

THEOLOGY & CULTURE

The Meaning and Function of Satan in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)

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Introduction

In the first two chapters of the Book of Job, we encounter a heavenly figure, identified as the Satan (*haśśātān*) who is described as one of “the sons of God.” The dialogue between this figure and God in Job 1:6-12 and 2:1-6, raises some important questions concerning the relationship between human piety/righteousness and God’s blessings in the form of material prosperity. This figure “incites” God to test Job (2:3)¹ in order to find out whether his piety is disinterested or not. In this article, we will discuss the nature and function of the figure of Satan. The article will examine the occurrence of this figure in the Hebrew Bible in four texts, namely, Numbers 22:22, 32; Zachariah 3:1; Job 1–2; and 1 Chronicles 21:1. In the course of this exploration, other key biblical themes will come into focus as well: the nature of disinterested piety, the notion of the Divine Council, and the problems associated with the principle of Divine Justice and Retribution.

In the first part of this essay we shall examine the etymology and the meaning of the noun “Satan”. We shall demonstrate that this noun denotes both earthly figures and a figure that is heavenly.

¹ In this essay, all biblical quotations in English are taken from *The Holy Bible: The Revised Standard Version*, (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1971), and the Hebrew texts are taken from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, Edited by K. Elliger, W. Rudolph, and Institute for NT Textual Research Munster (Munster: German Bible Society, 2006).

In the second part, we shall probe the meaning of the heavenly Satan, by closely examining three of the four texts mentioned above. We shall study the contours of the noun Satan within the context in which they occur. In the third part, we shall closely exegete the first, second, and fourth scenes of the prologue of Job 1–2, to determine how the meaning of Satan, and its function emerge. In the fourth part, we shall attempt to analyze our results, in order to see whether the various meanings and functions of Satan that emerge from these texts can be reconciled. In this section we shall argue that the meaning and the function of Satan emerged from the biblical authors' attempts to explain divine causality, and that there is a clear development of this concept, from the earlier text, Numbers 22:22, to the latest text, 1 Chronicles 21:1.

1. Etymology of the Noun Satan

The noun Satan (Hebrew שָׂטָן transliterated as *sāṭān*) is derived from the verb *sāṭān*, with the Semitic root *štn*.² The noun occurs 27 times in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), while the verb *sāṭān* occurs 6 times.³ Other related forms are *sītna*, *sāṭām*, and *mastema*, which are well attested in the Hebrew Bible.

The meaning of the verb *sāṭān* is variously rendered as “to accuse,” “to slander,” or “to be an adversary.” According to T.C. Young, the meanings “to accuse” and “to slander,” are not synonymous, but they overlap: “To accuse means to find fault and bring charges, falsely or accurately. By contrast, slander is always false, a statement of claim that is both inaccurate and damaging to the character and reputation of another.”⁴ To be an adversary means to be an opponent, i.e., an enemy, with political connotations.

In some instances, the noun *sāṭān* can be translated as “a slanderer,” while in others, “an accuser.” Thus, the term Satan

² The root is attested in Targumic Aramaic, Middle Hebrew, Syriac, Ethiopic and Arabic. Cf. G.J. BOTTERWECK – H. RINGGREN, – H. FABRY, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, XIV, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1997, 73. Cf. E. JENNI – C. WESTERMAN, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, III, Peabody: Hendrickson 1997, 74.

³ G.J. BOTTERWECK – H. RINGGREN – H. FABRY, *TDOT*, 74.

⁴ T.C. YOUNG, “Satan”, *ABD* V, New York: Doubleday 1992, 985.

means "an accuser," with the nuances of either a slanderer or an adversary.⁵ In the Hebrew Bible, the noun Satan is used to refer to both human adversaries (the terrestrial Satan) and a supernatural adversary (the celestial Satan).⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, the noun occurs 7 times and refers to the terrestrial Satan. In 1 Samuel 29:4, the Philistines refuse to allow David to go with them to the battle against Saul, lest he become "an adversary" to them by "turning against them on the battlefield in order to ingratiate himself to Saul."⁷ Here the term Satan is used to refer to a political opponent/adversary, without any other connotation.

