

## Three Doctrines about The Satan

### **Introduction**

One of the figures that Scripture refers to, in both the Old and New Testaments, is “The Satan”. In addition, the New Testament refers to a figure called “The Devil”. For example, The Satan caused the catastrophes that befell Job, and The Devil is called “The father of lies”.

An important item to note is that the Hebrew word *satan* means “adversary”, or “accuser”; and the Greek word *diabolos* (from which we get the word “devil”) means “slanderer”.

As with many other Scriptural concepts, there are several different beliefs about who - or what - The Satan actually is, among various Christian groups. Basically, there are two main questions about The Satan, that these doctrines try to answer:

- Does “The Satan” refer to a unique, *personal* spirit being - i.e., to an angel?
- If “The Satan” *is* a personal being, then how much “freedom of action” does he have?

### **Three different doctrines**

Here are the three most common doctrines that I have seen, about The Satan - along with some Scriptural passages which appear to support each doctrine:

**1. The “Metaphorical” Satan:** According to this belief, the terms “The Satan” and “The Devil” are completely *figurative*. In other words, those terms do **not** refer to a *personal being* at all - instead, they **only** refer to the “sinful nature” *within* human beings.

The Christadelphians, and some Universalists, have this belief about The Satan.

Some passages that are used to support this doctrine are as follows:

#### **Matthew 16:21-23 (ESV):**

<sup>21</sup>From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.  
<sup>22</sup>And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” <sup>23</sup>**But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me.** For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

#### **Acts 5:3-4 (ESV):**

<sup>3</sup>But Peter said, “Ananias, why has **Satan filled your heart** to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup>While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that **you have contrived this deed in your heart?** You have not lied to men but to God.”

### **James 1:14-15 (ESV):**

<sup>14</sup>But **each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.** <sup>15</sup>Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

**2. The “District Attorney” Satan:** This doctrine states that The Satan *is* a unique, *personal*, spirit being. However, the only **actions** he can perform are ones that God has **explicitly** permitted him to do. So, in a sense, The Satan *works for God* - i.e., he is God’s “district attorney” - or perhaps God’s “hit man”.

Orthodox Jews generally hold this doctrine about The Satan.

Some passages that are used to support this doctrine are as follows:

### **Job 1:8-12 (ESV):**

<sup>8</sup>And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” <sup>9</sup>Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? <sup>10</sup>Have you not put a hedge 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. <sup>11</sup>But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” <sup>12</sup>**And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.”** So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

### **1 Chronicles 21:1 (ESV):**

<sup>1</sup> Then **Satan** stood against Israel and **incited David to number Israel.**

### **2 Samuel 24:1 (ESV):**

<sup>1</sup> Again the anger of **the LORD** was kindled against Israel, and **he incited David** against them, saying, “**Go, number Israel and Judah.**”

**3. The “Enemy of God” Satan:** In this view, The Satan is a unique, *personal* spirit being. In addition, he is able to perform **any** action that he wants to - even **without** God’s permission. In other words, The Satan is the “enemy of God” - i.e., he is locked in an ongoing, cosmic “struggle” with God.

Almost all of the mainstream Christian denominations have this doctrine about The Satan.

Some passages that are used to support this doctrine are as follows:

### **Revelation 12:7-9 (ESV):**

<sup>7</sup>**Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon.** And the dragon and his angels fought back, <sup>8</sup>but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup>And the great dragon was thrown down, **that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan**, the deceiver of the whole world— he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

**Isaiah 24:21-22 (ESV):**

<sup>21</sup>**On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven,** and the kings of the earth, on the earth.

<sup>22</sup> They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit;  
**they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.**

**Ezekiel 28:14-16 (ESV):**

<sup>14</sup>**You were an anointed guardian cherub.** I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked.

<sup>15</sup>You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you.

<sup>16</sup>In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God,  
**and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire.**

**Is The Satan a personal being?**

The passages in group 1 indicate that in *some* cases, the generic word “satan” (adversary) *does* represent sinful human nature. However, that does not mean that **every** reference to satan refers to human nature! In particular, when the *specific* term **The Satan** - or **The Devil** - is used, it almost always refers to a unique, *personal* being - not to sinful human nature.

For example, consider Revelation 12:7-9, above. If the word satan always refers to sinful human nature, then that means that the archangel Michael fought against *sinful human nature* - and against sinful human nature’s *angels*! Does that make sense? In addition, Jude 1:9 tells us that Michael had a dispute with the devil about Moses’ body. Was the archangel Michael arguing with *sinful human nature*?

