earlier point in the narrative, when David first encountered Shimei, who cursed and threw stones at the deposed king. At that time, Abishai offered David his services as executioner, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head" (2 Sam 16:9). As in the earlier meeting of David and Shimei, Abishai is not so much an accuser as a willing executioner.

2. This understanding of Abishai's role in this passage and of the label *śāṭān* is further supported by the fact that David rebukes not Abishai alone but the "sons of Zeruiah." Abishai's brother Joab does not "accuse" Shimei in this passage. In fact, Joab is not said to be involved in the discussion of Shimei's fate at all. David's rebuke of the "sons of Zeruiah" is comprehensible, however, when read within the larger narrative context of Samuel–Kings. Joab distinguishes himself repeatedly as one whose zeal for protecting David's interests leads him to eliminate political rebels capitally, even though such action is clearly against the king's more magnanimous wishes (2 Sam 3:17–39; 18:5–33; 20:4–10; 1 Kgs 2:5–6). Abishai, too, on multiple occasions demonstrates his eagerness to execute David's enemies. In addition to the two encounters between David and Shimei when Abishai offers his services as

כִּי תהיִרְלִי הַיּוֹם לְשׂוֹנֵן. The NRSV renders this phrase, "that you should today become an adversary to me." Day, whose work will be considered more fully below, correctly argues that *לִי* in this verse does not indicate that Abishai would be acting "against" David, but "on behalf of" David ("Abishai the *śāṭān* in 2 Sam 19:17–24," *CBQ* 49 [1987]: 545). (See Judg 6:31 for another example of *לִי* in the sense of "on behalf of") Abishai is suggesting not that he attack David but that he attack Shimei for David.

⁸The adjective "legal," as employed in the paragraph above and throughout the article, does not necessarily imply that a formal trial or courtroom procedure is involved, but simply that the attack on a person's life is justified by that person's guilt, as is the case Numbers 22 and 2 Samuel 19.

⁹Day, "Abishai the *śāṭān* in 2 Sam 19:17–24," 543–47.

an executioner, Abishai also volunteers to take the life of Saul on David's behalf (1 Sam 26:7-11). On each of these occasions, David, true to form, denied Abishai permission to take the life of his enemy. David's words to the sons of Zeruiah in this pericope are situated within a larger narrative in which Abishai's and Joab's zeal for execution time and time again earns David's ire. It is this violent activity on the part of the sons of Zeruiah that merits David's rebuke and the label *šātān*.

3. That *šātān* refers to Abishai in his proposed role of attacker or executioner on David's behalf is consistent with the other uses of this noun that we have considered up to this point, all of which refer to physical acts of violence. The translation "accuser" requires that one posit a usage of *šātān* that we have not hitherto observed.

Furthermore, "executioner" seems to be the meaning of *šātān* in other passages. This meaning is attested in Numbers 22, which contains the comical account of Balaam's journey by donkey to assist Balak king of Moab against the Israelites. It displeases YHWH that Balaam has set out on this mission against God's people, so the angel of YHWH, sword in hand, stands in Balaam's path as his *šātān* (Num 22:22). Fortunately for Balaam, his donkey perceives the danger and three times takes steps to evade the angel and avert Balaam's swift demise. Each time the donkey does this, however, Balaam, who is oblivious to the threat to his life, beats his donkey for what the seer mistakes for insubordination. Once Balaam becomes aware of the armed messenger, the angel of YHWH says to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as a *šātān*, because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let it live" (Num 22:32b-33). Had the donkey not protected Balaam, the angel of YHWH would have fulfilled his role as a *šātān* by executing Balaam.¹⁰

Having surveyed the narrative passages in which the noun *šātān* occurs, one observes that this noun does not refer to an adversary generically but to an "attacker" who intends to harm physically or kill another person. In some passages, this attacker is of a military kind (1 Sam 29:4; 1 Kgs 5:18). *šātān* can also carry a more specific nuance in certain legal contexts, but this meaning is not "accuser" as is widely held. Rather, the attacker in this legal sense is an "executioner" of the guilty (Num 22:22, 32; 2 Sam 19:23). There is no evidence whatsoever in these narrative passages that *šātān* ever means "accuser."

¹⁰The notion of *šātān* as executioner may also lie behind what is the most debated passage referring to a *šātān* in the Hebrew Scriptures, 1 Chr 21:1. I have argued elsewhere that the *šātān* of 1 Chr 21:1 is a punishing emissary of God and is probably to be identified with the sword-wielding angel of YHWH who appears in vv. 12-30 of the same chapter ("The Devil Made David Do It ... Or Did He? The Nature, Identity, and Literary Origins of the *Satan* in 1 Chronicles 21," *JBL* 128 [2009]: 91-106). According to the Chronicler's narrative, this *šātān* is responsible for the deaths of seventy thousand Israelites.

II. שָׁטַן AND שָׁטַן IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS

When it comes to ascertaining the meaning of a word, the book of Psalms poses a different sort of challenge from that posed by the narrative books of the Hebrew Scriptures. The poetry of the Psalms seldom offers the kinds of explicit and concrete details afforded by historical narrative. One must often make do with historically unspecific language and imprecise poetic parallelism in an effort to triangulate the meaning of an unknown lexeme. The very characteristics that give the Psalms their universal appeal can frustrate the lexicographer. The case of שָׁטַן is no exception to this rule. Limited though one's data may be, the evidence of the Psalms suggests a meaning for this root that is consistent with what one observes in the narrative books. In the three Psalms in which it occurs, the root שָׁטַן refers not to "accusation" but to physical attack.

The first instance of שָׁטַן in the book of Psalms is found in Ps 38:21 [Eng. 20]. "Those who render me evil for good are my *adversaries* [שָׁטְנוֹנִי] because I follow after good." The verb שָׁטַן in this verse is treated variously by commentators and translators. It has been translated as "to be an adversary" (Craigie, RSV, NRSV, NKJV), "to oppose" (NASB), and "to harass" (NJPS).¹¹ It has also been rendered more specifically as "to accuse" (Kraus, ESV, NAB rev. ed.), "to lodge accusations" (NIV), and "to slander" (Dahood).¹² Although שָׁטַן in this verse clearly refers to an action that would bring someone harm (רָעָה), it is difficult to be more specific about the nature of the action. The meaning "attack" (Goldingay, HCSB [Holman Christian Standard Bible]), however, would certainly fit the historical context of Psalm 38.¹³ Psalm 38 begins with the suppliant seeking divine healing from illness, but he also asks God for protection from enemies who seek his life: "Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin, and meditate treachery all day long" (38:13 [Eng. 12]). While certainty about the specific

¹¹Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (WBC 19; Waco: Word, 1983), 301.

