

The satan

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(1) Why This Series on The satan?

I am often asked about the devil or the nature of evil or why there is evil in this world. Some folks would prefer that I do not talk overmuch about this. They say, since Jesus has defeated the devil, we should not give it too much air time. They are correct. As Karl Barth observed, the Bible only mentions the devil to dismiss him. However, the Bible does mention the devil so we too, even as we dismiss its/his presence and work. We must first clear away some misconceptions in the first few posts and note that the concept of the devil has a history.

Before I begin, however, I will lay my cards on the table so that as you follow along you will not be too surprised at what you will see. Primarily what I will be doing in these posts is seeking to work out an understanding of evil from a human perspective. If you are familiar with my writings you will know that the mimetic theory of Rene Girard informs how I read the Bible. I read it first as an anthropological text and then (and only then) as a theological one. The cross before the resurrection as it were.

As we begin this journey I hope you will find that reframing our understanding of the devil contributes greatly to our understanding of just what it is that is overcome in the life of Jesus. I hope you will find the courage to “cast out the satanic influences and impulses” in your own life. We who live in the light of God’s great liberation in Christ are already aware of the power of the gospel to deal with our sin, our addictions and the way sin manifests itself in the structures of our life. The devil is not an elusive concept nor a free floating spirit, nor a power to be feared. The satan had been crushed, laid low in the death of Jesus, never to rise, destined to doom.

You will notice that I do not capitalize the word satan. There are several reasons for this. Satan is not a name but a function (it means accuser). Second, the satan is not a person but a principle (more on this as our studies evolve). Third, the satan has been given way too much press in the Christian faith as a virtual equal or peer of God, as though God was a good eternal principle and the satan an evil eternal principle.

Not so! Christians are not dualists; we are those who recognize that only Jesus has been given all authority and power (Matthew 28:16-20, Phil. 2:5-11).

Yet, it is also true that while Jesus has overcome the satan in his death and resurrection and ascension, it is also true that we still live between the times; we live as those who share in both this age and the age to come. We are still bounded in this life by sin, death and the devil, but even as we are bounded by such we are freed from fear of any of them. We are liberated from fear of judgment, for Jesus has forgiven us all of our sin. We are liberated from fear of death for we live in the promise of the resurrection of our bodies. We are freed from fear of the satan and freed from its authority over us by virtue of Jesus overcoming of the satanic principle. This is the gospel and it is good news indeed.

So while we will discuss the devil and at times it may appear as though the devil has the upper hand in human history, nevertheless we do so knowing that there is a world coming where sin, death and the devil will cease to exist. We live, as the theologians put it, with an ever expanding eschatological horizon opening up for us.

(2) Hollywood, the Bible and The satan

Hollywood has a bit of a fascination with the satan. Films have depicted it as a horrid monster, as an angel with wings and horns and as a human being (Al Pacino no less). Films like *Constantine* or *The Exorcist* owe little to the canonical scriptures and more to the second Temple Jewish literature, medieval speculation and fear, Dante and the writings of the Puritans. I say this to show that while there is a lot of speculation about the satan, there is little that we can actually say for the devil is not a prominent figure in the Bible.

Other than the prologue to the book of Job, a reference in Chronicles and one in Zechariah one does not find much in the Hebrew Scriptures. Even the serpent of Genesis 3 hardly qualifies. The Henochic (= I Enoch) myth of the fallen watchers has to be imported somewhere between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 much like dinosaurs have to be read back into the creation narrative. The devil does just not play a major part in Israel's story.

When we come to the New Testament, there is a definite change. Jesus casts out demons and the world seems enthralled and under the power of evil. This is all due to the influence of apocalyptic watcher myth of I Enoch. In this literature the satan goes by many names including Beelzebub, Samma'el or the 'diabolos.' It is at the head of a hierarchy complete with generals, lieutenants, colonels, sergeants and minions.

One of the striking elements of the Henochic (I Enoch) myth is that after the rebellion of a certain number of angelic beings, judgment is passed and they are all consigned to eternal punishment. However, they send an emissary to God pleading that a small percentage of them may remain behind to plague humanity, and worse still, God seems to acquiesce to their request. One has to ask, what kind of a God, having passed such a judgment would then turn and allow this to occur. It would be like a person who had cancer being cured but because the faith healer felt sorry for the cancer allowed some cancer cells to remain and reinvigorate the disease! Strange.

Hollywood's depiction of the devil owes more to popular cultural experience and ancient and medieval speculation than it does to Scripture. Films often depict the satan as an almost-god; one with extraordinary powers that rival God's powers and in some films even outdoes God's power. The devil is a virtual equivalent of God, a most powerful being complete, not only with armies, but with personality, something the Bible never ascribes to the satan.

This dualistic approach to the satan, creating a worldview of some divine yin and yang, or equal opposites of good and evil in the universe is not that of Scripture. If in the Hebrew Bible, there is very little mention of the satan, in the New Testament, the satan is most frequently mentioned in contexts of defeat. So how is it that entire Christian traditions can make such a fuss over the devil? Entire industries have arisen and there is a lot of money to be made off of the devil. Exorcism schools, like that of Bob Larson, movies, books, websites, music and even the so-called satanic church all profit off of a myth, yet people continue to believe that there is some virtually omnipresent, omniscient being capable of making us all spin our heads and vomit pea green soup.

I am not mocking those who have had genuine encounters with evil. I will discuss these in upcoming posts. For now I simply want to debunk an unhealthy emphasis placed on the satan in certain Christian circles. Christians do not believe in the devil, they believe in Jesus, conqueror of all evil, in all of its forms, including whatever we may understand by the satanic. Christians need not fear "the satan" anymore than they fear a thunderstorm. Perfect love not only casts out the demonic, it also casts out all of our irrational fears.

(3) God the Creator and The satan

When it comes to the devil, we must first disabuse ourselves of the mythology that has overlain the concept. Evil is not a reality, it is an unreality. It has no being of its own. It is not real in the same sense that God is real or as theologians might say, it has no ontology. It does not exist in and of itself. The devil, or I should say, the concept of the devil has a history. Jeffrey Burton Russell has written four major books

(*Devil, Satan, Lucifer, and Mephistopheles*) that demonstrate that the concept of the devil is one that develops over time.

The idea of an agent of evil was first introduced into the history of ideas around 800 B.C.E, in Persia by Zoroaster. Zoroaster was a reformer of religion and taught that there were two competing principles, one of light, the other darkness; one was a good god, the other a bad god. These two principles were in an eternal battle. Sometimes in human history, the good god had the upper hand, at other times the evil god seemed to be winning. Back and forth this struggle between the gods went, playing itself out in the arena of human affairs. This principle lies behind the oriental notion of yin and yang, and of karma as well. When the Jewish people were exiled in Babylon in the sixth and seventh centuries B.C.E., they encountered this way of thinking.

Judaism also needed to account for evil in the world. In the Jewish traditions prior to the exile (found primarily in Torah), evil was a purely anthropological datum, that is evil was a purely human phenomenon. The story of the serpent in Genesis 3 shows that the man, the woman and the satan are all part of a matrix focused on the problem of desire. The talking serpent in Genesis 3 is a mythical figure. Snakes don't talk. When we look at Genesis 3 in a future post we shall see how the snake is a metonym for desire. The important thing here is that the serpent is not some fallen angel in the guise of a snake. There are no traces of the Enoch myth in Genesis 1-3.

It was during the time of the exile that the first creation narrative was produced (Genesis 1:1-2:4). Everything about this creation was good; all seven days were beautiful in God's sight. There is no evil in this creation story, in fact the story (or myth) is in distinct contrast to the myths espoused by the Babylonians whose gods needed and used violence to beget the creation. The Creator in the first creation story created all things with a word, that is, without violence, and that is what set apart this story from that of the cultural myths of origin from the surrounding civilizations. In my book *The Jesus Driven Life* I even said that this first creation story is not so much about beginnings as endings; in God's creation all things end up as "tov, tov", very good!

In the post-Exilic era, as this Persian dualism was imported into Jewish thinking a certain type of language and literature came into being that sought to explain the problem of evil in the world which we know as apocalyptic. This way of thinking divided the world into two ages, this age and the age to come. The way to account for evil in the world was to say that this age was evil and ruled by an evil power while the age to come was ruled by God.

The second creation narrative was another attempt to tell the story of the creation but this time, rather than express a hopeful vision, the author of the second creation story beginning in Genesis 2:5, seeks to also

explain why there is trouble in the world. Notice that there is no seventh day in the second creation narrative. Why is that? Because everything after that is the sixth day: Adam/Eve, Cain, Abel, Noah, Babel. The second creation account names the real problem of evil, it is not abstract. Over and over again the problem of evil is named as violence. Violence is a human issue, not a divine problem. When we are able to recognize this, when we are able to shoulder the burden of our predicament on our own shoulders and not blame it on another worldly “being”, we will have come a long way toward understanding an essential part of the satan. The satan is violence, violence is satanic and both are human.