Also, Scripture tells us that during the Millennium, Jesus will rule the nations with “a rod of iron” - and “sinners will be put to death”. This tells me that there will *still be sin* during the Millennium - because if there *won’t* be any sin during the 1000 years, then Jesus would not have to rule the Millennium so forcefully. With that in mind, consider this passage:

**Revelation 20:1-3 (ESV):**

<sup>1</sup>Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. <sup>2</sup>**And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years,** <sup>3</sup>and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, **so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended.** After that he must be released for a little while.

The above passage tells us that Satan will not have *any* influence over people, during the *entire* Millennium. So, if Satan always refers to “sinful human nature”, then that means that people will **not** sin *at all*, during the 1000 years - since everyone’s sinful nature will be “bound” during that time.

Of course, since Jesus will rule the Millennium with **force**, that implies that people *will* sin during the Millennium. That, in turn, indicates that Satan does not refer to sinful human nature in this case. On the contrary - this passage strongly indicates that Satan is a unique, *personal* being - completely separate from humans.

### **How much “freedom of action” does The Satan have?**

The passages in group 2 indicate that in *some* cases, God *does* permit The Satan to incite people to sin - and to even bring about calamities. However, that does not mean that God approves of **every** action that Satan performs!

Consider this: if Satan *only* performs the actions that God *wants* him to perform, then why would God *punish* him? In other words, if Satan is God’s “district attorney” - and if he *always* does *exactly* what God tells him to do - then why would God ever punish him at all?

Of course, the passages in group 3 indicate that God **will** punish The Satan, in the future. Isaiah 24:21-22 states that God will punish “the host of heaven, in heaven”. In other words, God will punish heavenly beings - i.e., angels. Also, Ezekiel 28 states that a *cherub* - a type of angel - **rebelled** against God; and as a result, God will *destroy* that angel. Finally, Revelation 12:1-9 speaks of a war in heaven - with some angels *fighting* against other angels - and the leader of the rebellious angels is identified as Satan!

Also, consider this passage:

Revelation 20:10 (ESV):

<sup>10</sup>and **the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur** where the beast and the false prophet were, **and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.**

That passage certainly seems to preclude the idea that Satan is God’s loyal “district attorney”...

### **Can The Satan do anything he wants to do?**

There is one other item to note: it certainly appears that The Satan *can* sin against God - i.e., he can do things that God does *not* approve of. However, that does not mean that he can do **anything** that he wants to do. In other words, there are (presumably) some “limits” on what Satan can do.

After all, if Satan *can* do anything that he wants, then why doesn’t he just kill off every human being? Or, at the very least, why doesn’t he ensure that everyone is *constantly* suffering calamities like the ones that struck Job? Certainly, life during this age is very difficult - but it could be a *lot* worse.

Also, consider this: Scripture contains examples of God **preventing** humans from doing certain things! In other words, even human beings do **not** have complete freedom of action - i.e., sometimes God does *not* allow us to take certain courses of action.

For example, Moses *wanted* to enter the Promised Land - but God **prevented** him from doing so, because Moses had sinned. Also, the apostle Paul *wanted* to enter the province of Asia, on one of his missionary journeys, but God **prevented** him from doing so. It seems to me that the same type of situation exists with Satan - i.e., God **prevents** him from doing certain things.

## Conclusion

As mentioned above, there are three common doctrines about The Satan:

- The “metaphorical” Satan;
- The “district attorney” Satan;
- The “enemy of God” Satan.

It occurs to me that *each* of those doctrines is **partially** true - and **partially** false:

- It is true that in *some* cases, the word “satan” refers to sinful human nature. However, in some *other* cases, Satan refers to a *spirit being* - not to sinful human nature.
- It is true that in *some* cases, God permits The Satan to perform certain actions. However, in some *other* cases, Satan takes actions that God does not want him to perform.
- It is true that The Satan is an enemy of God. However, Satan can *not* do anything that he wants to. In other words, God places “limits” on Satan’s actions, just like He limits human actions.

In closing, the reason why I think it is important to identify The Satan – or The Devil – is so that we will be able to **resist** him, when he attacks us. A very succinct description of this concept is provided here:

### **Ephesians 6:10-13 (ESV):**

<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup>For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup>Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.