

Evil in Scripture

Sunday Circle - March 16, 2025

This morning we will explore the origin of evil, the personification of evil, and free will and evil.

Evil is mentioned for the first time in the second chapter of Genesis and is mentioned 649 times in the Bible. There are also numerous references to the Satan, the devil, and other personifications or embodiments of evil such as Leviathan.

The Origin of Evil

Where did evil come from? God did not create evil. Evil is not a tangible thing such as a book or an animal. Evil is choosing to act and then acting in opposition to God and God's will for us.

According to Genesis, the knowledge of evil existed before God created the Earth and everything on it as God has placed a tree in the Garden of Eden that can help people understand the concept of evil. Elsewhere in scripture we have references to heavenly beings who commit evil which also indicates that the potential for evil existed before earth was created.

Genesis Chapter 2:9, 15-17 and 3:1-7, 22-23

Chap 2 ⁹Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and **the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.**

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

Chap 3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' ²The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die." ' ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,* knowing good and evil.' ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

²² Then the Lord God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever'— ²³therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

The Personification of Evil

In the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew term *śātān* (יֹשֵׁב) was originally a common noun meaning "accuser" or "adversary" that was applicable to both human and heavenly adversaries. Throughout the Hebrew Bible and in the early rabbinic literature, Satan is depicted as an agent of God to test humans and lead them astray, who then goes to Heaven to accuse them. The word also appears at times preceded by a definite article *Ha-Satan* (Hebrew: יֹשֵׁב הַשָּׂטָן *hasSātān*) which usually refers to an angel of God who is sent to test or confront someone on God's behalf use the same term to refer to the angel of the Lord. In Job and Zechariah Satan is mentioned 18 times and in Job is conversing with God before he goes to test Job.

Numbers 22: 22, 31-32 God's anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the road as his adversary. ... 31 Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. ³²The angel of the Lord said to him, 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me...

Zechariah 3:1-2 Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, 'The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?'

Job 1:6-12 6 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. ⁷The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' ⁸The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.' ⁹Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? ¹⁰Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' ¹²The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

In the Christian Bible

The devil as an individual figures more prominently in Christian scriptures and theology than in the Old Testament and Judaism. In Christianity, the devil is the personification of evil. The devil is conjectured to be several other figures in the Bible including the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Lucifer, Satan, the tempter of the Gospels, Leviathan, and the dragon in the Book of Revelation.

Early Christian scholars portrayed the devil as representing deficiency and emptiness, the entity most remote from the divine.

Pope Gregory the Great is developed the standard Medieval depiction of the devil as an angel and one of the first creation of God who fell away from God into hell and became the leader of demons.

Over the centuries ideas about the devil have portrayed him as a powerful being working against God and his creation. Other ideas depict the devil as a metaphor for humans' inclination to sin.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' ⁴But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' ⁷ Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' ¹⁰Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Revelation 12:7-10

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

Free Will and Evil

God gave us free will. We have the opportunity to choose God and good or to choose evil.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the people choose evil over and over. In Genesis (see above), Adam and Eve choose to eat the apple and to lie about it. The phrase "What is evil in the sight of the Lord your God." appears 56 times in Numbers, Deuteronomy, Judges, 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, Baruch, 1 Esdras referring usually to worship of other gods, the kings of Judah and Israel disobeying and sinning against God, and communities disobeying and sinning against God.

Jesus said in the Gospel of Mark 7:20-23 (see also similar passage Matthew 15:18-20)

²⁰ 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans 12:9-21 wrote: 9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. * 12Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; * do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;* for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' 20No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will hear burning coals on their heads.' 21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Thoughts from Scholars and a 16 year old

God did not create evil, but He did create within human beings the capacity to choose evil. While that capacity to choose evil is not evil itself, it nevertheless provides the possibility for evil to be chosen. God could have created a world in which evil choices could not be made, but it is possible, as many believers have argued, that such a world would not be the best world. – Arthur Lindsay

So if we think about where Satan came from, and as a result, where sin came from, I think we can look at what the Bible is telling us: that sin just came as a result of God creating angels, in this case. Angels, therefore, had the opportunity to choose God or choose not-God, that anti-God posture. And that anti-God posture is what we're saying evil is. This is a difficult question. It's a difficult question that the Bible is not explicit on. We have to look at implications and things that are—and make deductions from passages in the scriptures that are less than clear about all of these questions. - Dr. Guy M. Richard, President and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at RTS Atlanta.

God created the tree of the knowledge of good and evil not because God wanted evil, God wanted to give us a choice. If you are forced to do good then it's not good, you are just doing what you are doing. If you have the choice, you chose to do bad or you have the choice to love God. That makes it more beautiful. – Owen Bunker, wisdom from my 16 year old godson