(4) Is The satan a Person?

For most Christians, the satan is a malevolent person just like they are but without a human body. This begs the all important question: what is a person? How do you define what constitutes a person? What is personality? Before you continue this post, take a moment and write down your response to this question.

Most of us tend to think of people as ‘persons’ as agents of independent moral authority, that persons are those that can chose or have so-called ‘free-will.’ However, the concept of personality is far more complex than that. Even if we say that a person is an autonomous moral agent that has free will we then need to define free will. What is will? What makes it free? And then we would still have to define the terms we use when it comes to our definition of free will. The problem here is that we once we go down this road, we leave all knowledge gained from the human sciences behind and end up simply speculating and creating a view of ‘person’ far more indebted to our presuppositions than to what we actually know about people.

Especially since the Enlightenment (c. 1800), we have been taught that people are autonomous moral agents, that we all stand alone and that we are all responsible for our own choices. In the last one hundred years however, there has been a turn away from this way of thought to recognizing that the concept of ‘personhood’ requires redefinition. We are no longer to be conceived of as ‘free moral agents’ who make choices determined by our own individual wills. Relationality is now the watchword when it comes to understanding what it means to be ‘persons.’ Speaking of humans, we are beings-in-relationships. Our identity comes not from some isolated thing in each of us but from our relationships. So, e.g., there is no such thing as Michael Hardin. Who ‘I’ am is the confluence of all my relationships. Take away my relationships and ‘I’ do not exist. ‘I’ am my relationships.

We are not individuals. To use a term coined by Rene Girard, we are *interdividuals*. This has huge implications for how we understand the concept of person and will also have huge implications for how we understand, not only the satan, but also how we image the inner-trinitarian life of God as ‘three persons in unity.’ As long as we understand personhood as discrete individual entities, each with their own will,

rationality and ability to choose, we will remain mired in discussions that are little more than speculative quagmires.

Scientific research in social psychology and in the human brain has demonstrated that we are in deep structural relationship with one another well beyond the conscious level. We are inter-dependent beings. Our choices do not come from within but from without inasmuch as our desires, which we perceive to arise from within ourselves, are actually experienced internally even though they externally derived. What we want to call our 'own' desires/wants, are in reality the non-consciously taking up of the desires of others and making them our own.

This is a huge shift. For many people it will be troublesome. However, I would rather have a definition of 'person' that has some grounding in reality (that which is scientifically demonstrable) than in pure speculation. So as we consider what it means for the satan to be a person it is important to remember that our worldviews will determine how we understand this and what we bring to the table in our definition of 'personhood.' Would you rather just speculate as to what a 'person' is or would you rather take advantage of all the wealth of accumulated science that has helped us to see ourselves, not as islands on the ocean, but as part of an inner connected reality? These posts will do the latter and thus by reframing our definition of person we will come to see that the satan is not a person in the older sense of an autonomous good free moral agent turned evil, but that the satan is bound up intimately with what it means to be human. This is the turning point we are at.

(5) The satan as Mimetic Desire Corrupted

Well, by gosh and by golly, I have been called a Gnostic. Those familiar with my work know that for me Gnosticism is the worst possible relationship we can have to faith. In response to yesterday's post one poster said "I'm starting to think this belief system is in opposition with the physical sciences, which is a telltale sign of gnostic thought. It seems to exalt social thought and relationship with no explanation to reconcile the governing physical realities."

Let's unpack this before we go further. I have been saying that the satanic is not a creation of good by God turned evil. I am saying that the satanic is human in its origination. There, my cards are on the table. Now I must explain what I mean by this and it will take many posts to do so.

In reply to the poster above I would suggest that imitation of desire is first of all non-conscious; it is not something we learn to do, we are hard wired to imitate. The discovery of mirror neural networks by Rizzolatti (and his colleagues) in our brains in 1996 (known as mirror neurons) has validated this insight on

the level of physicality. The research of Andrew Metzloff on imitation of infants just minutes out of the womb is a social scientific proof of this as well. Readers may turn to *Science and Mimesis* edited by Scott Garrells for essays on this topic.

What bothers this poster is that I cannot seem to

“Reconcile the physical sciences and the obvious display of hierarchical laws as a physical representation of spiritual truth. Whether thrones or dominions they were made through Him. Everything is currently physically deteriorating- 2nd law of thermodynamics. This is not God's original design in the creation. How do you suppose the physical laws of science were changed, so that the entire created universe began to decay- not just a social degradation, but a physical one.”

Again I can only write so much in posts. My reply is that if there is anything we know about creation it is that it has been unchanging since the ‘Big Bang.’ Physical deterioration has been built into the universe, there was no such thing as some kind of Edenic ‘perfect Platonic’ universe. The poster reads the cosmology of the Genesis text through the Platonic lens of perfect creation – fall – restoration. I have already pointed out that there are two creation narratives. The first is really not protological as much as it is eschatological; everything God made is good and will turn out, in the end to be very good. But it is not perfect. Had it been the writer of the first narrative would not have said ‘tov, tov’ after God finished the creation but ‘tov, tov, tov’ (Hebrew has no comparatives or superlatives so if one wants to say ‘good’ one says ‘tov, ‘better’ = ‘tov, tov’ and ‘best = ‘tov, tov, tov.’).

While this creation is ‘very good’ it is not yet the ‘best’ (or perfect). That time is still to come, and has already come in the resurrection of Jesus!

The satanic element is introduced into the story of creation only when the human turns away from ‘imitating God’ in whose image and likeness they were made to imitating each other, a process begun internally by the female and externally by the male. The serpent in the text is a metonym for desire. In fact the Genesis 2-11 text is all about the phenomenon on mimetic contagion issuing in violence. An anthropological reading of this text still yields great insights into the human condition. This is why I have said time and again we must first change the way we think about ourselves before we can change the way we view God. Another way of putting this is we must first learn to read the Bible anthropocentrically (from below) before we read it theologically (from above). As long as we treat the Bible as first a text about God, we will not be able to see just how we make God in our own broken image. Only after we see this can we begin to see just how and where in the Bible (and especially in Jesus) God is remaking us in God's own Jesus focused image. (If you are new to these posts you may wish to listen to this podcast:

(6) Personhood and the satan

I am really appreciative of all the comments I have received on my recent series on the satan. Many posters are really struggling with me on the demystification of the devil. So far the biggest issue seems to be that how the concept of 'person' is understood.

We have been mired for so long, first in the metaphysics of Plato who divided the person into three discrete categories of body, soul and spirit and then in the Renaissance influenced and Enlightenment notion of the person as an autonomous free moral agent that it is difficult to be set free from these definitions. The shift from a 'faculty' approach to the human to a relational one is one that has been a hundred years in the making and still continues now with research on the human brain, the emotional states of cognition and the role of mirror neurons that enable us to live and learn by imitation.

The older philosophical debates about mind, will, choice, emotions and rationality have all been challenged by these recent shifts and discoveries. One important thing to keep in mind is that the church (the people in the pews) are about one hundred years behind what is being taught in the seminaries and the universities. A hundred years from now most of what I am suggesting will be 'normal' in the church, but for now my goal is bring the average person into the present and to be liberated from now useless ways of conceiving humanity. Our old ways have led only to violence, war, exclusion, scapegoating and other forms of making the 'other' out to be the enemy. We have too long lived with theologies that draw lines where there ought not to be lines.

Theology has always been an evolving science. Change is essential. I am sometimes asked if I believe in progressive revelation. My answer is no, but I do believe in progressive understanding; I think that as a species we are finally getting the message about God's love in Jesus, how the character of God has been reframed by Jesus away from our tendency to make God in our own image as a Janus-faced (or two-faced) God. This is harder than it seems for many if not most of Christianity has emotionally invested itself in a god that is just like them, angry, belligerent, sacrificial and demanding tit-for-tat justice. The message of the gospel as I understand it is that God is wholly other (Barth) than we are and that God is only love. God's character is revealed completely in the ministry of Jesus as one of compassion, mercy, inclusion and forgiveness.

Even if we quibble about the satan as a 'person' the fact remains, the satan is defeated. Jesus has cast down the satan as a principle by renouncing violence and retribution in his own life and ministry. Yes, evil is very real, yes it sometimes manifests itself in ways that seem incredulous, nevertheless, there are ways of understanding these manifestations in a rational way that does not require us to posit some supernatural metaphysical entity. I think we are best served when we are willing to rethink everything, that is when we

are willing to change our ways of thinking about anything and everything (this is what *metanoeo* ‘to repent’ means). We need not fear change. Jesus doesn’t change (Heb 13:8) but we are constantly in need of transformation and this is the beautiful work of the Holy Spirit in us.

So, as we continue our discussions in the coming weeks on evil, the satan and how Jesus has overcome these blights on our history and species (and indeed creation itself), let us rejoice! For we all know that this ‘old lion who seeks to devour us’ has no teeth and can only use fear to stop us in our tracks and keep us from making our way down the road that is Jesus.