In 2 Samuel 19:17-24 (MT), when he is returning to Jerusalem after defeating Absalom, Abishai tries to convince David to kill Shimei, who had cursed and thrown stones at the fleeing David (2 Sam 16:5-7). David responds by describing Abishai as an adversary: Abishai, in other words, acts as *śātān*, a legal accuser in this context.⁸ In 1 Kings 5:18, Solomon states that he has no *śātān*, no "adversary," referring to political opponents or enemies. Furthermore, in 1 Kings 11:14, 23, 25, after Solomon had apostatized, God raises Hadad of Edom and Rezon of Syria as *śātānim*, "adversaries" to Solomon. These are political enemies, through whom God intends to punish Solomon, because Solomon has contravened the Covenant: "Solomon had sinned, and because of this sin [the Lord] raised up Hadad and Rezon as adversaries against him ... [who become] concrete illustrations of divine judgment, and thus *śātān* has a legal connotation: Hadad and Rezon are accusers of Israel."⁹

Another text in which a terrestrial Satan occurs is Psalm 109:6: "Appoint a wicked man against him; let an accuser (*śātān*) bring him to trial." In this psalm, identifiable as an individual lament, the psalmist expresses sadness about the unjust accusations of his enemies (vv. 1-5). At this point, however, a question arises: in this

⁵ T.C. YOUNG, "Satan", 985.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ P.L. DAY, *An Adversary in Heaven: Satan in the Hebrew Bible*, Atlanta: Scholars 1988, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

psalm, are verses 6-19 words of the psalmist against his accusers (a kind of curse levelled against his enemies), or is the psalmist quoting what his accusers have been saying against him?¹⁰

Some scholars hold that these are the psalmist's words, wishing that his enemies suffer the fate they have been devising for him.¹¹ According to Day, this section is an insertion into a psalm which consisted of verses 1-5 and 20-30. Accordingly, these words are meant to be the words of the psalmist against his enemies. Thus, the meaning of Satan here is forensic: "Verse 7 clearly states that the psalmist wants his opponent to be brought to justice, and the expression 'stand on the right hand' (v. 6) is also clearly forensic ... there is no reason to believe that *śāṭān*'s sought-for testimony is slanderous."¹² However, the *New Revised Standard Version* puts verses 6-19 into quotation marks, introducing them with the phrase "they say," implying that here the psalmist quotes what his opponents have been saying against him. In this case, the meaning of *śāṭān* here would be "a slanderer," a wicked person who falsely accuses an innocent person (cf. vv. 2-5, 31).

This overview suggests that the terrestrial Satan refers to a human adversary, to an opponent, who is either a political adversary or a legal accuser before the court. The terrestrial Satan could also refer to a slanderer, a person who bring false charges against someone who is innocent. We shall now examine whether these meanings are reflected in the references to the celestial Satan in the Hebrew Bible.

The noun indicating the celestial Satan occurs 26 times in the Hebrew Scriptures in four passages (Num 22:22, 23; Job 1-2; Zech 3:1; and 1 Chr 21:1). This noun occurs in three of the four passages with a definite article (*haśśāṭān*), while in 1 Chronicles 21:1 it occurs without a definite article. According to Young, "this would seem to indicate that only in 1 Chr 21:1 is *śāṭān* possibly a proper name. In the remaining passages, with the definite article, it is a common noun, to be translated something like 'the accuser.'"¹³

¹⁰ P.L. DAY, *An Adversary in Heaven*, 30.

¹¹ Cf. P.L. DAY, T.C. Young, etc.

¹² P.L. DAY, *An Adversary in Heaven*, 31.

¹³ T.C. YOUNG, "Satan", 986.

We shall now examine these four texts, in order to determine the meaning of the term in its contexts.

2. Celestial Satan in the Hebrew Bible

2.1 Satan in Numbers 22:22, 32

22:22 וַיַּחַר־אַף אֱלֹהִים בְּיְהוֹלֵךְ הוּא וַיִּתְנַצֵּב מִלֶּאֱדָה יְהוָה בַּדֶּרֶךְ לְשָׁטָן לוֹ
וְהוּא רֹכֵב עַל־אֲתוֹנוֹ וּשְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו עִמּוֹ:
22:32 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מִלֶּאֱדָה יְהוָה עַל־מָה הִכִּיתָ אֶת־אֲתוֹנְךָ זֶה שְׁלוֹשׁ רָגְלִים
הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי יֹצֵאתִי לְשָׁטָן כִּי־יִרַט הַדֶּרֶךְ לְנַגְדִּי:

22:22 But God’s anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his *adversary*. Now he was riding on the [donkey], and his two servants were with him.