¹²Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (3 vols.; AB 16, 17, 17A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–70), 1:234, 237; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Hilton C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 410. Kraus translates שָׁטַן as "sein gram" (*Psalmen I* [BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961], 294). Dahood has his translation "to slander" in part on his translation of גָּדַל in 38:17 as "to calumniate" and in part on the uses of שָׁטַן in Psalms 71 and 109. As for the meaning of גָּדַל, Dahood's translation is dubious and has not been accepted by any other commentators, to my knowledge. The *hiphil* of גָּדַל, as one finds in Ps 38:17, is typically translated as "to magnify [oneself]" or "to boast." Further, while Dahood is correct to compare the use of שָׁטַן in this psalm with its uses in Psalms 71 and 109, he is incorrect, as will be shown below, to understand שָׁטַן in these passages as "to slander."

¹³John Goldingay, *Psalms* (3 vols.; Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006–8), 1:537.

meaning of *שָׁטַן* in this psalm is impossible, it is reasonable to suppose that the root *שָׁטַן* refers to physical “attack.” Not only is it the case that the root *שָׁטַן* elsewhere denotes a physical act of attacking and killing a person, but this is also precisely the situation about which the suppliant requests divine assistance. Nothing in this passage suggests that the word means “to accuse” or “to slander.” The translation “attack,” then, is more likely the intended meaning of *שָׁטַן* in Psalm 38.

One finds a very similar state of affairs in Ps 71:13, which the NRSV renders, “Let my *accusers* [*שָׁטְנִי נִפְשִׁי*] be put to shame and consumed; let those who seek to hurt me be covered with scorn and disgrace.” As with 38:21, translations proffered for the participial form of *שָׁטַן* in this verse include “adversaries” (Tate, Hossfeld and Zenger [“Widersacher”], NASB, NKJV, HCSB) as well as “accusers” (RSV, NRSV, NIV, ESV, NJPS) and “slanderers” (Dahood).¹⁴ Further, as in Psalm 38, it is the translation “to attack” (Goldingay, NAB rev. ed.) that most probably conveys the sense of *שָׁטַן* in this verse.¹⁵ The suppliant in Psalm 71 asks God to deliver him from the hand of the wicked (71:4), his enemies who conspire against him and watch for his life (71:10–11).¹⁶ Those who “attack [his] life” (*שָׁטְנִי נִפְשִׁי*) intend to bring him “harm” (*רָעָה*). Once again, physical attack with intent to kill seems to be the meaning of *שָׁטַן*, and once again there is no basis for the translation “accusers.” Psalm 71 also offers some guidance in the interpretation of the final psalm to be considered, Psalm 109.

Psalm 109 has the potential to contribute much to the present investigation. The verb *שָׁטַן* occurs three times in this psalm (vv. 4, 20, and 29). Additionally, the noun *שָׁטַן* occurs once (v. 6). Psalm 109 also contains an intriguing terminological parallel with Zechariah 3. Both passages speak of a *šāṭān* standing to the right (*עֹמֵד עַל־יְמִינִי*) of a person (Ps 109:6; Zech 3:1).¹⁷ For this reason, commentators find Psalm 109 to be determinative for their interpretation of Zechariah 3. Although recent translations and commentaries are virtually unanimous in their rendering of *שָׁטַן* and *שָׁטַן* in Psalm 109 in terms of “accusation,” there is little in this psalm that actually suggests this meaning.¹⁸ As with the other passages that have been considered up to this point, a much stronger case can be made that “attack with lethal intent” is what these words denote.

¹⁴ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 1990), 208; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100* (HTKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 290; Dahood, *Psalms*, 2:170. Kraus translates *שָׁטַן* as “die nachstellen” (*Psalmen I*, 488).

¹⁵ Goldingay allows that *שָׁטַן* in this verse may refer to accusation: “The adversaries are people who are attacking (*šāṭan*), perhaps by accusing” (*Psalms*, 2:372).

¹⁶ Cf. also Ps 35:4; 40:15 [14]; 70:3 [2], which resemble 71:13 very closely, except that *שָׁטְנִי* is replaced by *מְבַקְשֵׁי נַפְשִׁי* (“those who seek my life”).

¹⁷ The parallel between Psalm 109 and Zechariah 3 will be discussed in the next section.

¹⁸ For an example of an interpreter who understands this psalm primarily in terms of accusation, in addition to the commentaries cited below, see Hans Schmidt, *Das Gebet der Angeklagten im Alten Testament* (Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1928), 40–46.

The opening verses of Psalm 109 describe the harassment that the psalmist receives from his enemies. These verses also contain the psalm's first occurrence of *שָׁטָן*.

Do not be silent, O God of my praise.
 For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me,
 speaking against me with lying tongues.
 They beset me with words of hate,
 and attack me [*לִחְמוּנִי*] without cause.
 In return for my love they *accuse* me [*יִשְׁטְנוּנִי*],
 even while I make prayer for them.
 So they reward me evil [*רָעָה*] for good,
 and hatred [*שִׂנְאָה*] for my love. (Ps 109:1–5)

The psalmist claims that his enemies are attacking him without justification. He is receiving hatred for his love and is subjected to harm (*רָעָה*) in return for doing good.¹⁹ The psalmist also claims that his enemies are speaking hateful and false words against him (vv. 2–3). The psalmist decries malicious speech in v. 20, as well. With reference to the imprecatory prayer of vv. 6–19, the psalmist says, “May that be the reward of my *accusers* [*שֹׁטְנֵי*] from the LORD, of those who speak evil against my life.” While it is not impossible that the words spoken by the psalmist's enemies against his life include accusations, this is by no means the only possible interpretation of these lines. False and malicious speech can take a variety of forms, and nothing in Psalm 109 indicates that this hateful speech takes the form of accusation. More likely, the psalmist attributes words to his opponents such as those attributed to the psalmist's opponents in Psalm 71, which was considered above: “For my enemies speak concerning me, and those who watch for my life consult together. They say, ‘Pursue and seize that person whom God has forsaken, for there is no one to deliver’” (71:10–11). That the words *שָׁטָן* and *שֹׁטֵן* in Psalm 109 pertain to an attack on the psalmist's life is supported also by the psalmist's use of the word *לָחַם* (“to fight,” “to make war”) in v. 3. Though much about the suppliant's situation is ambiguous, the language he uses to describe his distress is clearly that of physical assault.²⁰ The third instance of *שָׁטָן* in Psalm 109 is in v. 29: “May my *accusers* [*שֹׁטְנֵי*] be clothed with dishonor; may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle.”