(7) Where Does Evil Come From?

When we think of the world as being ruled by two supernatural beings, one good, the other evil, one God, the other the devil, we will end up dealing with a problem known as theodicy. Theodicy is a term which roughly translated means “How can God be just in a world where there is so much evil?” Or, “Why does God allow evil in the world?” Another way of putting it is the way the French intellectual Voltaire did: “If God is good, he is not all powerful, if God is all powerful, God is not good.”

That the world is “bent” I don’t think anyone would disavow. We use terms like broken or fallen to indicate that something is off with this thing called history. We see murder, wars, abuse of all kinds, slavery, discrimination, pain, heartache, misery, poverty, greed, theft, scarcity and all manner of selfishness. If God created the world and it is good, how can we account for the evil that is in the world? Traditionally there have been a few options.

1. God created evil. Some cite Isaiah 45:7: “I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I am the LORD, that doeth all these things.” In this view, God is the author of both light and darkness, good and evil. God is both a cursing and blessing God. The problem with this view is that God is ultimately Janus-faced. The New Testament response to this is to say that “God is love” and “God is light” (I John) or that “in God there is no dark side [no shadow of turning]” (James). If one believes that God’s character is fully and truly revealed in Jesus, then one must reject Isaiah’s way of understanding God.
2. The way around this is to say that God makes all things “good” (Genesis 1) but that good became evil. This is what the watcher myth or apocalyptic literature of second Temple Judaism did. In this view, the devil is a good angel who rebels, is cast from heaven and then wreaks havoc on humanity. Some cite Isaiah 14 or Ezekiel 28 to justify this view canonically but there are several problems with this. First is that Isaiah and Ezekiel are referencing human kings, second, that the satan plays only a marginal role in Jewish thinking about evil prior to apocalyptic literature

(arising in the 3rd century B.C.E.). The problem here is that the satan must be conceived in the realm of the transcendent outside humanity. The satan becomes an ‘almost divine’ type of figure in this scenario. One solution was that of the author of the prologue of Job which we shall explore in another post, another that of the apocalyptists. Neither is satisfactory.

3. A third possibility is that evil does not arise from without but from within the human condition. The rabbi’s came up with this idea which Paul reflects in Romans 7 and perhaps James in James 1: that God created humans with two ‘impulses’ or ‘yetzerim’, one good the other evil. Think of those pictures where humans have a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. Jesus may (and I say ‘may’) have been alluding to this in the Lord’s Prayer when he said “Deliver us from [the] evil [impulse].”

Each of these is a way of accounting for evil in the world. As I said in the first post, the devil is an idea with a history. Israel in the exile had to figure out why God had brought them to this state of despair. The dominant idea was not that of an external tempter but of the disobedience of the people. One finds time and again in the prophets that Israel rebelled and was paying the price of her rebellion. It is only after the exile under the influence of Zoroastrian thinking that the devil makes an appearance in Jewish literature. In the literature prior to the exile, Israel’s fate is determined solely by her covenant faithfulness or lack thereof.

Only the third solution puts evil squarely on the shoulders of humanity. I think the rabbis were on the right track when they made this leap away from some transcendent notion of the devil (although it must be admitted that some also found ways to combine it with both the first and the second views and superstitiously found demons lurking in shadows and other assorted places). As I explore Rene Girard’s view of the satan as a purely human phenomenon I in no way wish to minimize the reality of evil. Nor will I be saying that it does not have a spiritual component. I will use the work of Walter Wink on *The Powers* to hopefully show that evil has two sides: a physical or structural one and a spiritual side. Following Wink, I argue that we may dwell in an ‘Integral’ view of the cosmos, a view which suggests retains that which is both seen and unseen. To give you a preview of where I am going there is a realm of the spirit, just as there is a realm of creation. Just as there is God’s good creation (nature) so there is our human creation: society, civilization or what the writer of the Fourth Gospel calls the ‘*kosmos*.’ Just as God dwells in the realm of “spirit” so also we humans have created a realm of spiritual darkness with our violence against one another. If you have listened to my podcasts on the satan you will know that I have said that this spiritual darkness we humans created (which we shall talk more about in future posts) has in a sense ‘broken free’ from us, brought us into bondage to its darkness and from which Jesus has delivered us.¹ The problem of theodicy can be solved when we as humans take the burden of evil on our shoulders, when we recognize that God

¹ <http://www.preachingpeace.org/2013/02/07/the-satan/> and <http://www.preachingpeace.org/2013/08/10/the-satan-revisited/>

does not create evil or darkness, that God is only light and love and that it we who have brought down the creation and ourselves. I am glad that the New Testament is at such pains to speak of our deliverance from evil, but it is our own evil from which we are delivered. We humans, not some transcendent being, are the bottom line in why the world is so out of whack. And it is Jesus, the True Human who restores to use our rightful place as sons and daughters of the living God, so that we may, as He is, be fully human and thus transform, challenge, and bring light and life to our world.

(8) The Satan as The Accuser

Scholars have long noted that the Book of Job has two distinct parts. There are the Dialogues (chs. 3-37) and the Prologue and Epilogue (chs 1-2, 38-42). The latter stand apart from the original dialogues and were added later. They have a different vocabulary, style and content. If you read just the Dialogues as though the Prologue didn't exist, you would find a character (Job) who had once been highly esteemed in the community as its leader or king, now having been hurled down to the bottom. Job's laments are all about his change of fortune from one valorized to one demonized. His so-called friends seek to get him to admit that he must have done something wrong, which he won't right do, since he has examined his life and can find no good reason for his sudden catastrophic social free-fall. The friends argue that 'God' must be against Job and he should just admit his guilt. The friends are not friends but accusers.

In the Prologue, the Satan has the same function as the friends. The Satan is apparently an angelic being who has the job of being God's fault-finder. Amazingly this heavenly Judge, Jury and Executioner can find no fault in Job and so insists on a test to make Job guilty: take away all he has and he will curse God. The Satan, as one of the 'sons of God' can only point a finger; that is his function. This is the oldest purpose of the Satan, to accuse.

If Rene Girard is correct in his reading of Job (*Job: The Victim of His People*), what we have in Job is a story about a human scapegoat about to be sacrificed because the community is in a crisis and will seek to bring about its resolution by casting Job as a scapegoat. He will be the figure upon whom they can collectively cast their hostility and thus rid themselves of all the evil and malice that afflicts them and so return the community to normal functioning. However, they need Job to agree with their valuation of him and he just won't do it. Job's refusal to bend his knee to their 'ungodly' demands to be guilty of a crime he did not commit casts him in the role of the innocent victim.

What makes the story of Job so profound is the protestation of his innocence. Unlike other victims of mythology, Job refuses to buy into falsely attributed guilt. Victims of myth, like Oedipus (or Aachen in Joshua 7) are always guilty. The way the story is told is that victims get what they deserved and by pressure from the community they too acknowledge that the crime for which they have been accused is true and the

punishment deserved. We humans know this pattern too well and here we are over two thousand years later using similar techniques in police interrogation rooms and prisons like Guantanamo Bay, and sadly, in our homes.

Job is a story that challenges this satanic way of accusation. Job is the opposite of mythological victims. Victims of myth believe they are guilty. They have been told they are guilty for so long and so loud that they accept the false accusation as truth. If you don't think this is possible then just think of victims of spousal abuse or child abuse. These victims often blame themselves for the breakdown of family relationships in which they had no fault!

The satan is the accusatory principle. Every time we point a finger to blame someone else for our woes, we play the part of the satan. There is more to the satanic principle than this (there is also deception and death which we will look at later this week), but it all begins here. Groups, families, nations and organizations which need to blame someone else for their troubles are not Jesus like, they are satanic. I am bemused when people call America a Christian nation, for it is the number one example of a nation that blames others for its problems, whether Native American, slaves and eventually African Americans, women suffragettes, rock and roll, the hippies, gays, immigrants and now people of other faiths. We are not a Christian nation. Our American history is a satanic national history, we have gone from scapegoating one group to another all in the name of The American Dream. Our Dream has been their Nightmare. But we are not the only people to do so, just look at your own history. Jesus doesn't point fingers, he offers a healing hand, and therein lays all the difference between Jesus and the satan.

(9) Once More: Worldviews

Worldviews are the presuppositions about reality that we bring to our understanding of what "is" without realizing that they inform all we think and even how we think. In that previous post I wrote "None of us come to Scripture as blank slates. We all come to Scripture informed by our worldviews. A worldview is the way we have been taught to see and interpret existence. All of us have been raised in different environments, with different educations, values and beliefs about reality. These all form our worldview. When we disagree about theological ideas it is usually not the things we are actually discussing but it is a clash of our underlying worldviews."

