

Angels Throughout the Ages

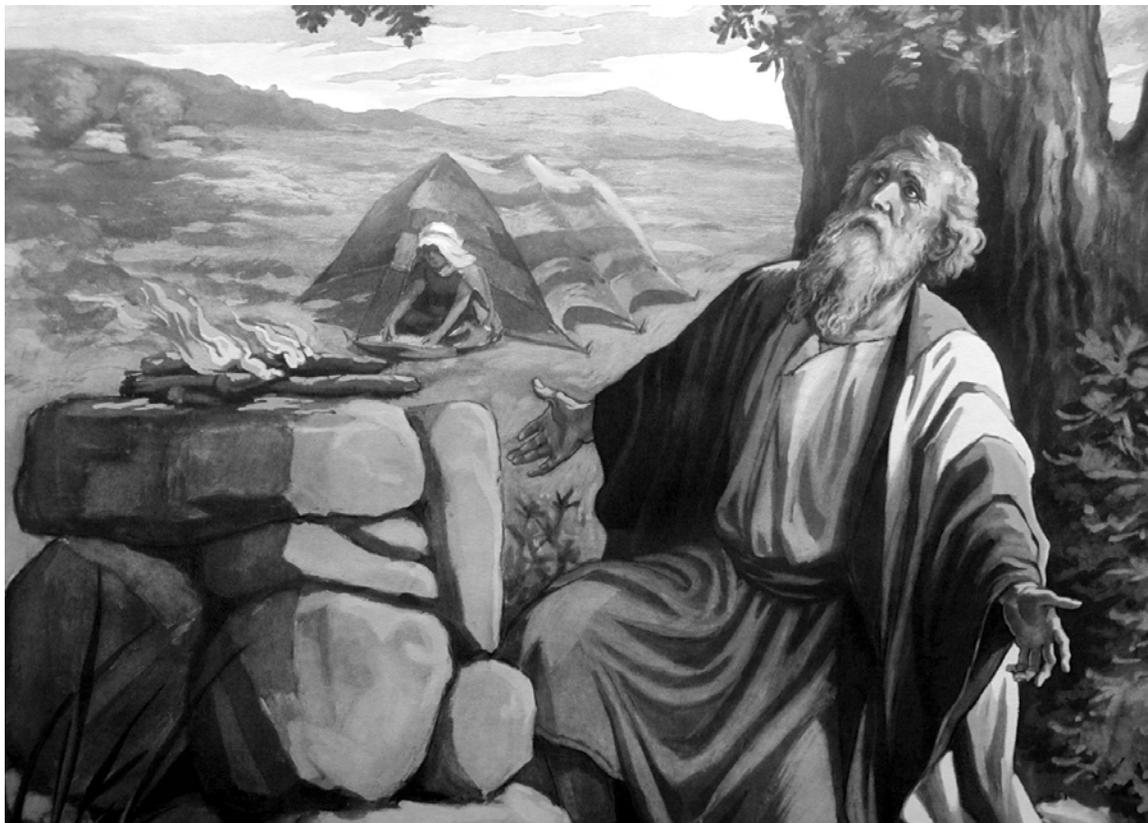


LESSON 2: Satan in the Book of Job

INTRODUCTION

THE BOOK OF JOB WAS WRITTEN somewhere between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C. Similar narratives can be found in earlier Babylonian literature, and it is interesting to note that the story, which deals with the question of the suffering of the innocent, touches the most primal cord in the human heart. Whatever the canonical form of the story

of Job and its final date of composition, the story should be regarded as genuinely ancient, even by biblical standards, because it represents a more developed form of a narrative that had been told with different names and different details for as far back into the history of story-telling as we can trace.



Although the canonical form of the Book of Job dates back only about 2,600 years or so, the story carries forward a way of thinking about God and heaven that dates back considerably farther, even to the earliest days of the Hebrew covenant, when Abraham had first been called from among the nations. In fact, Job, the example of the quintessentially righteous man, does not hail from the land of Israel or Judah, but from Edom. Abraham ibn Ezra, a Jewish exegete writing in the Middle Ages, held the opinion that Job had been translated into Hebrew from a different original lan-

guage. In the Book of Job, God is called by his proper name, Yahweh. Since the Edomites had introduced a cult to a god named Yahweh before that name had been taken up into the Hebrew context, and since the Edomites later entered the Hebrew covenant themselves, it is possible that the biblical story of Job actually traces back to an ancient Edomite source. These reflections are important, of course, only because they help us understand the depiction of God and heaven in the text of this book, and that will help us to understand the book's main characters.

JOB 2:1-7

¹ Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. ² And the LORD said to Satan, "Whence have you come?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." ³ 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? He still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause." ⁴ Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. ⁵ But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face." ⁶ And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your power; only spare his life." ⁷ So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD, and afflicted Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

POINTS TO PONDER

Among the Book of Job's most interesting features is the portrayal of a heavenly court, in which Yahweh is surrounded by a cast of attendants known as bene

Elohim or "sons of God." This phrase is used frequently in the Old Testament to indicate heavenly beings other than God—beings that we later came to designate with

the terms “angels” and “demons.” Among these heavenly courtiers in the Book of Job is a figure called *ha Satan*, or “the Satan,” which means “the adversary” or “the accuser.”