¹⁹ Cf. the similar statement in Ps 38:21.

²⁰ Regarding the pair of terms *לָחַם* and *שָׁטָן* in Ps 109:3–4, Goldingay states, “Initially the suppliant's language uses the language of battle, but then it speaks more literally in indicating that the attacks take the form of accusations” (*Psalms*, 3:278). Ironically, so confident is Goldingay that *שָׁטָן* means “to accuse” that he interprets *לָחַם* figuratively so as to accommodate this understanding of *שָׁטָן*. If one simply recognizes that the root *שָׁטָן* is used in Psalm 109 as it is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, to refer to physical attack, then it makes perfect sense that *שָׁטָן* would be used alongside of *לָחַם*. (Pertinently, one should observe, the nouns *שָׁטָן* and *מִלְחָמָה* appear together in 1 Sam 29:4.) One need not interpret one of the words in a way that is contrary to its literal sense in order to reconcile them. This is not to deny that the psalmist may employ *לָחַם* and

The close resemblance between this verse and Ps 71:13, which also expresses the wish that those who “attack” the psalmist would be ashamed and clothed with dishonor, increases the likelihood that *שָׁטָן* carries the same meaning in both passages, “to attack.”

The final occurrence of the root *שָׁטָן* to be considered in this section is in Ps 109:6. For many commentators, this verse uses the noun *שָׁטָן* unambiguously to refer to an “accuser” or a “prosecuting attorney.”²¹ In her discussion of the meaning of *שָׁטָן*, Day states, “There seems to me to be little doubt that *śāṭān* has a forensic connotation in Ps 109:6.”²² Although a forensic understanding of *שָׁטָן* in this verse appears reasonable at first glance, more careful analysis reveals that “attacker” is a better translation.

Appoint a wicked man [רשע] against him;
 let an *accuser* [שטן] stand on his right.
 When he is tried [בהשפטו], let him be found guilty [יצא רשע];
 let his prayer [תפלתו] be counted as sin [חטאה].
 May his days be few;
 may another seize his position.
 May his children be orphans,
 and his wife a widow. (Ps 109:6–9)²³

In order to make her case for a forensic understanding of *שָׁטָן* in 109:6, Day first argues that one must interpret vv. 6–19 as a discrete unit, apart from its context in Psalm 109.²⁴ This separation of vv. 6–19 from the rest of the psalm is more conducive to Day’s forensic interpretation than reading the psalm as a unity would be,

שָׁטָן figuratively, but simply to observe that, in the case of both words, he uses the language of physical assault/combat to describe his situation.

²¹ Dahood interprets Ps 109:6–7 as referring to a postmortem judgment and the *śāṭān* of this passage as *Satan*, whom he regards as a superhuman prosecutor (*Psalms*, 3:101–2). Though most commentators understand the *śāṭān* of Ps 109:6 to be a prosecutor, Dahood’s interpretation of the figure in this passage as superhuman has won few followers.

²² Day, *Adversary in Heaven*, 31. More recent interpreters who understand the language of v. 6 forensically include Stephen Egwim, “Determining the Place of vv. 6–19 in Ps 109: A Case Presentation Analysis,” *ETL* 80 (2004): 116–18; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen* 101–150 (HTKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 183.

²³ The NRSV supplements v. 6 by adding the words “They say” at the beginning, identifying vv. 6–19 as a quotation of the psalmist’s enemies: “They say, Appoint a wicked man ...”

²⁴ Day (*Adversary in Heaven*, 30–31) points to the difference in the number of enemies between vv. 1–5, 20–31 (plural) and 6–19 (singular) as evidence for distinct compositional units. As examples of commentators who make this distinction, she cites Moses Buttenwieser, *The Psalms, Chronologically Treated, with a New Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 742; and Oswald Loretz, *Die Psalmen: Beitr. d. Ugarit-Texte zum Verständnis von Kolometrie u. Textologie d. Psalmen* (AOAT 207; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), 2:158–59. She also notes other commentators who regard Psalm 109 as a compositional unity, whose arguments she finds unconvincing.

since, as we have seen, the verb *שָׁפַט* occurs elsewhere in Psalm 109 with the likely meaning of “to attack.” Day then supports her inference that the *šāṭān* of 109:6 is an accuser with the observation that *בְּהִשְׁפָּטוֹ* “clearly indicates” that the goal of the *šāṭān* is to bring someone to justice. Day further asserts that the expression “to stand on the right hand” in v. 6 is also “clearly forensic.”²⁵

The evidence that Ps 109:6–7 speaks of an accusing *šāṭān*, however, is not nearly as clear as Day would have one think. One weakness of Day’s interpretation of the passage is that it requires her to divorce vv. 6–7 from the rest of Psalm 109. Although it is possible that vv. 6–19 constitute a distinct compositional unit within the psalm, an interpretation of *שָׁפַט* that is consistent with its context is still preferable to one that is at odds with its context. Furthermore, there are no grounds for Day’s claim that “stand on the right hand” is forensic, let alone “clearly forensic.” In support of this claim, Day cites Roland de Vaux’s discussion of judicial procedure in ancient Israel. Regarding the location of the accuser during a trial, de Vaux says only, “The accuser was the ‘adversary,’ the *šāṭān*; he stood on the right of the accused (Ps 109:6; Za 3:1).”²⁶ Since de Vaux’s only evidences for the supposition that an accuser would stand on the right of someone are two passages whose meaning is presently in question, they constitute an insufficient basis for a forensic reading of “stand on the right hand.” That an accuser would stand on the right side of the defendant is entirely without support apart from the alleged evidence of Psalm 109 and Zechariah 3.²⁷ Further, *נִשְׁפָּט*, which, according to Day, shows that the psalmist wanted his enemy to be brought to justice, rarely, if ever, means “to be judged” or “to be tried,” as it is translated in v. 7 by the NRSV.²⁸ More typically, it means “to enter into dispute” and can even mean simply “to quarrel.”²⁹

The speaker in Ps 109:6–7, rather than expressing his desire that a criminal trial will result in a verdict of guilty for his enemy, may be voicing his wish simply that an attacker will kill his enemy. Though his opponent may seek justice, the speaker hopes that it will be wickedness that transpires (*יָצָא רָשָׁע*) and that his enemy’s appeal for arbitration, whether to God or to a human authority, will fail to prevent sin from occurring (*תִּפְלֹתוֹ תִּהְיֶה לְחַטָּאָה*). This understanding of these lines makes better sense of the expression *יָצָא רָשָׁע* in v. 7, which the NRSV

²⁵ Day, *Adversary in Heaven*, 31.