As I have noted, our understanding of what constitutes a 'person' informs our understanding of the devil. I have (in summary form to be sure) argued that the devil is a concept with a history, not a being created by God, whether good or evil. When the biblical writers speak of the devil in 'personal' terms that is because this is part of their supernatural worldview; they had no other way or categories by which to describe evil.

Evil, when done to us, feels very personal. Little wonder then that as the Old Testament sought to understand evil it would at times use personal categories.

There are various understandings of the satan in the Jewish world. There is first of all God as the Creator of all that is good and all that is evil as we find in Isaiah 45. This is a rather deterministic worldview but its importance is only in contrast to the background of the dualism of Persian religion where good and evil are co-equal powers that struggle back and forth for eternity. By saying God is the Creator of evil Isaiah is also asserting God's authority over evil. The Prologue of Job portrays the satan as part of the heavenly court; the function of the satan is to watch out for troublemakers who would bring dishonor to the heavenly King. The satanic function is a purely negative one and it is this figure's "job" to test humans to see if they are worthy of divine favor. Evil in this experience can be attributed to life "tests" that we go through to test our fidelity.

With the advent of the apocalyptic worldview in the third century before Jesus, the split between this evil age and the good age to come, evil became a king in its own right. The satan in this way of thought was the ruler of a host of demonic forces that plagued the world, taught humans evil skills, wreaked havoc among the faithful. The function of the satanic was to lead people away from God's holy Torah and thus God's blessing. This worldview divided humanity into two groups, the in group which would be saved after much tribulation and the rest who would be doomed to perdition. Here, evil is a pervasive reality that must be constantly guarded against and the best way to guard against evil is to study Torah.

There is another viewpoint of the satan in the Bible: the satan was conceived of as the evil impulse (Hebrew: *ha yetzer*). The New Testament writer Paul is the one person who has done the most vigorous thinking on this subject. As we begin to work through Paul's understanding of evil, we shall see that while Paul retains the apocalyptic worldview, he has altered its structure to bring it in line with the rabbinic anthropological view that evil is a purely human phenomenon. He does this in a surprising way and so this is fair warning that the next few posts will be a real challenge to those who would still retain the Henoctic worldview as though this was taken over lock, stock and barrel in the New Testament. The question we must examine through several posts is how does Paul understand the relation of the satan, evil, corrupted desire and the Torah for they all belong together in his thinking. There is an internal logic to all this that is easily missed by us who read the Bible some 2,000 years later for we do not think like first century Jews. In preparation for these future posts I encourage you to read Genesis 2-4 and then Romans 7. We are about to see that Paul's thinking on this subject will totally alter most contemporary Christian understanding and release us to see clearly just how it is that Jesus has defeated sin, the devil and death in his crucifixion and resurrection. If these posts can be compared to a roller coaster, then we are finally at the top of the beginning of the ride. Hold on tight, for that first big drop is coming.

(10) The Serpent and the satan (Part 1)

If we are willing to acknowledge that the fallen angel myth of I Enoch is not part of the Old Testament idea of the origin of evil, then it is possible to read Genesis 2-4 in a different light. The reading I am proposing is an anthropological one. Let me explain what I mean. Rather than come to this text burdened with a host of assumptions about how the text was formed or who wrote it, or how it was inspired or if it is inspired, I will interpret this text for what insight it may offer about the human condition. What it says about God or spiritual matters is an irrelevance to me (in the opening stages of my work, later they will become important), I seek to discern how the text ‘reads me’ as a human being. One further note: I come at this text as though the concept of “The Fall” had never entered my mind, as though Plato, Augustine, Calvin and almost two millennia of the (Western) Christian doctrine of original sin had never existed. I want to read this text pretending I have never read it before and there is no such thing as a God. This is not blasphemy but it may be the only way some have of learning how to see this text in a new and liberating light.

First, things first. There are no such things as talking snakes, so I know I am dealing with something metaphorical, something symbolic. The talking snake is the clue that this text cannot be read literally. Second, I can immediately recognize that it is an “originary myth”, that is a story about the origins of the world and the human being, similar to other types of stories/myths found all over the planet. So now I know how to classify it and what it is seeking to communicate. Third, I see that it is the second of two creation myths, the first being Genesis 1:1-2:4. I may notice many of the subtle differences between the tales. I may notice that in the first creation story the male and female are created together (androgynously) while in the second creation myth they are created hierarchically; typically the woman is taken from the male and seen as subservient, I, and others, see the woman created last as the crown of creation.

As I read Genesis 2-4 I notice that several words get repeated. Words like man, woman, eat, fruit, tree, Lord God, God, and of course serpent. There is another word that appears once at the end of chapter 2 and twice in the first seven verses of chapter 3, or in other words, three times in eight verses; that word is ‘*arum*.’ The first time ‘*arum*’ appears is in 2:25 where the “the man and his wife were both ‘*arum*’”, the second in 3:1 where the “serpent was more ‘*arum*’ than any other wild animal” and the last in 3:8 where after having eaten of the fruit of the tree “then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were ‘*arum*.’” So what is this ‘*arum*’ business and why is this word used of both the human and the serpent? How can a word mean ‘naked’ and ‘shrewd or clever?’

Rather than go into deep, dark technical places where horrendous etymological creatures wait to gobble up the weak and weary, I offer this simple example as a suggestion. The word ‘*arum*’ is used in Genesis 42:9 by Joseph who accuses his brothers of spying out “the nakedness of the land.” That is, places where the land may well be vulnerable or penetrable to enemy attack. Ah Ha! ‘*Arum*’ comes to refer to the human genitalia inasmuch as it is exposed or vulnerable. The snake has no defense mechanisms, no hands, feet or

spine so it is vulnerable (although it may have a venomous tongue). ‘*Arum*’ is a word that connotes vulnerability. In the first use of the word, the male and the female had no idea that one could hurt the other, thus they were vulnerable and not existing in a place of shame (the feeling that would result from hurting the other who was vulnerable). The second time the word is used it is in regard to the snake that is also the most vulnerable of any of the wild creatures, thus making the connection between the snake and the humans: they are both ‘*arum*.’ The third time the word is used the couple have eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and are aware that they can hurt one another and be hurt by the other, thus they begin ‘clothing themselves’, that is making themselves less vulnerable. So before tomorrow’s post your homework is this to ask yourself this: to what are the couple and the snake both vulnerable? Why do we experience assault on our genitalia as shameful (e.g., rape or the cutting off of a male penis). How might this text be about core human identity (rather than sex, sexuality or gender)? Let’s get beyond Augustine and Freud into something new and insightful.

(11) The Serpent and the satan (Part 2)

Let me recall where we are going with this: we want to know how Paul made the connections between the satan, the law and the problem of interpreting Torah through the lens of zeal. This post will be just scratching the surface. Some have lamented (or complained) that my posts are already too long. But one cannot rethink 2,000 of Christian tradition without engaging a host of issues.

I sought to show that the use of the term ‘*arum*’ connects the serpent and the human in yesterday’s post. From a purely anthropological perspective, the serpent is (represents) that part of the human which responds to the prohibition in Genesis 2 not to eat of the tree of knowledge. We all know that when something is banned to us we want it all the more. There is something seductive about the forbidden. So we ought not to be surprised then when one part of the human reacts to the prohibition by questioning it.

The human is the only animal that once its needs are satisfied, does not know what it wants. That is, humans experience a lack. This lack is the problem of desire. If you recall the emphasis I have placed in these (and other) posts about our interdividuality, that we are not isolated, but inner-connected as a species, and if you recall that I have said that desire does not arise from within us but from without (that is, in relation to the other) and that this has been shown scientifically in studies in Brain research (neurophysiology, neural networks and mirror neurons), then it will not come as a surprise when I say that the serpent’s engagement with the woman is a literary way of showing the true problem of the human condition: desire is easily corrupted. That corruption can first of all be seen in the serpent’s question “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” God did not say that. God prohibited only the one tree. The woman’s response is a further distortion for she adds to the command not to eat of the tree the further prohibition “nor touch it.” The serpent compounds the deceit of desire by adding that the human, by

eating of the tree will become God-like, that is, that the human will have all ultimate desires met (we call this 'the desire for the being of the other' in mimetic theory).

The fact is that when the woman eats nothing happens, her eyes are not opened nor does she die. It is only after the man imitates the woman that consequences abound. This text connects desire and imitation. Desire is mediated through the other. We want what others want, we value what others value, we take what others have thinking that in so doing we shall find fulfillment. The text shows that this is not the case and all we are left with when we imitate each other's desires is a sense of alienation. Note that the male is not absent from this scene of discourse between the serpent and the woman "for he was with her." All of this literarily suggests that the man, the woman and serpent are one big figure of the process of mediated desire and its consequences. The origin of evil, the opening of the eyes to discriminate stems not from some fallen angel who is outside of us, but from within us. We are the satan. We humans create the satan. The satan is the problem of mimetic desire which grasps. This is not the end of the story though. Genesis 2-3 is connected to Genesis 4 and the problem of rivalry and violence in the story of Cain and Abel. It is only after the murder of Abel that Cain founds "civilization." This is the same process Girard argues occurs in founding murder myths: mediated desire, rivalry, violence and the origin of human culture and religion. So the Genesis text is not really different than ancient mythology in its structure; it is very different in what it reveals in these connections. Myths occlude these connections; they have to, for they hide their victims. The revelatory component of the Genesis text is that the victim is no longer hidden; the victim has a voice ("your brother's blood cries out from the ground for vengeance"). And this revelation of the victim's voice makes all the difference. From Abel to Jesus to Stephen to Auschwitz and beyond, human history has, because of the biblical anthropology, been able to progressively hear the voice of the victim.