22:32 And the angel of the LORD said to him, “Why have you struck your [donkey] these three times? Behold, I have come forth to withstand [*be an adversary to*] you, because your way is perverse before me ...

This is the earliest occurrence of the celestial Satan in the Hebrew Bible. The context is the story of Balaam. The Israelites have camped on the plains of Moab, on their journey to Canaan (Num 22:1). Fearing that the Israelites might attack and destroy his territory, Balak, the king of Moab, hires Balaam, a mercenary prophet, for the purpose of cursing the Israelites, so that he might defeat them (Num 22:1-6). However, God appears to Balaam at night, forbidding him to go on this mission, “for they [the Israelites] are blessed” (22:12). Although initially Balaam refuses to go to Balak, he eventually goes, with God’s permission, but he is to say only what God commands him to (v. 20). On the way, he meets the angel of the Lord, who is identified as an adversary (*sāṭān*). After trying to thwart Balaam’s journey twice, the angel reveals himself to Balaam as an adversary (v. 32).

The story of Balaam has some noteworthy textual problems. God allows Balaam to go with the messengers of Balak (v. 20); but in the next verse, when Balaam sets out to go, the Lord’s anger is kindled against him (v. 21). Why this anomalous twist? Day hypothesizes that this story contains two contrasting traditions: one

tradition is favourable to Balaam (22:1-20, 23:1–24:25, cf. Deut 23:3-6, Mic 6:5), and so presents him as a seer and a prophet who consults God and obeys God's commands. A second tradition, on the other hand, is hostile to Balaam. This includes the story of Balaam and his donkey (22:21-40, cf. 31:8, 16), a story which caricatures Balaam as dumber than his donkey. While the donkey can see the angel, discern the danger, and act accordingly, Balaam cannot.¹⁴ He cannot even discern the meaning of his donkey's odd behaviour, in spite of the fact that the donkey speaks to him in a human language: "Am I not your [donkey], upon which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so to you? And he said, No" (v. 30).

In this context, the celestial Satan, a heavenly messenger, is not hostile to God, but he is sent as an adversary to Balaam at a moment that he is choosing to commit sin. In this passage, "the angel is both adversary to and accuser of Balaam, and is dispatched on his mission by [the Lord]."¹⁵ The angel's action is ultimately authorized by God. Here Satan is not a proper name, but a functional role: "Here the noun *sāṭān* clearly refers to an 'opponent,' someone who 'stands in the way' and obstructs Balaam's plans. Twice God raised up a Satan against Solomon who acted as an adversary to the king. The result in Numbers 22 is the same. Since God wants to thwart the Moabites' plan, God stands in their way in the figure of his angel."¹⁶

2.2 The Satan in Zechariah 3:1

3:1 וַיַּרְאֵנִי אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה
וְהַשָּׂטָן עֹמֵד עַל־יְמִינֵי לְשֹׂטְנֵנוּ:

^{3:1} Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him.

This is Zechariah's fourth vision, which is set in the Heavenly Court. This vision presents God as King surrounded by his

¹⁴ P.L. DAY, *An Adversary in Heaven*, 48-57.

¹⁵ T.C. YOUNG, "Satan", 986.

¹⁶ G.J. BOTTERWECK – H. RINGGREN – H. FABRY, *TDOT*, 76-77.

courtiers. The conception of a heavenly court, a conception that also appears in Job 1–2, is well attested in the Hebrew Bible (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19-23; Ps 82; Isa 6:1-5; and Dan 7:9-14). C. L. Meyers offers the observation that “this setting is deeply grounded in mythology, with [the Lord’s] Heavenly court corresponding to the council of ’El ... The concept of an assembly or council of the gods was a common motif throughout the Ancient Near East.”¹⁷ The Israelites entertained a notion that God regularly held a court, took counsel and rendered judgment on various matters.¹⁸ In both Zechariah 3:1 and Job 1–2, Satan acts as a prosecuting attorney. But there is another possibility: common royal practice during that time may have influenced this image: “The concept of the royal council in which the king would be surrounded by his courtiers, receiving reports from them, taking council with them, and giving directives to them, is familiar especially from Egypt ... and may be assumed equally for Israel.”¹⁹ Either way, the evidence shows that the Israelites had the notion of the Heavenly Court, which is reflected in these texts.