²⁶ De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. John McHugh; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 156.

²⁷ On the significance of the *šāṭān* standing to a person’s right in Psalm 109, see the discussion below in relation to Zechariah 3.

²⁸ H. Niehr cites Ps 9:20 [Eng. 19]; Ps 37:33; and Ps 109:7 as passages in which this form can be translated “to be judged” (“*שָׁפַט* *šāpaṭ*,” TDOT 15:421). The meaning “to be judged,” however, is far from certain in these passages. In Ps 37:32–33, as in Psalm 109, the word refers unambiguously to a wicked person’s (*רָשָׁע*) attempt to kill a righteous person.

²⁹ Ibid. See 1 Sam 12:7; 2 Chr 22:8; Prov 29:9; Isa 43:26; 59:4; 66:16; Jer 2:35; 25:31; Ezek 17:20; 20:35, 36; 38:22; Joel 4:2.

translates “let him be found guilty” A wish for a verdict of guilty does not seem to be the plain meaning of this expression. In 1 Samuel 24, after refusing to take advantage of an opportunity to kill Saul, David assures the king that he does not intend to kill him: “As the ancient proverb says, ‘Out of the wicked [מרשעים] comes forth wickedness’ [יצא רשע]; but my hand shall not be against you” (1 Sam 24:14 [Eng. 13]). David uses the expression *יצא רשע* to speak of the murderous activity that one would expect to come from wicked persons (מרשעים). The speaker in 109:6–7 uses these words to articulate his hope that a wicked person (רשע), a *śātān* (שָׂטָן), will kill his enemy.

Even were one to maintain, on the basis of the presence of נשפט or of other supposedly legal terminology, that Psalm 109 depicts a judicial proceeding, there is nothing in this passage that suggests that the *śātān* in such a proceeding would function as an “accuser.”³⁰ Based on the analysis up to this point, one would expect this *śātān* to be an attacker of some sort. In a judicial context, this *śātān* would probably be an executioner, such as Abishai in 2 Samuel 19. Whether it is hoped that the attack will take place in a legal setting or otherwise, the intended outcome of this encounter with a *śātān* is stated unequivocally in vv. 8–9. Regarding his enemy, the speaker says, “May his days be few.... May his children be orphans and his wife a widow” (109:8–9). As elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, שָׂטָן in Psalm 109 seems to denote lethal, physical attack.

It would be impossible to prove beyond a doubt that שָׂטָן never refers to accusation, particularly in the book of Psalms, where the specifics of the various passages’ historical settings are difficult to determine with absolute certainty. If one is willing to assume that שָׂטָן refers to accusation, it would be possible to read the psalms in which it occurs with this meaning. Apart from this sort of a priori understanding of the root, however, evidence that these psalms speak of accusation is meager. There is little support in the psalms and in the narratives considered above that שָׂטָן or שָׂטָן ever refers to accusation. In contrast, physical and lethal attack is very clearly the idea behind the use of the noun שָׂטָן in the narrative portions of the Hebrew Scriptures. In addition, this meaning is supported contextually and makes excellent sense in all of the psalms in which the root שָׂטָן occurs. That the words refer to lethal, physical attack is especially well supported in Psalm 109.

Having considered all of the occurrences of שָׂטָן and שָׂטָן outside of Zechariah 3 and Job 1–2, one is now in a position to consider their meaning in these two important passages. Zechariah is a natural place to begin, since interpreters often link this passage with Psalm 109.

³⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger offer an insightful analysis of Psalm 109 as a “*Gerechtigkeitspsalm*,” citing as evidence for their interpretation an impressive amount of potentially legal language in the psalm (*Psalmen* 101–150, 181–95). Some of the supposed legal terminology they cite, however, is that which we have called into question above. They assume, for instance, that an accuser would “stand on the right” of a defendant and that *יצא רשע* refers to a guilty verdict.

III. THE ŠĀṬĀN IN ZECHARIAH 3

^{3:1}Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan [שָׁטָן] standing at his right hand to accuse him [לְשׁוֹן]. ²And the LORD said to Satan [שָׁטָן], "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan [שָׁטָן]! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?" ³Now Joshua was dressed with filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. ⁴The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." And to him he said, "See, I have taken your guilt [עֲוֹןָךְ] away from you, and I will clothe you with festal apparel." ⁵And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with the apparel; and the angel of the LORD was standing by. ⁶Then the angel of the LORD assured Joshua, saying ⁷"Thus says the LORD of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here." (Zech 3:1–7 NRSV)

This translation of Zech 3:1–7 represents the scholarly consensus as to how these verses are to be understood with regard to the identity and activity of the *šāṭān*. Two aspects of this rendering of the passage merit comment. First, the NRSV translates שָׁטָן in 3:1 as "to accuse him." Second, it renders שָׁטָן in 3:1–2 as "Satan." Since this is a semantic study of the root שָׁטָן, I will not here discuss the grammatical distinction between "Satan" and "the Satan," as one would usually translate a noun with the definite article.³¹ One should note, however, that the transliteration of שָׁטָן as *Satan* is not as interpretively neutral as it might at first appear, since the NRSV and several other translations provide readers with an explanatory note defining this term as "the Accuser."³² Commentators and translators alike are virtually unanimous that what the *šāṭān* is doing in this scene is accusing Joshua and that the *šāṭān* is in fact "the Accuser."³³

³¹ Day (*Adversary in Heaven*, 43) suggests that the definite article in שָׁטָן does not point to a particular *šāṭān*, as in "the" *šāṭān*, but indicates that the figure is "a certain unspecified" *šāṭān* (emphasis mine). The precise nuance of the definite article in these instances is beyond the scope of this study, as is the question of how the definite article relates to the tradition history of "Satan" in the Hebrew Scriptures.