This is what makes the Genesis text so powerful and so exceedingly relevant for today. All the evil in the world does not come from God, but from us. It has a structural form (culture) and it has a spiritual form (religion). Just as we humans are both '*adama*' (clay, soil, humus) and '*ruach*' (spirit, wind, breath) so also this reality we have created called civilization, human history consists of both dimensions. There is a physical side to evil and there is a spiritual dimension to it as well. The Genesis story has more to teach us about the problem of humanity than we realize. If we insist on a 'personal' devil we will always be able to ultimately blame evil on God. When we accept that we humans are responsible for the horrors of our history, when we realize that the creation has been subjected to death so that we won't exist in this state forever, when we accept that Jesus' defeat of the satanic is the defeat of our grasping acquisitive ways, when we see him as the model for how to desire God alone, then, and only then, will we understand that we cannot but desire, and that Jesus has opened our eyes to desire the only 'object' in the universe that lacks nothing, that fills everything, that truly satisfies, namely the One Jesus called Abba. God alone meets our deepest needs, yearnings, longings and desires. And that, in a nutshell, is the point of the story of the man, the woman and the serpent in Genesis.

(12) Paul on The satan

The term 'satan' is not a common word in the New Testament. If one counts the duplicate sayings in the Synoptic Gospels, it occurs perhaps half a dozen times, once in John, twice in Acts, twice in I Timothy and eight times in Revelation. In Paul the term 'satan' occurs once in Romans (16:20), twice in I Corinthians (5:5, 7:5), three times in 2nd Corinthians (2:11, 11:14, 12:7), and once in both I Thessalonians (2:18) and 2nd Thessalonians (2:9). This will make some folks unhappy but the satan is just not a major figure in the New Testament.

If one were to add in the term '*diabolos*' (devil), there is more usage of that term: 7x Matt, 0x Mark, 5x Luke, 3x John, 2x Acts, 0 times authentic Pauline letters, 2x Ephesians, 5x I&II Timothy, 1x Hebrews, 1x James, 1x I Peter, 3x I John, 1x Jude, 5x Revelation. The Septuagint uses '*diabolos*' for the Hebrew '*shatan*' which means "the one who separates" (like the figure we saw in the prologue to Job) or "adversary." In the Hebrew Scriptures, "the satan is the enemy in a specific sense, i.e., the accuser at law" (von Rad in *TDNT Vol 2*, 73). Other than 2 Cor. 6:15, and unlike apocalyptic Judaism or the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament does not "name" the satan (and 2 Cor. 6:15 may well be an interpolation; the entire section 6:14-7:1 reads like a piece of Qumran theology and does not fit Paul's thinking at all).

Walter Wink (*Naming the Powers*) has shown that Paul's preferred language is "principalities and powers" (Rom. 13:3, I Cor. 2:6, 8:1 cf. also Eph. 2:2). This phrase is used with reference to both the governing authorities, that is the Roman Empire (Romans), and of "spiritual powers" (Corinthians). Later we shall have occasion to explore Wink's understanding of the dual sided nature of the "principalities and powers" which manifest both physically in corporate structures (family, group, nation, government, corporation) and which has a distinct maleficent spirituality.

When it comes to the satan, Paul may implicitly reference the Genesis story (Gen. 3:15) and aver that the satan is "soon to be crushed" (notice, not already crushed, but soon to be!, and not under the heel of the promised one but under "your" feet) in the benediction of Romans 16:20. The satan figures as a figure of mimetic crisis in two different sexual situation in I Cor. 5:5 and 7:5 and again in 2 Cor. 2:11 where the accusatory function of the satan should not trump forgiveness in the community. In 2 Cor. 11:14 and 12:7 it would appear that Paul refers to the "super-apostles" (whom I take to be Peter and James, Jesus' brother), as messengers of the satan (we may return to this in a later post). Interestingly, these usages are in contrast to the first recorded usage of Paul in I Thess. 2:18 where the satan blocked Paul's coming to Thessalonica. I suspect that early in his ministry Paul was still working in the framework of the Henocheic apocalyptic worldview (prior to the shift in his theology after he leaves Corinth for Ephesus where he likely encountered the Johannine community, a shift reflected in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians).

This linguistic foray demonstrates that nowhere, except for possibly I Thessalonians is the satan conceived of in Paul like some supernatural being as we find elaborated upon in apocalyptic Judaism (Enoch or the Dead Sea Scrolls) or in medieval Christianity or modern Hollywood. It is important to see that, for Paul, the satan in Romans and Corinthians is used, in each case, in a judicial framework, “the satan is the enemy in a specific sense, i.e., the accuser at law” (von Rad).

However, there is also another accuser that Paul must deal with in his letters and that is the Torah, for it is the Torah that accuses. Now if Paul can say that “the Torah is holy, and the commandment is holy, just and good” (Rom 7:12), why then does he seem to have such a problem with it? The problem with the law is not that in itself it is evil, but that it does not stop sin from occurring but in fact brings sin forth (Rom. 7:5-7). That is, the purpose of the Torah may well have had a positive function, to stop sin from occurring but had the opposite effect. If you have raised children you know this all too well. Tell a child not to do something and they will do it! This is not only true for children but also for adults. It is the problem of the prohibition. That which is prohibited is made desirable. This is the dilemma we shall see Paul working out in Romans 7. However there is a much more sinister problem with the law and that is the way it goes from being a “guide” to righteous living (which is the best and proper Jewish interpretation) to being a vehicle of accusation. In our next post we shall examine this specific problem and then return to the problem of the law as the instigator of sin (mimetic conflict). For now, I think there is enough to chew on in this post.

(13) When the Law Becomes The satan

The apostle Paul had a problem before he became Paul, while he was still known as Saul: he was zealous, extremely zealous. Laying out his street creds in Philippians 3:4-6 he says that when it came to zeal he was a top-notch, A-One lover of Torah. He went so far that in his thinking he had to “persecute the church.” He loved Torah and that love led him to take as his model Phineas, the proto-typical zealot whose story is told in Numbers 25. God (El) had told Moses to “impale all the chiefs of the people in the sun before El, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel” (25:4). One poor bloke brought his lovely Midianite wife into their tent and whilst having a quickie before dinner, suddenly found Phineas busting through the camel skin, spear in hand. He proceeded to ruin their sex life by driving a spear through them both.

Now El (God) was so pleased with this that he turned away his fierce wrath from Israel due to Phineas’ “manifesting such zeal among Israel on my behalf” (25:10). It didn’t end there though. God granted Phineas his own personal “covenant of peace” and “a perpetual priesthood” (25:12-13). So if God is angry at the people because of their sin how do you get God to bless you? You go kill anyone you think is offending God (sounds like some Fundamentalist American Christians today, doesn’t it). The story doesn’t

end there for Phineas made it into Israel's rock and roll songbook and you can just hear his tale kareoked "Then Phineas stood up and interceded/and the plague was stopped/and that has been reckoned to him as righteousness/from generation to generation forever" (Psalm 106:30-31). At the time of the Maccabean revolution in 167 B.C.E., as the elder Matthias Maccabee lay dying he extolled the greatest heroes of Israel's faith citing Abraham who was "found faithful when tested and it was reckoned to him as righteousness", then he extols Joseph, and then Phineas who "because he was deeply zealous, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood" (I Macc. 2:51-54).

Does any of this language sound familiar? It should. The entire letter to the Galatians is built around the problem of what happens when Torah is interpreted through the lens of zeal. When Paul refers to Abraham in Galatians 3:6 should we think of Phineas as the contrast? Yes! Immediately Paul goes on to cite Deuteronomy 27:26, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all things written in the book of the Law." If God curses you, then you are fair game here below for others to do with you as they please and that usually means getting rid of you. If you are perceived as a law-breaker, and if by your violating Torah you bring God's wrath down upon the nation, it is essential to get rid of you, for you are sin, and must be purged. A zealous interpretation of Torah brings death and destruction in its wake. This is the second problem Paul has with the law (the first being that it fuels sinful tendencies as we saw in the previous post).