In Zechariah 3:1-5, a case is presented before the Heavenly Court concerning Joshua and the office of the High Priest. Joshua was the first High Priest after the exile. He it is who led the first exiles who returned to Jerusalem (cf. Ezra 2:2; Neh 7:7; 1 Esdr 5:5, 8). In Ezra, Joshua “participated in the construction of the Second Temple, and played a role at least at the beginning of the successful drive to complete the structure (3:1-13; 5:1-2; 1 Esdr 5:47-58; 6:1-2).”²⁰ In this lawsuit, Joshua stands as the accused, God presides as the judge, the Satan acts as the prosecuting attorney, and the angel of the Lord stands as Joshua’s defense attorney/advocate. Joshua stands in filthy garments before the angel of the Lord (vv. 1, 3), and the Satan stands at his right hand to accuse him (v. 3). There are other members of the heavenly court standing before the angel

¹⁷ C.L. MEYERS – E.M. MEYERS, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8*, AB 25B, New York: Doubleday 1987, 182.

¹⁸ C.A. NEWSOM, “The Book of Job”, *NIB IV*, Nashville: Abingdon 1996, 347.

¹⁹ D.A. CLINES, *Job 1–20*, WBC 17, Waco: Word 1989, 18.

²⁰ J. VANDERKAM, “Joshua the High Priest and the Interpretation of Zechariah 3”, *CBQ* 53 (1991) 553.

of the Lord (v. 4). God rebukes the Satan and affirms that He has chosen Jerusalem. Joshua is acquitted, cleansed and re-clothed splendidly (v. 4).

In this lawsuit, the Satan challenges Joshua's dignity and worth as the High Priest. Although his crime is not explicitly mentioned, it can be derived from the symbolism of Joshua's filthy garments: "The word translated 'filthy' (פִּלְאָה) is used here alone in the Bible, but its nominal cognates (פִּלְאָה and פִּלְאָה) express the filth of human excrement (Deut 23:14; 2 Kgs 18:27) and a drunkard's vomit (Isa 28:8). Thus, Joshua's clothing was not a little soiled; it was thoroughly filthy and beyond cleaning."²¹ In verse 4, therefore, the angel of the Lord explains the meaning of the filthy garments: "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with rich apparel." Young explains the significance of this scene as follows:

In his rebuke [the Lord] reminds the *śāṭān* that he has chosen Jerusalem. That [the Lord] draws attention to his choice of Jerusalem, and not to Joshua, would seem to indicate that Joshua not only represents himself, but in some way also represents the restored postexilic community. Neither the iniquity of Joshua nor the sins of Judaeans are such that they bar the way to the investiture of the High Priest or the forgiveness of the community, much to the dismay of the prosecuting *śāṭān*.²²

Thus, in this passage, what defines the Satan is his function in the Heavenly Court, namely, that of an accuser, a prosecuting attorney, but one who is firmly under God's control.²³ He has an adversarial relationship with human beings, as indicated by the fact that he is overzealous to prosecute Joshua. He seems to forget that God is both merciful and faithful to his covenant with his people.

²¹ J. VANDERKAM, "Joshua the High Priest", 555.

²² T.C. YOUNG, "Satan," 987.

²³ J.M. O'BRIAN, *Nahum, Habakkuk Zephaniah, Zechariah, Malachi*. Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, Nashville: Abingdon 2004, 188.

2.3 1 Chronicles 21:1: Satan as a Proper Name

21:1 וַיַּעֲמֹד שָׂטָן עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְבַסֵּת אֶת-דָּוִד לְמַנּוֹת אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל:

21:1 Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel.

The latest occurrence of the word Satan in the Hebrew Bible is 1 Chronicles 21:1. It is the only place where a celestial Satan is mentioned without a definite article. Most English translations render it as a proper name, ‘Satan.’ Young suggests that this is “an original appellative that has assumed the character of a real proper name and is therefore used without the article.”²⁴ But as an indefinite noun, it could as well be translated as ‘an anonymous adversity,’ terrestrial or celestial.²⁵

This development has a context that is worthy of note. The same text occurs in 2 Samuel 24:1. While in 1 Chronicles 21:1, Satan incites David to take the census, in 2 Samuel 24:1 the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and incited David to take the census. In other words, the Lord was angry at the Israelites so He incited David to take the census, so that He may punish Israel. In both cases, the Lord punishes David for taking the census. L.C. Allen offers the hypothesis that the anger of the Lord “sometimes in the Psalms ... is not a reaction to human sinning, but an amoral violent force beyond human control (e.g. Pss 6:1, 74:1 ...).”²⁶ Thus, 1 Chronicles 21:1 could be an attempt to personify this force, and distance it from God.