³² See also, e.g., NIV, ESV, NASB. The NJPS departs from the convention of translating שָׁטָן as Satan, and has "the Accuser" in the body of the translation itself, not relegated to an explanatory note. The NAB rev. ed. translates שָׁטָן as "to accuse him," but has the more generic "the adversary" for שָׁטָן.

³³ E.g., Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25B; New York: Doubleday, 1987), 183–86; Hinckley G. Mitchell, John Merlin Powis Smith, and Julius A. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 147–49 (Mitchell); David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 189–90; Dominic Rudman, "Zechariah and the Satan Tradition in the Hebrew Bible," in

What is somewhat surprising, given this scholarly unanimity, is that there is absolutely no evidence in the context of Zechariah 3 itself that accusation is indeed what is happening or that the *śāṭān* should be understood as the Accuser. Zechariah 3:1 itself says only that the *śāṭān* stood at Joshua's right to *śāṭan* him. Granted, the contents of ch. 3 are not obviously incompatible with the supposition that the *śāṭān* is functioning as an accuser. For example, the *śāṭān*'s activity appears to be connected in some way with the fact that Joshua is wearing filthy clothing (which is associated with the high priest's iniquity). In addition, the *śāṭān*'s activity is assessed negatively, eliciting YHWH's rebuke (3:2). For these reasons, scholars who have assumed that "accuser" and "to accuse" are possible meanings of *śāṭan* and *śāṭan* have been able to translate and interpret this passage accordingly.

Having surveyed the evidence for such uses of *śāṭan* outside of Zechariah 3, however, the assumption that this root denotes "accusation" can no longer be sustained. And the contextual clues provided by the passage, though they are not obviously incompatible with this understanding of the *śāṭān* and his activity, are not enough in and of themselves to warrant the translations "the Accuser" and "accuse" in 3:1–2. Since the evidence supplied by ch. 3 alone is insufficient for determining the meaning of *śāṭan* and *śāṭan*, one's primary guide as to their meaning must be their use elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures.³⁴ One must also look to other

Tradition in Transition: Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 in the Trajectory of Hebrew Theology (ed. Mark J. Boda and Michael H. Ploidy; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 475; New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 191; Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi* (WBC 32; Waco: Word, 1984), 199. Interestingly, the LXX translator did not understand the activity of the *śāṭān* in this way, but rendered the verb *śāṭan* with ἀντίκειμαι. The verb ἀντίκειμαι can denote adversarial activity of various sorts, often of a military kind (e.g., Exod 23:22; 2 Sam 8:10; Esth 8:11). It does not mean "to accuse."

³⁴ Attempts to explain *śāṭan* etymologically have been unsuccessful. Knut Tallqvist claims that the root *śāṭan* occurs in Akkadian with the meaning "to feud" (*Akkadische Götterepitheta: Mit einem Götterverzeichnis und einer Liste der prädikativen Elemente der sumerischen Götternamen* [StudOr 7; Helsinki: Societas orientalis fennica, 1938], 240). KBL also relates the Hebrew *śāṭan* to this supposed Akkadian root (p. 918). AHW, however, identifies the Akkadian root not as *śāṭan* but as the *št* stem of *etēm/nu(m)* (1:260). So also Day, *Adversary in Heaven*, 23; Wanke, "יָשָׁן *śāṭān* adversary," 1268. N. H. Tur-Sinai argues that *śāṭan* was derived from the root *śāṭan* ("to roam to and fro") and that a *śāṭān* was one who would roam around the earth and report any disloyalty to the king that he observed (*The Book of Job: A New Commentary* [rev ed.; Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1967], 38–45). This etymology, however, has been rightly rejected by Adolphe Lods, "Les origines de la figure de Satan: Ses fonctions à la cour céleste," in *Mélanges Syriens: Offerts à monsieur René Dussaud* (2 vols.; Paris: P. Geuthner, 1939), 2:658–59; Rivkah Schärf Kluger, *Satan in the Old Testament* (trans. Hildegard Nagel; Studies in Jungian Thought; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 30–31; Day, *Adversary in Heaven*, 20–22; Nielsen, "יָשָׁן *śāṭān*; יָשָׁן *śāṭan*; יָשָׁן *śāṭam*," 73; Breytenbach and Day, "Satan יָשָׁן Σατάν, Σατανᾶς," 726. More recently, Manfred Görg has posited a connection between the figure of "the *śāṭān*" in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Egyptian verb *śdnj* (from *dnj*), arguing that the *śāṭān* of the Hebrew Scriptures is a superhuman "enforcer" (*Vollstrecker*) ("Der 'Satan' – der 'Vollstrecker' Gottes?" BN 82 [1996]: 9–12). It seems unlikely, however, from both a semantic and a phonetic standpoint that there is any etymological

passages that resemble Zechariah 3 formally and conceptually in order to comprehend more completely the context of these words.

In view of the fact that “lethal, physical attack” is the meaning of *ḥṣ* and *ḥṣ* attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, this is also almost certainly the meaning of these words in Zechariah 3. More specifically, it was shown that *ḥṣ* is in some instances used with reference to capital punishment (Num 22:22, 32; 2 Sam 19:23). In these passages, the attacker functions as an “executioner.” This seems to be the sense of the root *ḥṣ* in Zechariah 3, the first verse of which should be translated as follows:

Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of YHWH, and the Executioner standing on his right to execute him. (Zech 3:1)

That the *śāṭān*’s attack should be understood more precisely as “execution” is strongly suggested by the contents of ch. 3.

