

The Eden connection

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The Devil and Satan are often explained by us as simply being personifications of sin. However, on many occasions these terms apply to sinful beings, with the serpent in the garden of Eden as the great prototype.

IN PREACHING Bible truth concerning the Devil, we stress its symbolic nature. We show how Scripture uses the literary device of personification, that it represents the propensity to sin in human nature. The main thrust is to refute the popular teaching that the Devil is a supernatural being. It is inevitable that we concentrate on the abstract nature of the Devil, and this can on occasions be misleading.

Back to the serpent

When we speak of the Devil we include Satan, because they are often interchangeable terms. However, we do not include 'devils' or 'demons', which is a different subject. The key to a right understanding of this subject is the way our Lord Jesus used the terms Devil and Satan. They were proper names that he gave certain people who came in contact with him. In so doing, he placed them in a specific category. He addressed his enemies as a "generation of vipers", "serpents" (Mt. 23:33) and being "of [their] father the devil" (Jno. 8:44).

It is apparent by the use of these terms that our Lord takes us back to the first temptation in Eden, and probably includes Cain as well. It is the serpent incident in the garden of Eden which evidently gave rise to the New Testament concept of the Devil. It is suggested that we also make this connection. Jesus represented those who incited him to disobey the will of God as being the serpent in Eden. They were not abstractions but real persons.

It is not only Jesus who makes the link with the first temptation in Eden. In veiled terms the Apostle Paul sees the serpent at work in the Roman ecclesia. A superficial reading of Romans 16:17-20 may miss the connection and thrust of this passage:

"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark *them* which cause divisions and *offences* [the serpent's incitement] contrary to the *doctrine* which ye have learned [the commandment in

Eden]; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own *belly* [the fruit to be desired]; and by *good words* and *fair speeches* [the serpent's stock in trade] *deceive the hearts of the simple* [Eve] . . . but yet I would have you wise unto that which is good, and simple concerning evil [the two trees in the garden]. And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly".

Let us look briefly at a selection of references in the New Testament where there is mention of the Devil and Satan:

"Ye do the deeds of your father . . . Ye are of your father the devil" (Jno. 8:41-44);

"Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offence unto me" (Mt. 16:23);

"O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness" (Acts 13:10).

The Eden connection is evident in these references. It is suggested that these are helpful guidelines. When the terms Devil or Satan are used we endeavour to apply them to persons who fit the role of the serpent in Eden. However, it may not be possible to make such an application at all times, in which case we should make the symbolic interpretation, as a symbol of sin.

Peter and Satan

We refer again to Simon Peter, because on this occasion he is subject to the attention of Satan: "Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you" (Lk. 22:31). Our Lord does not identify Satan, but it is possible that *someone* was inciting him. Simon was vulnerable, and had already shown his unwillingness for Jesus to suffer and die. In the case of Judas, not only was he a devil (Jno. 6:70,71), he was also subject to the attentions of the Devil. It has been suggested that we can identify the Devil who influenced Judas as the Jewish rulers. The RV supports the suggestion that collaboration had already taken place: "the devil *having already* put into the heart of Judas . . ." (13:2).

The Peter of Acts is no more the unconverted Simon of the Gospels who resisted his Lord. He is now his vindicator, with the authority of the Holy Spirit. Consider Ananias and Sapphira. Their judicial death brought "great fear" upon the early church: "why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie

to the Holy [Spirit], and to keep back part of the price of the land?" (Acts 5:3,11). Peter indicates that Ananias had succumbed to the influences of Satan, but does not name the inciter. The record tells us there was collaboration between husband and wife. This may well be the clue to the identity of Satan, that is, the persuasive powers of the wife upon the husband.

In his letter to the Dispersion, the Apostle Peter forewarns them of the "fiery trial" coming upon them (1 Pet. 4:12). This is thought to be either the hostility of the Judaisers or the imminent threat of Nero (A.D. 63–65). This explains Peter's warning in his letter: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (5:8).

Paul and the Judaisers

During Paul's missionary journeys from town to town there is a particular feature which we cannot fail to notice. It is the constant opposition and hostility he meets in every place. It came from different sources, but mainly from his own people, the Judaisers. They posed a serious threat to Paul's physical wellbeing and to the preaching of the gospel. They also undermined the faith of the believers. It is to this opposition that Paul refers when he speaks of Satan and the Devil. To be brief we select four examples:

"Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us" (1 Thess. 2:18). We get some idea of the 'adversary' in Thessalonica from the record in Acts 17, which says that Paul and Silas had to make their escape at night (v. 10). The Judaisers influenced the authorities to such an extent that it was nigh impossible for Paul to visit them again;

"for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the *serpent* beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2,3);

"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light" (vv. 13,14);

"And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure" (12:7).

The temptation of Jesus

The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness must not be omitted when dealing with the subject of the Devil. The idea of the presence of another person in the wilderness as the tempter may present some difficulty. That which gave rise to the temptation was the Messianic promises. The psalmist speaks of God's protective hand, "lest thou dash thy foot against a stone" (91:12). Also, he was promised "the uttermost parts of the earth for [his] possession" (2:8). Furthermore, he had only just received the power of the Holy Spirit, without measure. These special privileges made Him vulnerable.

How do we interpret this remarkable dialogue that took place in the wilderness? Was it:

- 1 that the Devil was another person who tempted Jesus?
- 2 that the Devil represents the subjective evil thoughts of Jesus?
- 3 that the Devil was the challenge of his own people's desire for a political king to overthrow Roman oppression?

Regarding the latter, he was fully aware of this, and was now confronted by it as he began his ministry to the nation. The kind of thinking behind this temptation characterised the nation and not Jesus. However, this is not to say that Jesus was not affected by this pressure. If he was not, it would be a blatant denial of his human nature. What is represented here is the incitement of the nation, which was ready to acclaim him king. Such was the devilish pressure upon him, and he was to meet it again during his ministry. We cannot deny that this would spark illicit desires within him, which of course he suppressed.

In sharing our nature, our Lord was subject also to the same propensities as ourselves. If he were not, there would have been no contest. He was "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin". Our Lord's final triumph over the Devil was through his death and resurrection: "that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 4:15; 2:14). Our Lord's change to spirit nature was the effective destruction of the Devil. He was then out of the reach of temptation and of death itself. This great salvation has extended even to us, by God's grace.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3).