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The Accuser or The Executioner? The Role of *ha-satan* in Job and Zechariah

Many of the modern connotations associated with the name ‘Satan’ involve red skin, horns, pitchforks, and most importantly, the embodiment of evil. However, this association was not the original association with the word, but rather, developed overtime as Judaism and Christianity evolved into their present states. Particularly, in the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, the word *satan* is not referenced with the serpent in Genesis 3, or as the personification of evil. So, if evil and Satan are not explicitly linked, what was the original ‘Satan,’ and what was its role in the Hebrew Bible? For starters, the word *satan*, is commonly translated from Hebrew as ‘adversary’ or ‘one who obstructs.’ As for the Biblical use of the word, *satan* is mainly used as a common noun the few times it is referenced in the books of Numbers, Samuel and Kings. For example, in Numbers when Balaam strikes his donkey, the angel of the LORD says to him, “I have come out as an adversary [*satan*] because your way is perverse towards me” (Numbers 22:32). In the New Revised Standard Version or NRSV, it says adversary, which is translated from the original Hebrew of *satan*. The uses of *satan* in these texts are thus used as a noun to describe the role of a human or celestial being who is obstructing someone’s goal or pathway.

When it comes to the books of Job and Zechariah, this noun evolves into something different. *Satan* is now written as *ha-satan* or *hassatan*. The addition of the article *ha* changes it to mean ‘the satan’ or ‘the adversary.’ The NRSV often translates this to the proper noun of

Satan, but the direct translation would have had the article attached to it. In each of the texts, *the satan* is now a role or job title attributed to a specific character, rather than a noun that is applied to anyone who is an adversary. In the prologue of the book of Job (the first two chapters), *the satan* attempts to test Job's righteousness and his loyalty to God. In Zechariah, *the satan* is mentioned in chapter three as a member of the divine court, serving as an accuser against the high Priest, Joshua. On the surface, these accounts seem as though the role of Satan is quite different to the modern representation of The Devil. However, harsh punishments and debate over the translation of *satan* make this distinction more blurred. Through an analysis of each mention of *ha-satan* in these texts, the role of *the satan* becomes clearer and gives insight into how these accounts may have influenced later representations of Satan.

Likely composed after the Babylonian Exile, the book of Job is noted as a peculiar text because of its form and with no reference to any Israeli history.¹ It is also interesting because of the doubts it raises about God's fairness.² This account begins describing Job as 'blameless and upright' and as 'one who feared God and turned away from evil' (Job 1:1). After the description of Job's righteousness, *the satan* appears before God: 'One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and [the] Satan also came among them' (Job 1:6). *The satan* being presented with the rest of the heavenly beings, (or *bene ha-elohim* in Hebrew meaning, Sons of God) must mean that he is one of these beings, which are often considered as members of a royal court or a great army.³ This places *the satan* as a high ranking character in this story.

¹ H.A. Kelly, 'Hebrew Backgrounds', in *Satan: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 21-28, (p. 21).

² T. Wray, G. Mobley, 'The Devil is in the Details: Satan in the Hebrew Bible,' in *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 51-74, (p. 59).

³ Pagels, E., 'The Social History of Satan: From the Hebrew Bible to the Gospels', in *The Origins of Satan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 35-62, (p. 39)

Next, God asks *the satan*, ““Where have you come from?” [the] Satan answered the Lord, “From going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it”” (Job 1:7). This may be just an explanation of where *the satan* has been, but next, God asks him if he has considered Job (Job 1:8). This exchange is where parts of *the satan*’s role are hinted at. Since he has been asked by God specifically about a certain individual, he has a purpose for his walking of the earth, to observe humans and evaluate them.⁴ So, not only is the satan a member of these heavenly beings, he has a specific task, to patrol the earth. As T.J. Wray and Gregory Mobley say, his purpose here is to ‘audit human virtue.’⁵ Therefore, the first part of *the satan*’s role in this account is as a patroller or an observer.