Zechariah does not in this passage portray the high priest as an innocent victim of undeserved assault by evildoers, as the suppliant portrays himself in the psalms considered above. Joshua is guilty of some unspecified iniquity, which Zechariah associates with the priest’s filthy garments (3:3–4), so the *śāṭān*’s attack on Joshua’s life is not without justification.³⁵ The *śāṭān* in this scene resembles the *śāṭān* whom Balaam encountered on his way to Moab, a superhuman executioner of the guilty. In Zechariah’s vision, the angel of YHWH intervenes on behalf of Joshua, protecting him from the *śāṭān*’s attack. When compared with the other passages that speak of a *śāṭān*, the scene in Zechariah 3, in some respects, has its closest parallel in 2 Samuel 19. In the 2 Samuel pericope, Abishai stands ready to serve as David’s *śāṭān* and to execute Shimei for his crime, but David rebukes the would-be executioner and shows mercy to Shimei. So also in Zechariah 3 the *śāṭān* is poised to put Joshua to death for his iniquity, but the angel of YHWH rebukes the *śāṭān* and extends pardon to Joshua.

relationship between the Egyptian *śnhj* and the Hebrew root *ḥṣ*. Given the tenuous nature of the proposed etymologies for *ḥṣ* to date, the Hebrew Scriptures’ usage of this word and of its cognate *ḥṣ* remains one’s primary guide to the meaning of these words.

³⁵ There may be more at stake in Zechariah 3 than simply the fate of the high priest. Scholars disagree as to whether the Satan’s opposition in this passage is directed at Joshua alone or at the community represented by this high priest. Day, for example, finds in this passage a controversy over whether Joshua was fit to be invested as high priest (*Adversary in Heaven*, 118–21). Meyers and Meyers argue that the purpose of this scene is to legitimate an expanded role for the priesthood (*Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 180–82). Petersen, on the other hand, contends that the *śāṭān*’s accusations concerned not only the position of the priest but also that of the entire community before God (*Haggai and Zechariah 1–8*, 194–96). He cites Exod 28:36–38 and Num 18:1, which speak of the high priest bearing the guilt of those he represents. Relevant to this discussion is the fact that the *śāṭān* is rebuked in the name of “Yahweh who has chosen Jerusalem” (3:2). However, it is not the social and religious realities to which this vision points but the nature of the *śāṭān* within the scene described that is the concern of the present discussion.

The identification of the *śātān* as a superhuman executioner garners additional support from a comparison of Zechariah 3 with two other passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, although these two passages do not mention a *śātān* figure. Exodus 28 contains instructions concerning the clothing that Aaron and his descendants are to wear when they enter YHWH's presence. At the conclusion of these instructions, the following warning pertaining to the priestly vestments is given: "Aaron and his sons shall wear them when they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister in the holy place; or they will bring guilt [עו] on themselves and die" (Exod 28:43). According to Exodus 28, were a priest to approach YHWH clothed inappropriately, he would incur guilt and invite death. Zechariah seems to envision a scenario similar to the one warned against in Exodus, as he describes the priest Joshua standing guilty (עו) before the angel of YHWH and wearing filthy garments (3:3–4). Joshua's very life is at stake, and the *śātān* in this passage is the one who would take Joshua's life were it not for the angel of YHWH's intervention.

A second passage that sheds light on Zechariah 3 is the familiar account of Isaiah's vision of God and prophetic commission in Isaiah 6. In this passage, when Isaiah beholds God, he immediately recognizes that his life is in danger because of his iniquity. The prophet exclaims, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (6:5). At that point, one of YHWH's divine attendants takes action to spare Isaiah's life, taking a burning coal from the altar and touching Isaiah's mouth with it. The seraph then explains to Isaiah, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt [עו] is taken away, and your sin forgiven" (6:7). Once Isaiah's guilt has been removed, Isaiah receives his commission to prophesy to the people.

Zechariah's vision of Joshua follows the same sequence. Like Isaiah, Joshua stands in the presence of the (angel of) YHWH. And, like Isaiah, Joshua is in peril for his life on account of his guilt (Zech 3:1–3). Then, as the seraph touches a coal to the prophet Isaiah's unclean lips and declares that his guilt has been removed, so also the divine attendants in Zechariah 3 remove the priest Joshua's filthy clothes and the angel of YHWH declares that he has taken away Joshua's guilt (3:4). Once his guilt has been removed and the danger eliminated, Joshua receives his commission to serve as high priest (3:7), just as Isaiah received his commission to prophesy. These formal and conceptual parallels between Zechariah 3 and other passages reinforce the conclusion of the semantic analysis above, that a *śātān* is one who would take another's life by physical attack. Zechariah 3 describes not just any *śātān*, however, but "the *śātān*," God's superhuman executioner.

What is to be made of the terminological similarity between Zechariah 3 and Psalm 109 ("stand on the right side") is not as apparent. That Zechariah offers the reader information about the location of the characters in his vision in ch. 3 should likely be understood in light of the fact that such locative descriptors appear, as well, in Zechariah's other visions. In ch. 1, the prophet sees a man "on" (על) a horse

standing “among” (בין) myrtle trees with other horses “behind” (אחר) him. In ch. 4, Zechariah sees two olive trees “on the right” (על-ימין) and “on the left” (על-שמאל) of a bowl. These olive trees are said to be the two anointed ones who stand “by” (על) the Lord of the whole earth. In ch. 5, Zechariah describes a woman “inside” (בתוך) a basket and mentions two angels who lift up the bowl “between” (בין) heaven and earth. In 6:1, the prophet sees four chariots coming out “from between” (מבין) two mountains. In 3:1, the prophet, as he does elsewhere, describes the location of the various elements of his vision. He may be saying no more than that the Satan was standing next to the high priest.³⁶

This would differ from the situation in Ps 109:6, where “on the right” (על-ימין) seems to be used more idiomatically. The psalms frequently speak figuratively of a person’s “right side” as a position from which one person would support another (e.g., Pss 16:8; 73:23; 109:31; 110:5; 121:5; 142:5).³⁷ According to Job 30:12, the right side might also be a position, figuratively, from which one would oppose another. In Ps 109:6, the expression על-ימין parallels the על of the preceding line.

Appoint a wicked man against him [עליו];
let a *śātān* stand on his right [על-ימינו].

The idea of a *śātān* standing “on a person’s right” in Ps 109:6 should also be understood in contrast with the statement later in the psalm that it is God who stands “at the right hand” (לימין) of the needy (109:31).

Although Psalm 109 and Zechariah 3 both employ the language of a *śātān* “standing to the right” of someone, it is not evident that the situations depicted in these passages are analogous. As argued above, it is possible that Psalm 109 describes a judicial scene in which a *śātān* would serve as an executioner. In that case, both Zech 3:1 and Ps 109:6 would refer to an executioner standing to the right of a guilty individual. Although it is possible that Psalm 109 depicts a legal scene along the lines of Zechariah 3, the ambiguities of the psalm make it difficult to determine with confidence whether it actually does so. Even if Zechariah 3 and Psalm 109 are related, there is no evidence either in Zechariah or in the psalm that a person’s right side was a position from which one would issue accusations in a forensic setting.