For the zealot, the law is an accusatory instrument. It is used satanically in order to justify violence against the perceived violator, the sinner, the heretic, the law-breaker. This is why Paul could say he was the most zealous person he knew. What he is saying in other words in his confession in Philippians 3 is that he was the most satanic person he knew, the one who, like the Attorney General in the Prologue to Job, went about looking for those evil law-breakers, and he found them in the early Jesus movement followers. How far did Paul go, he consented to the lynching of Stephen. That was a righteous act as far as he was concerned. This satanic accusatory perspective blinded Saul/Paul and it still blinds people today, including sadly, Christians.

Paul's beef is not with the Torah as a set of guidelines, but as a means of exclusivity, of marginalization, of torture, and of death. This is why Paul can tell the Corinthians that the Torah was a "ministry of condemnation" (2 Cor. 3:9) or that "the letter kills" (3:6), and not just metaphorically or spiritually but literally. Every Christian justification for war, violence, subjugation, or torture comes from this misreading of Torah. What was meant as life is, because of our misguided interpretation, death itself.

The zealous interpretation of the law, an interpretive model which dominated most of the groups in Paul's time (and which Peter and James would follow), is, and always has been, the problem. There is one text that connects these two: the Law as an accusatory instrument and the satan and it is found in Colossians 2:13-15: "And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us

with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.” Never does Paul (or any New Testament writer) say that God put our sins on Jesus or that our sins were nailed to the cross. No! It is the accusatory instrument which is nailed to Jesus’ cross; it is the “principlality and power” which is unmasked and disarmed so that it may never have power over us. It is this way that Jesus overcomes sin and the devil in his crucifixion. Jesus’ death was a supreme act of zealous behavior on the part of the Jewish “authorities” and an act of cowardice by the Roman ones. This is what gets exposed in the death of the innocent wandering preacher from Galilee.

(14) Preparatory Knowledge for Reading Romans 7

“It appears clear from a close reading of Romans 5 that neither Augustine, nor Luther, nor Calvin understood the trajectory of Paul’s argument properly” (Ben Witherington III, *The Problem of Evangelical Theology*). I couldn’t agree more. There is a major problem in Evangelical theology. We might think it is the doctrine of the two-faced God, but it is deeper than that. It has to do with the way Evangelical theology understands the human being. If Girard is correct that desire does not arise from within us but externally, that is, we imitate one another’s desires non-consciously, this means that western concepts of the human being as an autonomous individual or a free moral agent are tanked! If, as modern science has been able to demonstrate we are all connected (or to use Girard’s term, we are interindividual), then the gospel is not about the redemption of each of us independently of one another but about all of us together. This is the burden of Paul’s message.

As long as we continue to define the human in Platonic or Augustinian terms we will find ourselves mired in endless debates that are dualistic: free-will vs. predestination, soul vs. body, time vs. eternity, divine vs. human, etc. All of the great debates in western theology, many of which simply leave us cold today, are argued from false premises. We are much better off questioning those premises and seeking to understand Paul on his own terms.

Romans 7, for most of western Christian history has been read as an autobiographical text about Paul’s post conversion struggle. It isn’t. It is the human story prior to our being liberated in Jesus. It is a retelling of the old Adamic story. There is a shift in “voice” between Romans 7:6 and 7:7. This was an ancient rhetorical technique known as *prosopopoiia*. Witherington describes

“This rhetorical technique [which] involves the assumption of a role, and sometimes the role would be marked off from its surrounding discourse by a change in tone or inflection or accent or form of delivery...signaling a change in voice. Unfortunately for us, we did not get to hear Paul’s discourse delivered in its original oral setting, as was Paul’s intent.”

Thus it is that when we read Paul's letters where he is "role playing" we don't pick up on the signals and read everything as though it was all Paul! A contemporary novelist writing in the first person does the same thing. This is also why Paul sent someone to read his letters out loud, they would know where to make the change of voice or inflection! The same phenomenon occurs in Romans 1:18-32 which is Paul role playing the false teacher he is combating throughout Romans. Douglas Campbell has used this to good effect in his book *The Deliverance of God*. Romans 1:18-32 is the false gospel being combated, not Paul's view. Try that one on for size! Paul also role plays the false teacher in Romans 2-4 and 9-11.

For a long time, Christian exegetes read everything in I Corinthians as having come from Paul. Now we know that at certain places Paul is quoting from the letter the Corinthians wrote to him. We also do this when we want to accurately reproduce something someone wrote before we respond to them. These ancient ways of communicating are not lost to us. We have the manuals of the ancient rhetoricians to guide us and help us understand just how it is that when Paul's letters were read in the house churches, the lector (reader) would orally change the tone of voice. For too long Paul has been viewed as double minded, saying first this, then that. When he is read this way his letters are really mumbo-jumbo and we can spend centuries arguing back and forth and throwing "well, what about this verse?" questions at one another. But when we realize that Paul is using a device where he role plays then we can distinguish his own thoughts, beliefs and voice from those opponents he is arguing against. Some may say, well I have the Holy Spirit, and I don't need all this modern scholarship. Great. Let the Holy Spirit help you figure out where Paul's voice begins and ends. You may just find that the Holy Spirit is of little help here (for that is not the work of the Spirit, if it had been we wouldn't have misread Paul for almost 2,000 years). No, we need modern scholarship to help us place the New Testament documents including the letters of Paul, back into their cultural milieu. Then we can allow the Holy Spirit to guide us as we hear the authentic gospel of Paul.

We do not need to be anti-intellectual. Nor do we need to be unspiritual. By using both our reason and the Spirit together we may just find ourselves hearing the Bible in its rich fullness, fresh and new, over and over again. We may just find ourselves reveling in the revelation of truly awesome good news! This is the radical turn that is happening in Christianity today. Come join the parade!

(15) Romans 7: Sin and the Serpent

Of the 63 times Paul uses the noun 'sin' (*hamartia*), 58 times it is in the singular. For Paul sin was not so much the acts we commit as a principle within us. When Paul comes to reflect on the origin of sin, he does it by reflecting on the inter-relationship between law (or the commandment) and sin.

In Romans 7:7-13, Paul argues that while the concept of the commandment was not evil as such, nevertheless, it participates in evil. Is the law itself sin? “No way” Paul says. (7:7) but immediately goes on to indict the commandment or law inasmuch as without the law there is no knowledge of sin. What follows in 7:8-13 is a reflection on the Genesis 2-3 text. Ben Witherington III (*The Problem of Evangelical Theology*) translates it this way (his additions are in brackets):

“But the serpent [sin], seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, worked in me all kinds of evil desires- for apart from *Torah*, sin is dead. I [Adam] was once alive outside the framework of *Torah*. But when the commandment really encountered me, sin sprang to life,¹⁰ and I died. The commandment that was intended to bring me life was found to be bringing me death!¹¹ For the serpent [sin], seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me; and through the commandment, sin killed me. (CJB)”

Notice as you read this section (7:7-13) that what you have is Paul observing that had it not been for the commandment sin would not exist. Paul had said as much in Romans 5:13, “where there is no law, there is no sin.” Sin only exists in the presence of law.

If Romans 7:7-13 is a reflection on sin in the Genesis 2-3 story, Romans 7:14-20 may be a reflection on the further story of Cain in Genesis 4. In Genesis 3 sin is not mentioned. This is important. Sin is first mentioned with regard to Cain in Genesis 4 where sin “is a croucher at the door.” Does this mean that Paul is wrong to connect sin with Adam. No. It does mean that what happens in Adam and continues on in Cain are inter-connected. In other words, the violation of the prohibition leads inevitably to violence. Or another way to put this is that Genesis 2-4 are to be read, not as isolated stories but as a process of ‘how did we get here?’ What Paul is reflecting on is the problem of mediated desire.

“Genesis 3 and 4 recount the beginnings of the descent of humanity into a world dominated by sin, violence and idolatry. Rather than trace the fall of Adam to the breaking of a covenant (which is not mentioned in the text) or to pride (which is not mentioned in the text), or to sex, which occurs after the problem in the garden, we can see the ‘fall’ as the human descent into violence, sacrifice and culture.

What then might the serpent represent? The serpent perfectly represents the mechanism of object-mediated desire. One can see the very psychology of human desire being played out in these few short verses. Remember monkey see, monkey think he do? Here it is, at the beginning of the whole story. It is all about imitated desire and its consequences. Not to mince words, but the devil is an anthropological category not a theological one. The devil is about us humans, our violence, our projection, our victimizing, our idolatry. It is not about some supra temporal being, that God

created. No, we humans created the satan, the moment the male imitated in paradise. The satan dwells within us, creates our communities, rules our ideologies. It is the most terrifying ‘thing’ that exists because of its ability to keep us enthralled as a species for so long. The satanic has a highly developed sense of deception and a powerful voice that creates great fear. The satanic requires sacrifice. Human sacrifice” (from my book *The Jesus Driven Life*).