The next portion of the story gives deeper aspects of *the satan*’s role as an observer of humans, and specifically, of Job. After considering Job and his righteousness, *the satan* poses a question to God:

Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face. (Job 1:9-11)

To paraphrase, *the satan* asks God if Job would be righteous if he did not receive everything he wanted from God, and suggests that he is only righteous because he has a good life. God then grants *the satan* permission to set out tests for Job as long as he does not harm Job himself (Job 1:12). This section reveals two aspects of *the satan*’s character and power. The first being that *the satan* is the one who suggests testing and punishing Job to see if he is truly righteous. This

⁴ L. Gu, ““Have You Considered My Servant Job?” A Reflection on the Book of Job’, *Perspectives on Political Science*, 43(3), (2014), pp.122–132, (p. 122)

⁵ T. Wray, G. Mobley, ‘The Devil is in the Details’, p. 60

shows a slight opposition to God, as he is questioning His treatment of Job and has to persuade God to punish him.⁶ However, this does not mean *the satan* is in total opposition to Him. As Wray and Mobley point out, ‘It was *God* who provoked *hassatan* to consider Job in the first place, and it was *God* who granted *hassatan* permission to dismantle the structures of this righteous man’s life.’⁷ Thus, the second aspect of his character here, is that he still operates under God’s will, so he is not the direct opposer of God and does not embody evil.

Next, through the punishments (or tests) Job receives from *the satan*, one final element is revealed about what *the satan* represents in this account. In chapter one of Job, *the satan* punishes Job by killing his animals, servants, and even his family (Job 1:16-19). Yet, Job remains righteous and ‘did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing’ (Job 1:22). What is interesting here is that the punishments Job receives are quite harsh and devastating. It was not enough for *the satan* to just kill his animals or his servants, but also felt the need to kill his family. As well, in chapter two, Job goes through more punishments, now on his own health (Job 2:5-8). *The satan* was not satisfied with Job’s righteousness after suffering the losses of those close to him, so he proposes that Job must show his righteousness after suffering himself (Job 2:4-5). This could reveal the more sinister side to *the satan* as more of a punisher rather than just an adversary or observer. However, referring back to an earlier point, *the satan* does all of these punishments with permission from God, as well as God initiating this consideration of Job in the first place. Jeffrey Burton Russell suggests that this could reveal more aspects about God rather than *the satan*. What he proposes is that *the satan* in Job represents not the destructive nature of

⁶ J.B. Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 174-220, (p. 200)

⁷ T. Wray, G. Mobley, ‘The Devil is in the Details’, p. 62

the satan, but rather the destructive powers of God.⁸ Overall, *the satan* that appears in Job is not as destructive or evil as we think, rather, he acts as an adversary or a tester of Job and could represent the unfair wrath of God.

Zechariah, another post-exilic text, shows *the satan* in a slightly different role than in the prologue of Job. As well, *the satan*'s presence in this text is quite brief as he is only mentioned in the first two verses in the third chapter:

Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the Lord, and [the] Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to [the] Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?" (Zechariah 3:1-2)

As in previous quotations, the NRSV translates mentions of *the satan* to a proper noun, but in the original Hebrew, it would have said *ha-satan*. So, when God (or, the Lord) rebukes 'Satan,' he is rebuking the heavenly being who holds this job title, rather than the later versions of Satan as a specific character. In this section, *the satan* is accusing Joshua of something, obviously something regarding his sins as he is clothed in dirty rags, but the specific accusation is not mentioned (Zechariah 3:3). What is important to note is that God rebukes *the satan* for accusing Joshua. On first interpretation, it seems as though it is a glimpse of a Satan versus God battle. As Antti Laato points out, *the satan* could be opposing God because of Joshua's uncleanness, and that he is unfit to be the High Priest.⁹ Since this is a post exilic text, Laato mentions that this text represents the debate on whether Jerusalem is ready to introduce a Judean community again. From this text, we see that *the satan* does not like this idea. So, it seems as though there is intent

⁸ J.B. Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil*, p. 200

⁹ A. Laato, 'The Devil in the Old Testament', in *Evil and the Devil*, ed. by Fröhlich, I., Koskeniemi, E. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), pp. 1-22, (p. 20).

to oppose God's will, but *the satan* also has good intentions in his opposition. *The satan* is also placed at God's right hand side, making him an important member of the divine court. Thus, his main concern may be the keeping of God's holiness¹⁰, so in his accusation of Joshua, *the satan* is trying to appease God. But, this accusation does go against God's will, so *the satan* is rebuked.

However, *the satan* is not thrown down into a fiery pit, nor is he even mentioned in later verses. After his rebuke, God proceeds to remove Joshua's dirty clothes and replaces them with clean ones, thus removing all his previous sins (Zechariah 3:4). This rebuke of *the satan* thus seems like more of a warning, rather than a full punishment for wrongdoings. So, while *the satan's* behaviour is disapproved of, he is not removed from his position in the court. As Russell notes, 'Satan appears merely to be punishing Joshua for his sins; rather than having any malicious intent, he may simply have failed to understand that [God] intended to be merciful.'¹¹ Although his punishment of Joshua is considered to be too harsh, *the satan* is not in total opposition of God. Rather, in this text, he serves as an accuser for the divine court, and is not serving as an evil opposer of God.