JOB

When we see the words *ha Satan* in the Book of Job, we are actually looking at a title, not a name in the strict sense. The Satan is depicted as a member of the heavenly court, whose task is to hold human beings accountable before God for their sins and their failings. In this respect, the Satan is related to the human conscience. Nonetheless, he is clearly depicted in terms of a personal celestial entity other than ourselves.

Many of the ancient Jewish commentators on the Book of Job regarded the book as an allegory, and insisted that Job was not an actual historical person. So, if that is the case, then we might not have to worry too much about how the image of the Satan in the Book of Job relates to later Church teaching about conscience, wherein the conscience is that sacred inner space in the human psyche where the Holy Spirit speaks to us in silence. We would not want to think of the Holy Spirit as “the Satan.”

Still, as late as the First Letter of John, which was probably written toward the very end of the 1st century A.D., the “conscience” is depicted as a kind of “accuser.” Such an image of conscience could help us to understand what is happening in the

1 JOHN 3:7-10

⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸ He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ No one born of God commits sin; for God's * nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is * born of God. ¹⁰ By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.

Book of Job with the figure of the Satan.

ST. JOHN THE APOSTLE

For the apostle John, there is some element in the conscience, somewhere deep within the human heart, that calls us out for our moral weaknesses, even when we don't actually sin. He sees this as a demonic temptation to despair against the transformative power of grace. Somewhere within the inner person, the devil taunts us to see only our disordered desires and none of our fidelity, and he waits for us to turn away from God and sin. John reminds us, though, that sin occurs in an explicit act, not merely in a disordered desire that we resist. He insists that God is greater than the inner heart—than that accusing voice speaking through the conscience—and that God knows the real truth about us even better than we know ourselves. **John**

explains that this inner voice cannot be allowed to condemn us if, in the end, whatever our disordered desires may be, we stay faithful to God in our conduct, follow his commands, and do what is pleasing in his sight.

So, in his presentation of this inner voice of the heart, which follows a long discourse on the devil, the apostle John appears to borrow something from the images present in the Book of Job. In Job, the Satan expresses concern over God's interest in human beings. Human beings, he insists, are all unfaithful to God in the end and would curse God if given any excuse to do so. Humans are ungrateful for God's concern for them.

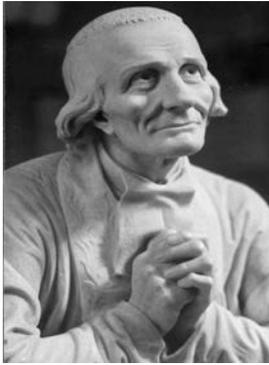
In Job, God insists that the Satan is wrong about this analysis, whatever may be true in the preponderance of cases. **Job is a righteous man, and he proves that it's possible, in principle, for human beings to be truly faithful and righteous.** The Satan, however, is so insistent that human beings are all treacherous in their hearts that he asks God to give him reign to destroy Job, arguing that when God lifts his protection from Job and allows him to suffer as if a guilty man, then he will become one, himself, in the end. He will turn on God and curse him when things do not go his way.

So after several waves of persecution against Job, who loses his whole family and all his wealth to the torments of the Satan, Job's friends advise him to curse God and die, only to see him stand firm in his righteousness. Job rues the day of his own birth and asks God to explain himself, but he never turns away, and the Satan is shown that there is moral hope for the human race.

So, by the time we arrive at 1 John, we have a picture of the Satan as a real person and not merely as a metaphor.

Saying this, of course, is not the same as making a statement about the historical character of Job—a question that would not really be appropriate to this study, anyway. It is only to say that the image of the Satan in the Book of Job came to be seen as a genuine insight about a real person. **But for the apostle John, the Satan is not a member of the heavenly court, but stands in fierce opposition to the designs of God.** He is "*ho Diablo*," or "the devil"—a term that means essentially the same thing as "*ha Satan*" but now comes to hold demonic implications. In our next lesson, we will take a look at the figure of the dragon in the Book of Revelation.





VOICES OF THE SAINTS

St. John Vianney, Cure of Ars

“The greatest of all evils is not to be tempted, because there are then grounds for believing that the devil looks upon us as his property.”

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

- CCC 2851 states that evil is not an abstraction, but rather a person, Satan, the angel who works to keep mankind separated from God’s plan of salvation.
- CCC 1777 explains the role of conscience in making moral decisions.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what book of the Old Testament does *ha Satan* feature prominently? Approximately how old is that story?

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

The proverbist can rightly say, “Seven [times a day] falls the righteous [man] and rises” (Prov 24:16). How does Church teaching on mortal and venial sin help us to understand our capacity to recognize evil and freely choose to do it anyway?



ROME TO HOME

While it is true that suffering has a meaning as punishment, when it is connected with a fault, it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment. The figure of the just man Job is a special proof of this in the Old Testament. Revelation, which is the word of God himself, with complete frankness presents the problem of the suffering of an innocent man: suffering without guilt. Job has not been punished; there was no reason for inflicting a punishment on him, even if he has been subjected to a grievous trial. From the introduction of the Book it is apparent that God permitted this testing as a result of Satan's provocation. For Satan had challenged before the Lord the righteousness of Job: "Does Job fear God for nought? ... Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face." And if the Lord consents to test Job with suffering, he does it to demonstrate the latter's righteousness. The suffering has the nature of a test. The Book of Job is ... in a certain way ... a foretelling of the Passion of Christ.

POPE JOHN PAUL II,
Salvifici Doloris, February 11, 1984