Of the other passages that mention a *śātān* in the Hebrew Scriptures, Numbers 22 and 2 Samuel 19 are more recognizably analogous to Zechariah 3 than is Psalm 109. These passages, which speak of executioners, assist the interpreter in comprehending the role of the *śātān* in Zechariah 3. The theological and formal correspondence of Exodus 28 and Isaiah 6 to Zechariah 3, though these two texts do not mention a *śātān*, points in the same direction, strengthening the argument that Zechariah’s *śātān* is not an accuser but an executioner.

³⁶So also Mitchell, Smith, and Bewer, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*, 149.

³⁷See also Isa 41:13; 45:1; and 63:12 for this use of “the right side.”

IV. THE ŠĀṬĀN IN JOB 1–2

The title רִשְׁפָּן appears twelve times in the first two chapters of Job. When it comes to discerning the meaning of the title, however, Job 1–2, like Zechariah 3, leaves open more than one interpretive possibility. Despite the more elaborate narrative context provided by Job and the frequency of רִשְׁפָּן, the book of Job offers no unambiguous indication of the meaning of the noun רִשְׁפָּן. As a result of this ambiguity, scholars have proffered various readings of Job 1–2 and various translations for רִשְׁפָּן. Some commentators regard the *šāṭān* in Job as “the Adversary” or “the Opponent.”³⁸ Others understand this figure more specifically as “the Accuser” or “the Prosecutor.”³⁹

Complicating matters somewhat is the nature of Job's circumstances, which are supposed to be at the same time both exceptional and typical. Job's exemplary virtue, his great wealth, and his extreme suffering are extraordinary. His undeserved suffering and righteousness in the midst of it, on the other hand, are supposed to be meaningful to ordinary readers who find themselves suffering unjustly. Similarly, the portrait of the *šāṭān* in Job is probably to be regarded as typical in some respects and atypical in others. One must engage in a bit of careful reading between the lines in order to determine what was supposed to have been the *šāṭān*'s business as usual.

Based on the present study's analysis of רִשְׁפָּן up to this point, one would expect “the *šāṭān*” in Job to be an attacker. Since the word is used exclusively in this way elsewhere, unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary, this is likely to be the way it is used in Job as well. Given that the designation רִשְׁפָּן is identical to that found in Zechariah 3, and given that this figure reports to YHWH among the “sons of God” in Job (1:6; 2:1), one would expect, more specifically, for this attacker to be, as in Zechariah, a superhuman “executioner.” What remains is to determine

³⁸ See, e.g., David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC 17; Dallas: Word, 1989), 19–20; Samuel Rolles Driver and George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job* (ICC; New York: Scribner's Sons, 1921), 11.

³⁹ Scholars who regard the *šāṭān* as “the Accuser/Prosecutor” include Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 70; Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965; 3rd ed., 1973), 9–11; Tremper Longman III, *Job* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 82–83. According to William D. Reayburn, translators have two valid options when it comes to translating רִשְׁפָּן in Job 1–2: (1) transliteration with translation, e.g., “Satan the accuser” or (2) translation only, e.g., “the accuser, the tester” (*A Handbook on the Book of Job* [UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1992], 39). Norman C. Habel defines רִשְׁפָּן as “the accuser/adversary/doubter” (*The Book of Job* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985], 89). John E. Hartley defines רִשְׁפָּן as an “opponent at law” (*The Book of Job* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 71).

whether this meaning is further supported by, or at least is compatible with, its context in Job.

The evidence of Job itself, allusive though it may be, also suggests that the *śāṭān* is thought to be a superhuman executioner of the wicked. Several aspects of the narrative indicate that an understanding of the *śāṭān* as God's "attacker" or "executioner," rather than "accuser," lies in the story's background. First, while the *śāṭān* certainly questions the motivation for Job's unwavering fear of God, Job has committed no crime, nor does the *śāṭān* accuse Job of having committed a crime.⁴⁰ The *śāṭān* does, however, launch a vicious physical assault on Job, destroying Job's property, killing Job's children, and afflicting Job's body. The meaning "attacker" is quite appropriate for the activity of the *śāṭān* in Job. Second, although Job suffers despite his innocence, the *śāṭān*'s conversation with God assumes that God's normal policy is to protect the righteous but to stretch out the divine hand to strike the wicked. Behind the idea of the *śāṭān* who attacks the upright and blameless Job, presumably, is the notion of a *śāṭān* who has God's tacit authorization to bring this sort of trouble on the wicked. In the case of Job, the *śāṭān* must obtain special permission from YHWH to attack an innocent individual.

Third, one can perhaps detect an underlying understanding of the *śāṭān* as "the Executioner" in YHWH's instructions to him regarding his attack on Job. When the *śāṭān* challenges God to strike Job, God assents, telling the *śāṭān* that all that Job has is in the *śāṭān*'s hand. But each time that God hands Job over to the *śāṭān*, God curtails the *śāṭān*'s authority, instructing him in the first instance not to strike Job's flesh and bones (1:12). In the second instance, God permits the *śāṭān* to attack Job's body but forbids him to take Job's life (2:4–6). These instructions limiting the *śāṭān*'s freedom would have been necessary, given that the use of such physical and lethal force would have normally been within the purview of "the Executioner's" authority.

To be sure, the book of Job, in an effort to address the complex problem of human suffering, describes the *śāṭān*'s activity in a way that moves well beyond the simple meaning of this figure's title. The *śāṭān* certainly does more in this narrative than attack and kill, and Job has much more to say about the nature and activity of the *śāṭān* than can be addressed in the present article. Nevertheless, despite the complexity of the book of Job, it is not difficult to see how the notion of "the Executioner" lies in the background of the story's description of the *śāṭān*. The translation of שָׂטָן as "the Executioner" in Job 1–2, as in Zechariah 3, is supported by the word's usage outside the passage as well as by a contextual analysis of the passage.