The argument currently stands that the satan is not the traditional evil figure, or rebel against God, but rather serves as specific roles under God's will. However, Ryan Stokes poses an interesting argument that could change the interpretations of *the satan* in these texts. What he proposes is that the current translation of *ha-satan* as 'the accuser' is incorrect and that it could mean 'the attacker' or 'the executioner,' especially in the context of Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3.¹² If this is the more correct understanding of the word, then *the satan's* role in each text has a more sinister meaning. Stokes notes that in the case of Job, because God has to make certain

¹⁰ A. Laato, 'The Devil in the Old Testament', p. 20

¹¹ J.B. Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil*, p. 191

¹² R. Stokes, 'Satan, YHWH's Executioner', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 2, (2014), pp. 251-270, (p. 252)

limitations to what *the satan* can inflict on Job (Job 1:12, 2:6), He recognizes the power and more evil side that *the satan* has.¹³ God recognizes that *the satan* has the ability and would potentially kill Job, so he sets boundaries on the tests he is allowed to give. However, as mentioned previously, *the satan* has permission from God to give these tests. As well, the satan willingly accepts these limitations and does not step outside his boundaries. Thus the question is raised: Is *the satan* or God the one who is more sinister, since He is allowing a righteous man to be punished?

Looking at this translation in Zechariah 3, a similar conclusion can be drawn. Stokes argues that *ha-satan* in this instance should be translated as ‘the executioner.’ And, since in the original hebrew, ‘accuse’ in verse one was written as *satan*, it should be translated as ‘execute.’ Thus Stokes translates the verse as: ‘Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of [the Lord], and the Executioner standing on his right to execute him. (Zech 3:1)’¹⁴ If this is the correct translation of the verse, then *the satan* is quite a more sinister role. The punishment Joshua receives is not only an accusation, but an execution. However, Stokes also mentions that this ‘execution’ is not unjustified as Joshua has committed sins.¹⁵ If the context of this situation is considered, then this execution is not malicious. Although the punishment is too extreme for the situation, *the satan* is still just raising concerns about Joshua’s ability to be the High Priest. Remember as well, *the satan* is in a revered position in the divine court. Therefore, even if the satan’s role is of ‘the executioner’ or ‘the attacker,’ he still operates as a specific

¹³ R. Stokes, ‘Satan, YHWH’s Executioner’, p. 268

¹⁴ R. Stokes, ‘Satan, YHWH’s Executioner’, p. 264

¹⁵ R. Stokes, ‘Satan, YHWH’s Executioner’, p. 264

function for God, not in direct opposition of Him. Rather, these notes of maliciousness, are quite possibly hints for future representations of the Devil.¹⁶

Overall, the books of Job and Zechariah in the Hebrew Bible challenge the modern notions of the character of Satan. In the book of Job, *the satan* is presented as one of the ‘heavenly beings’ with the specific task to test Job’s loyalty to God. Although *the satan* suggests testing Job, and tests Job in horrendous ways, he ultimately has permission from God to do so. As suggested, *the satan* could represent the destructiveness inside of God, and not a separate evil entity. In Zechariah, *the satan* is a member of the divine court, and is positioned on God’s right-hand side as an accuser against Joshua. Although he is harsh in his accusation and is rebuked by God, *the satan* did not have evil intentions. The fact that he stands at the right hand of God further insinuates that he is welcome and revered in the divine court. Thus, it is suggested that he merely was over punishing him, and again, not as an evil opposer of God. Although Stokes poses the argument that the translation of *satan* could have more evil connotations (as ‘attacker’ or ‘executioner’), the context of each situation is quite important. It seems as *the satan* could be acting maliciously in both accounts, especially if he serves as an attacker of Job or an executioner of Joshua. But, because *the satan* is still operating under God’s will, and is not directly opposing him, he does not serve as an ‘evil’ figure. As noted, these situations may have influenced later philosophy on the character of Satan. In the contexts of the original texts, however, *the satan*’s job is ultimately, ‘The Accuser’ and ‘The Adversary’ for God.

¹⁶ T. Wray, G. Mobley, ‘The Devil is in the Details’, p. 52

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