Allen proposes that 1 Chronicles 21:1 can be understood in the light of Job 2:3 and Zechariah 3:1. These texts predate 1 Chronicles. In 1 Chronicles the verb “incite” (יָבַסֵּת) occurs with Satan as the subject. Thus, the First Book of Chronicles borrows both the activity and the posture of hostility characterizing the Satan, but here there is a development, namely, Satan is used for the first time as a proper noun, instead of a description of

²⁴ T.C. YOUNG, “Satan”, 987.

²⁵ G.N. KNOPPERS, *1 Chronicles 10-29*, AB 12A, New York: Doubleday 2004, 744.

²⁶ L.C. ALLEN, “The First and Second Books of Chronicles”, *NIB* III, Nashville: Abingdon 1990, 421.

a function.²⁷ Thus, Satan's activity here amounts to imposing a test, a test which David fails.

C. Young offers three possible explanations of this shift.²⁸ First, the Chronicler was uneasy about attributing a morally dubious action to God. Hence he refrains from insinuating that God incites David to take the census and then punishes him for doing so. Secondly, the Chronicler was eager to paint a picture of a good relationship between God and David, God's chosen servant. Hence he substituted Satan for God and thus he retells this story as a temptation episode. Thirdly, this passage "reflects a development in how the OT explained evil. Most of the earlier literature of the OT explained evil in terms of a primary cause [the Lord]. Later OT literature such as Chronicles expanded on this by introducing a concept of a secondary cause in its explanation of evil, namely, *śātān*."²⁹ This is the principle of Divine causality in the Old Testament, and we see a movement from single Divine causality to double causality. Thus, in this text, Satan is presented as an independent figure who acts as a seducer, a tester, an inciter of humans to sin.

3. The Satan in Job 1–2

The term Satan occurs in the prologue to the book of Job, in the prose section (Job 1–2). This section is an introduction to the poetic section, the dialogues between Job and his friends. This section is divided into five scenes, alternating between the earth and the heavens. What happens in the heavenly realm affects what happens in the earthly realm. While the earthly characters are unaware of what happens in heaven, the reader knows. This is the setting for the dialogues, for the dialogues will attempt to address the questions that are raised in the heavenly setting. Thus, the structure of Job 1–2 can be outlined as follows:³⁰

²⁷ L.C. ALLEN, "The First and Second Books of Chronicles", 422.

²⁸ T.C. YOUNG, "Satan", 987.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 987.

³⁰ Cf. D.A. CLINES, *Job 1–20*, 8.

- 1:1-5 Earthly Setting: Description of the person of Job, his character, and his family.
- 1:6-12 Heavenly Court: The first dialogue between the Satan and God.
- 1:13-22 Earthly Setting: the Satan brings to realization the deliberations of the Heavenly Court, and Job reacts.
- 2:1-6 Heavenly Court: The second dialogue between the Satan and God.
- 2:7-13 Earthly Setting: the Satan brings to realization the deliberations of the Heavenly Court. Job reacts; so do his friends.

In this analysis, we shall focus on scene one, for it sets the ground for the subsequent scenes, and scenes two and four, where the Satan and his activities are described, which is the focus of our consideration. We shall treat scenes three and five just in passing, since they are intricately connected with the other scenes.

3.1 Scene 1: Description of Job's Character, His Family and Possessions (Job 1:1-5)

1:1 איש היה בארץ-עוץ איוב שמו
 והיה האיש ההוא תם וישר וירא אלהים וסר מרע:
 2 ויגדלו לו שבעה בנים ושלוש בנות:
 3 והיו מקנהו שבעת אלפי-צאן ושלושת אלפי גמלים
 וחמש מאות צמד בקר וחמש מאות אֲחֻזֹת ועבדה רבה
 מאד ויהי האיש ההוא גדול מכל-בני-קדם:
 4 והלכו בניו ועשו משתה בית איש יומו
 ושלוהו וקראו לשלושת (אחיתיהם) ואחיותיהם לאכל ולשתות עמם:
 5 ויהי כן הקיפו ימי המשתה וישלח איוב ויקדשם
 והשכים בבקר והעלה עלות מספר כלם
 כי אמר איוב אולי חטאו בני וברכו אלהים בלבבם
 פכה ועשה איוב כל-הימים:

^{1:1} There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil. ² There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. ³ He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she-asses, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. ⁴ His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each on his day; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵ And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