⁴⁰ Although it is not impossible construe the *śāṭān*'s claim in Job 1–2 as an "accusation" in an abstract sense, this is not a straightforward reading of the text. F. Rachel Magdalene, for example, argues that the *śāṭān* accuses Job of "blasphemous intent" (*On the Scales of Righteousness: Neo-Babylonian Trial Law and the Book of Job* [BJS 348; Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2007], 106–17). The *śāṭān* does not imply that Job has the "intent" to do evil, but that the motivation for Job's loyalty to God is suspect. This legal interpretation of Job 1–2 also presupposes that the title "the *śāṭān*" means "the Accuser."

V. CONCLUSION

The tradition of a superhuman *śātān*, whether a *śātān* as in Numbers 22 and 1 Chronicles 21 or *the śātān* as in Zechariah 3 and Job 1–2, is among those traditions in the Hebrew Scriptures that pertain to superhuman agents of death, who visit God's enemies with capital judgment. One example of this sort of figure is the “destroyer” (הַמַּשְׁחִית) who kills the firstborn children of Egypt on the eve of the exodus (Exod 12:23). The angel of YHWH also serves as a messenger of death in several passages. We have already noted Numbers 22, where the angel of YHWH comes out as a *śātān* to kill Balaam. It is also the angel of YHWH who, in response to the prayer of Hezekiah, strikes down 185,000 Assyrians who have marched on Judah (2 Kgs 19:35//Isa 37:36).⁴¹ It is the angel of YHWH, as well, who kills seventy thousand Israelites as a result of David's unwise census in 2 Samuel 24. It should be no surprise that the Chronicler's retelling of this story attributes this census and the death that ensues to the activity of a *śātān*, an executioner from YHWH (1 Chr 21:1).

There is much more to be said about the *śātān* tradition and its varied manifestations in Zechariah and Job and in later literature. My forthcoming book on Satan in biblical and early Jewish literature (Eerdmans) addresses the history of the tradition more fully.⁴² My arguments in this article are simply the following: (1) There is insufficient basis for the scholarly consensus that רִשָּׁע means “accuser” and that רִשָּׁע means “to accuse”; (2) a better case can be made that these words refer to lethal, physical “attack” and that רִשָּׁע can in some instances be translated as “executioner”; (3) “executioner” and “execute” are very likely the proper understandings of רִשָּׁע and רִשָּׁע in Zechariah 3 and Job 1–2.

⁴¹ Cf. the parallel account in 2 Chronicles 32, where the figure who kills the Assyrians is not the “angel of YHWH,” but simply an angel sent by YHWH.

⁴² One question that is raised but not answered by this study is the following: If רִשָּׁע does not mean “accuser” in the Hebrew Scriptures, then how and when did the *śātān* become “the Accuser” [ὁ κατήγωρ] of our comrades” (Rev 12:10)? To deal with this question fully would take one further into exegesis and tradition history than is within the scope of this semantic study. A very brief answer to the question, however, is that this development probably took place among Greek-speaking theologians. The LXX most often renders רִשָּׁע and רִשָּׁע with *διαβαλλ: διαβολή (Num 22:32); διάβολος (1 Chr 21:1; Job 1:6, 7, 9, 12; 2:1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7; Ps 108:6 [MT 109:6]; Zech 3:1, 2); ἐνδιαβάλλω (Num 22:22; Ps 37:21 [MT 38:21; Eng 38:20]; 70:13 [MT 71:13]; 108:4, 20, 29 [MT 109:4, 20, 29]). It also uses ἐπιβουλος (1 Sam 29:4; 2 Sam 19:23 [Eng. 22]; 1 Kgs 5:18 [Eng. 5:4]), ἀντίκειμαι (Zech 3:1) and the transliteration σαταν (1 Kgs 11:14, 23, 25)). The noun διάβολος and its cognates can refer to adversaries and various kinds of opposition. Although διάβολος can at times mean “accuser,” according to W. Foerster, “accuser” is not the word's primary meaning (“διαβάλλω, διάβολος,” TDNT 2:71–73). The same can be said of the root *διαβαλλ- in general. It is very unlikely, for instance, that διαβολή and ἐνδιαβάλλω in Num 22:22, 32 are supposed to refer to accusation. Given the semantic range of διάβολος, however, whatever the intent of the LXX translators, their use of this word opened the door for later interpreters to view the *śātān* (LXX ὁ διάβολος) as “the Accuser.”

Excursus: The Meaning of שְׁטָנָה

The noun שְׁטָנָה occurs twice in the Hebrew Scriptures, though never together with שָׁטָן or שָׁטָן. In Gen 26:21, שְׁטָנָה is the name given to a well, because the herdsmen of Isaac and the herdsmen of Gerar “quarrel” (רִיב) over it.⁴³ The second passage in which שְׁטָנָה appears is Ezra 4:6, which says that during the reign of Xerxes the people of the land write a שְׁטָנָה that is intended to hinder Judah’s reconstruction efforts. Although שְׁטָנָה in this passage is often translated as “accusation” (e.g., NRSV, NAB rev. ed., NIV, NJPS, ESV), we know none of the specifics of this letter. It was clearly a document of “opposition” of some sort.⁴⁴ The way in which this document was supposed to impede Judah’s reconstruction efforts, however, is not specified.

Translators’ choice of “accusation” for the word can only be based on the presumption that the root שָׁטַן carries this connotation, not on information as to the letter’s contents found in Ezra 4:6 itself. A mistaken conflation of the שְׁטָנָה letter of 4:6 with a later letter described in Ezra 4:7–16 may also contribute to the (mis)understanding of שְׁטָנָה as an “accusation.”⁴⁵ The later letter, which was written during the reign of Artaxerxes, suggests to Persian authorities that Jerusalem’s rebuilding will lead to revolt. This letter, however, is not called a שְׁטָנָה. The contents of the earlier document, which is called a שְׁטָנָה, are unknown. Even were the later letter to be called a שְׁטָנָה, it would not be clear whether the word itself denoted accusation or simply meant “opposition.” Judging from the two instances of this word in the Hebrew Scriptures, שְׁטָנָה does not appear to be identical in meaning to its cognates שָׁטָן and שָׁטָן. Nor, based on these two occurrences, can שְׁטָנָה be said to denote accusation.

⁴³ Cf. Gen 26:20, where another well is named עֶשֶׂק under similar circumstances. A verb based on the root עֶשֶׂק occurs in the same verse and is a *hapax legomenon*.

⁴⁴ So Horst, *Hiob*, 1:14.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Nielsen, “שָׁטָן *śāṭān*,” 75.



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