If we plan on understanding the nature of evil, we must recognize that Paul nowhere turns to the kind of account we find in the apocalyptic Enoch myth of a fallen angel outside of us who tempts us. Rather, for Paul, like the proto-rabbis of his time, sin is an anthropological principle. It has to do with the way we humans have learned to deal with the problem of intra-species violence. It is the origin of the process of using scapegoats, of deflecting our violence onto a victim. It is thus, the origin of religion, and religious zeal. All of this comes together in Paul’s thinking about the origins of evil: sin, death (real death, real killing), zeal, law, the satanic. They are all ways of describing a phenomenon that we much prefer to not see in ourselves. Tomorrow we shall explore this further with regard to the evil *yetzer* (desire) and then begin our journey as to how Jesus overcame all of this.

(16) Demythologizing the satan

I have noticed that the greatest difficulty people seem to be having with these posts on the satan concerns the depersonalization of the satan. For some reason people feel the need to hang onto a personal devil. If, as I have argued, that Genesis 3-4 belong together as a process describing the descent of humanity into the madness of sacrificial religion and if Paul is making this connection between Adam and Cain in Romans 7 the big question is, is there any other biblical text that makes this connection explicit? Yes there is. It comes from the Fourth Gospel where Jesus says “From the start he was a murderer, and he has never stood by the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he is speaking in character; because he is a liar—indeed, the inventor of the lie!” (John 8:44 CJB). Even though the satan (or the serpent) does not make an appearance in Genesis 4, Jesus connects what occurs there with what has happened in Genesis 3.

Paul in Romans 7 has done the same thing by turning the conversation over to the problem of Adamic humanity. We saw that he does this without reference to the satan, especially the ‘personal devil’ of the Henochoic myth. That is, both Paul and the writer of the Fourth Gospel anthropologize the satan; the satanic is a human phenomenon. We have been following this cue for the last several posts. To demythologize the devil is one of the most difficult things Christians must do for one big reason.

Most Christians have a view of the person as an autonomous individual. I have argued that Rene Girard’s notion of persons as ‘interindividual’ is an essential move from modernity to a postmodern understanding of humanity. This is not a recent shift in the human sciences but one that has been occurring for almost a

hundred years in others disciplines like psychology, philosophy and literary theory. It has been confirmed by the hard science of neurophysiology. Thus, those who would see evil as coming from a 'free moral agent', as stemming from choice, fail to recognize the deeply embedded situation we humans are in when it comes to the problem of mediated desire (or object oriented desire).

Confirmation of this can be found in the Passion Narrative of Luke 23. Most of us would tend to think that Caiaphas, the religious authorities and Pilate 'made the choice' to execute Jesus. If there is any text in which deception and murder occurs it is here in the trial and execution of Jesus. Yet, Jesus says from the cross that "they don't know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:32, admittedly a textual variant). Girard observes that this is the first literary allusion to the non-conscious. Jesus does not ascribe intent to his persecutors. Nor does he invoke their decision to execute him to the following of a Henoctic devil. His saying underscores that "they" do not know what they are doing. He sees the deception and murder as stemming from "them" and them alone. Genesis 4 and all the other murders and victimizations found in the Jewish Bible are reenacted here center stage in the Passion story for all to see. Not once, in any Passion Narrative is the concept of a personal satan invoked (John 13:27 is altogether a different question and at any rate not part of the Passion narrative).

James explores this connection between desire, sin and death in his epistle: "No one who is tested should say, "God is tempting me!" This is because God is not tempted by any form of evil, nor does he tempt anyone. ¹⁴ Everyone is tempted by their own cravings; they are lured away and enticed by them. ¹⁵ Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death. (Jam 1:13-14 CEB) Notice here that James does not invoke a personal devil or some version of the Enoch myth. Rather evil arises purely from within the human.

Those who insist on a personal devil need to make several critical changes in their thinking: first in their anthropology, their definition of person, second, in the way they had previously related evil to conscious choice, third, to an understanding of evil grounded in mimetic desire and fourth to see the connection between the deception of evil and its flowering in violence, death and scapegoating. Until they do, they will not ever be able to explain evil; they will simply be stuck on the merry go round of theodicy, trying to justify a god who would make a devil in the first place.

(17) Prolegomena to The Temptation of Jesus

Before we begin our study of the Temptation of Jesus, let's take care of a few housekeeping details. First, one's view of Scripture is going to determine how one approaches, interprets and understands Scripture. As I have followed the comments on these musings about 'the satan' this has particularly come home time and again, particularly when it comes to asking about the 'personhood of the satan.'" Back in April when I was

discussing the perspective of the inerrancy/infallibility tradition I pointed out that this defending the inspiration and authority of the Bible **is** the starting point for many Protestants. I also pointed out that this view is also a hermeneutic, that is, it does not simply establish the [so-called] nature of the text but functions, in a liminal way, to say what can or cannot be said about any given text. That is, it limits interpretive possibilities.

So, at the risk of being redundant let me again say that I do not accept the standard Protestant paradigm of the inspiration and authority of Scripture (I have worked all of this out in several essays on my website). I mention this because it seems to me that the perceived need to retain the notion of the satan as a person has two distinct warrants from some of my responders. On the one hand there are those who feel as though if the Bible speaks of satan as a person (which begs the question as to what constitutes personhood) then we too should accept that the devil is a personal being. On the other hand there are those who have experienced what they can only describe as real encounters with a force that ‘appears’ evil and manifests itself in rather strange or unusual ways.

In this series I am not interested in showing how the way we view scripture influences the way we read it; I have done that already. Nor do I wish to discredit those who have experienced ‘evil.’ I will say this though: we all interpret our experience, there is no such thing as ‘raw’ experience, it is all filtered through a lens. Our interpretations are bounded and informed by the particular grids we have learned throughout our lives. A person in tribal Africa will have a different interpretation of the demonic than a New York psychiatrist, yet both could be right. It all depends upon the frame of reference of the person.

Finally, let me say this: I am seeking to mine the biblical text for anthropological data, for what it tells us about the human condition. I have made the intellectual choice to no longer accept the metaphysical structuring of reality found from Plato to Hegel (and some points beyond). For me, the main problem of Christianity does not lay in theology first; it is primarily our anthropology that has created all of our conundrums. Because we have the problem wrong (the human condition), we have misread the solution (our view of God and God’s redemptive work). One of the merits of the work of Rene Girard has been to help us get our anthropology back on track with a theory of how we came to be in the situation we are in where we structure our relationships on sacred violence. By showing the connections between mediated desires, rivalry and scapegoating, Girard proffers a way out of the anthropological mess we have created and the problem of viewing ourselves as ‘free moral agents’, a term which plagues our discussions.

When we return to this topic we will take a look at Jesus’ temptations. I was recently asked if the temptation story in the Gospels is a hallucination or a fiction. I do not think it was either but I also think that the way this question is posed indicates that if one questions the notion of a personal devil then one must either take the story to be a fiction or a hallucination. That is not an optimal way of rendering the text.

So as we turn to the Gospels to discuss these questions please remember that 1) our view of scripture limits the way we read the biblical texts and 2) that our understanding of what constitutes ‘personhood’ limits the way we will understand Jesus’ relation to the satan in the text.

(18) Jesus’ Testing

In my last post on the satan I said I was going to follow up with some thoughts on Jesus’ temptations in the Gospels. Imagine my surprise then to find I had a “follower” who had written his PhD on this very subject, Dr. Jeffrey B. Gibson. By chance or by the grace of God I had found his book *The Temptations of Jesus in Early Christianity* last year on my trip to Australia and had read it while traveling down under. (Whew!). So, this past several days I have revisited that book along with an article by Dr. Gibson and much to my delight found that indeed we are tracking along the same path. For this reason, these next few posts are going to lean heavily on his work and I am going to quote him more extensively than I have others in my previous posts. Although I am certain he may not agree with all I write I thank him for his magisterial work on this topic and urge anyone interested in delving more deeply into this topic to read his book.

When one compares the gospel accounts of Jesus’ testing in the wilderness following the baptism, it is easy to see that Matthew and Luke have ‘expanded’ narratives and Mark’s gospel contains a brief account. On this basis some have argued that Mark’s account does not offer much detail. Gibson has challenged this reading noting that the use of the words ‘the Spirit’, ‘desert’, ‘testing’ all would trigger immediate inter-textual echoes (or references to Old Testament stories of Israel’s testing in the wilderness).

Today I want to focus on the content of that testing in Jesus’ life by noting three important things.

First, the episode of Jesus’ testing found in Mark 1:12-13 (“At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him”) is not the only test of Jesus. Mark bookends his gospel with another test of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-53). While this text does not explicitly state the nature of the test, it becomes clear that the test involves Jesus’ fidelity to his call and mission to renounce violence. This is clearer in Luke 22:38 where Jesus says in reply to the disciples bringing swords, “Enough of that!” or Matthew 26:52-53 where Jesus says "Put the sword back into its place. All those who use the sword will die by the sword. ⁵³ Or do you think that I'm not able to ask my Father and he will send to me more than twelve battle groups of angels right away? ⁵⁴ But if I did that, how would the scriptures be fulfilled that say this must happen?" Mark’s gospel is thus bracketed at the beginning and end of Jesus’ ministry with the same test: would Jesus renounce the use of violence, force and coercive power or would he succumb to them?

