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):

21 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.
22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”
23 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):

3 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? 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):

14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 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):

8 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?” 9 Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? 10 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. 11 But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” 12 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):

1 Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.

2 Samuel 24:1 (ESV):

1 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):

7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 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):

21 On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. 22 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):

14 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. 15 You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. 16 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):

1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 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):

> 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):

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 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. 13 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.