Second, Gibson points out that the word that is sometimes translated “to tempt” has less to do with Jesus’ struggle with greed, avarice, lust etc, and more to do with the central focus of his mission: how to reveal that God is nonviolent. He says “When the participle - indeed, any form of ‘*pierazo*’ - was used, as in Mk. 1:13a, with reference to a person, its connotation was even more specific: *being probed and proved, often through hardship and adversity, in order to determine the extent of one's worthiness to be entrusted with, or the degree of one's loyalty or devotion to, a given commission and its constraints.*

So "central" was this connotation to this usage of the participle and its root, that the statement that someone was “being tested” could not be made without communicating the idea that person was undergoing an experience in which his character or fidelity was being ‘put to the proof’.” The great test for Jesus had to do with the possibility that he might succumb to the use of violence as a justifiable means to accomplish his Abba’s will.

Third, if this is not clear from Gethsemane, it is clear by another passage where Jesus is tested; at Caesarea Philippi in Mark 8:27-38. Here again Jesus is tested, this time by his main man, Peter, to renounce his idyllic hippie, tree-hugging vision and get with the revolutionary program. Jesus calls Peter a “*scandalon*” which is the worst relation one could possibly be in relation to Jesus. Peter would have Jesus take up the mantle of the Davidic Warrior Messiah, act like Phineas with zeal for God’s holy will and start a holy war like the Maccabees. Jesus renounces Peter’s violent ideology. So Mark 1, Mark 8 and Mark 14 are the three great tests of Jesus in the gospels. Tomorrow we shall look at The Tester.

(18) Jesus and the satan

I mentioned Jeffrey B. Gibson’s book *The Temptations of Jesus in Early Christianity* yesterday and I am half-tempted (pun intended) to turn this post into a lengthy book review. It is a fantastic resource for anyone who will be teaching and preaching on this topic.

When it comes to the character of the satan, Dr Gibson says the exact same thing I have been asserting in my posts, namely that Jesus was tested to use violence, that that was the content of Jesus’ testing. This dovetails quite brilliantly with Rene Girard’s insights in *I See Satan Falling Like Lightning* where the ‘satan’ is a metonym for the violent structuring of the victimage mechanism.

Dr Gibson says,

“The figure whom Mark designates as the perpetrator of Jesus' wilderness temptation, whether called Satan or one of a host of other names, was not an ‘unknown quantity’. On the contrary, in Mark's time and in the thought world in which Mark and his audience took part, Satan's identity

and the activities characteristic of him were both closely circumscribed and widely known. He was regarded primarily as the Accuser, or more specifically, the Evil Adversary, and this in two ways. First, as one who stood in opposition to God, seeking to frustrate God's work by leading his elect astray and destroying the relationship between God and men. Second, as one whose primary activity was the proving of the faith and steadfastness, not of men in general, but of the pious.”

The question before us has always been the ‘nature’ of the satanic. I have been suggesting in these posts that we need to demythologize the devil. In other words, we need to see that the satan is not a person (as we are used to conceiving of persons) but rather a human originated principle of structuring community based upon the use of deadly violence (scapegoating). The devil is a ‘murderer.’

In the accounts of the testing of Jesus, Jesus is accosted by the satanic principle to use violence as the promised deliverer of Israel, to use power to throw out the Roman oppressors and restore Israel’s former fortune and glory. The accounts of Jesus’ testing all revolve around this theme (whether after the baptism, at Caesarea Philippi or in Gethsemane, and one may add, in the demand for a ‘sign’). If, as Girard asserts, violence is the way we humans form and maintain social relationships, then the ministry of Jesus is all about deconstructing our relationship to violence and victimization.

In the testing of Jesus, God took a huge risk. If Jesus failed in his test(s), then humanity would have been forever doomed to a cycle of retributive violence and constant apocalypse. Jesus, time and again, refused the path of the militant warrior, calling out instead for reconciliation, forgiveness and peace. This alone was God’s way, the way of his mission and message.

In his tests, Jesus confronted the possibility of his own dark side, the possibility of using violence as a solution to social crises. It was this possibility that he rejected time and again. As a metonym for scapegoating violence, Jesus overcoming of the satan has huge implications for Christians today in how they treat those whom society would use to reconstitute itself: immigrants, the LGBT community, persons of other faiths, the homeless, the poor, people of color, etc. Inasmuch as we do to the “least” of these we do to Jesus. This, and this alone, is the criterion by which we determine our relation to Jesus. Will we resist the satanic in our own thoughts and actions? Will we stand with the victims of our cultures? Will we, like Jesus, say no to power that is coercive or manipulative? Will we like Jesus renounce violence?

Imagine if all Christians everywhere were to do this. Imagine if all Christians everywhere took the side of the poor, the downtrodden, the alienated. Then we might just see the deceptions of the satan crumble before our very eyes and the reign of God brought to earth.

(19) The End of the satan

This will be my last series of posts on the satan. I hope they have been helpful. I had one goal in mind when I began: to argue that the devil as it has been portrayed in the common Christian consciousness was not an accurate depiction of evil. I did this by showing that the depersonalization of the devil (or the anthropologizing of the devil) was necessary in order for us to really get at what evil is and how Jesus overcame it in his life, death and resurrection.

Evil is violence in all its forms. These forms include (but are not limited to) abuse, torture, slavery, racism, discrimination, economic deprivation, apathy, self-justification, self-defense, addiction, self-hatred/loathing, judgmentalism, exclusivism, war, and the list could go on and on. We manifest the satanic every time we point a finger at someone and blame them for our woes. We are satanic every time we seek to convince another that they should admit their complicity. We are evil when we think that those who are different than us are under God's wrath, while we are blessed.

You see, we are the satan. Our social hatred can become internalized in our victims and they may resort to extreme behaviors: cutting, addiction, suicide. They may even manifest the horrors of the human collective unconscious as evidenced in many areas of the world where the "demonic" speaks in strange voices or tongues or exhibits unusual behavior. The closer a culture is to archaic religion, the more such manifestations can appear; the more "civilized" a culture is, the more "civilized evil will appear (this is what Hannah Arendt refers to as "the banality of evil"). Our human history is a veritable slog through the wasteland of our victims. We humans created this; we started this when we turned to violence as our solution to the problem of violence. Our whole human history is a history of violence, it is a history of our sins against one another.

Ultimately we would even gang up and kill God. And that was our undoing. How so? Because God, instead of becoming a victim who collaborated with us by admitting complicity and guilt, stood silent as a sheep before shearers. Because God, instead of becoming a retributive victim, like Abel, spoke a better word, a word of forgiveness. Because God would not even count this one great universal heinous act against us, instead saying "No one takes my life from me, I offer it of my own choice." Our killing of God in Christ, from God's perspective, is no crime, nor sin, but is instead God's free choice to be the act that brings life by bringing forgiveness, by exposing the sham of our religious mechanism to take life, by nailing all accusatory instruments to the cross. In the death of God in Jesus, the old Adam, the old Cain, the old Joshua, the old Samuel, the old David, the old Deborah, the old Miriam, the old Bill, the old Jane, the old Michael, the old Lisa, they all die. They all are laid to rest. The satan died when we died with Jesus.

It is true that there is still evil in this world. We do not yet live in God's glorious kingdom, we live between the times. But IT IS FINISHED! The satan is crushed beyond repair. The satanic capacity to deceive is

forever exposed and rendered powerless. The satanic capacity to use victims to rebuild families, communities, nations and civilizations is doomed and broken forever, sabotaged by the blood of the forgiving victim Jesus Christ. It is Jesus voice that echoes down the ages since. It is the life of Jesus, raised from the dead, seated at the right hand of our Abba, poured out on all by the Spirit which empowers peoples everywhere to live for one another. It is the life of Jesus which welcomes the stranger, feeds the hungry, offers hospitality to the immigrant, weeps with the victims of war and violence, cares for the sick and heals them. It is the life of Jesus in us, through us and sometimes in spite of us, that courses through human history. He is our hope. He is transforming us, each and every one. He has defeated the devil, that old serpent. The satan has been utterly rendered back to nothingness on the cross. The judgment of the prince of this world is complete. Violence, marginalization, ostracism, shunning or discrimination will never, ever be a solution after the death of Jesus. He has forever exposed them as lies. He has brought the truth of inclusion, of acceptance, of healing, of reconciliation and of peace. He is our hope, he is our life, he is our glory. Jesus has won the cosmic Super Bowl! He has ascended on high and been given the Unpronounceable Name. We never need live in fear of anything or anyone again. Jesus is Victor! Amen.