The first scene serves as a setting for the unfolding of the events in the prose section, which forms in some sense, the basis for the dialogues. It introduces Job, the main character in the book. In 1:1, Job is described as a perfect human being, blameless (תָּם), upright (יָשָׁר), God-fearing (יָרָא), who turns away from evil (סָר מִרָע). His character is described using a pair of words, which are common in proverbial wisdom and the Psalms.³¹ This description suggests completeness and perfection, integrity and respectful piety.³²

In Job 1:2-3, the author describes Job's family, property, his household and status. Newsome suggests that the conjunction *wə* connects Job's integrity and piety with his prosperity: "Does Job just happen to be rich and have a large family, or does he have these things because he is a man of exemplary piety? Although the narrator does not say explicitly, the very description of Job's family and wealth suggests a connection. All the numbers used are symbolic, suggesting completeness and perfection ... Just as Job's piety is complete, so also his family and property are complete and perfect."³³ His prosperity is the result of his exemplary piety, the sign of God's blessings. This is the principle of Divine Justice and Retribution, that is, God rewards the just and punishes the wicked.

³¹ D.A. CLINES, *Job 1–20*, 8.

³² C.A. NEWSOM, "The Book of Job" 345.

³³ *Ibid.*

In verses 4-5, Job’s exemplary piety is emphasized by showing how he goes to extraordinary lengths to ensure that his sons do not sin against God. The Hebrew expression for what the sons may be doing is literally “blessing” (בִּרְכוּ) God “in their hearts”. The verb “blessing”, however, seems to be a euphemism (cf. v. 11). As the translation above indicates, the word seems surely to mean “cursing.” This scene prepares the ground for the second scene, which takes place in the Heavenly Court (1:6-12).

3.2 Scene 2. The First Dialogue between God and the Satan (Job 1:6-12)

1:6 ויהי היום ויבאו בני האלהים להתיצב על־יהוה ויבוא נִם־הַשָּׁטָן בְּתוֹכָם:
 7 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־הַשָּׁטָן מֵאֵין תָּבָא:
 וַיַּעַן הַשָּׁטָן אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר מִשׁוּט בָּאָרֶץ וּמִהַתְּהַלֵּךְ בַּהֶ: 7
 8 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־הַשָּׁטָן הֲשַׁמֵּת לְפָנַי עַל־עַבְדִּי אִיּוֹב:
 כִּי אֵין כָּמוֹהוּ בָאָרֶץ אִישׁ תָּם וְיֹשֵׁר יִרָא אֱלֹהִים וְסָר מִרָע:
 9 וַיַּעַן הַשָּׁטָן אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲחַיִּים יִרָא אִיּוֹב אֱלֹהִים:
 10 הֲלֹא־אֵתָּ [אֵתָּ] שָׁכַת בְּעָדוֹ וּבְעַד־בֵּיתוֹ וּבְעַד כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ מִסָּבִיב
 מִעֲשֶׂה יָדָיו בְּרִכָּתָ וּמִקְנֵהוּ פָרַץ בָּאָרֶץ:
 11 וְאוּלָּם שְׁלַח־נָא יָדְךָ וְנַע בְּכָל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ אִם־לֹא עַל־פְּנֵיךָ וַיִּבְרַכְךָ:
 12 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־הַשָּׁטָן הִנֵּה כָל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ בְּיָדְךָ רַק אֵלָיו אֶל־תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ
 וַיֵּצֵא הַשָּׁטָן מֵעַם פְּנֵי יְהוָה:

^{1:6} Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. ⁷ The LORD said to Satan, “Whence have you come?” Satan answered the LORD, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” ⁸ And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” ⁹ Then Satan answered the LORD, “Does Job fear God for nought?” ¹⁰ Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹ But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face.” ¹² And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do

not put forth your hand.” So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.

The second scene is set in heaven, whereby the Lord presides over the Heavenly Council. We have already discussed the concept of the Heavenly Court in connection with Zechariah 3:1. In this session, God presides over the court as King (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 6; Zech 3–4), surrounded by his divine entourage of counsellors. “The sons of God” (*bənê hāʾēlōhîm*) present themselves (*hityaṣṣēb*) before God, as courtiers, royal officials before the king (cf. Prov. 22:24).³⁴ Byrne points out that the concept of *bənê hāʾēlōhîm*, literally, “the sons of the gods,” as heavenly beings, does not imply actual progeny of God or the gods.³⁵ Instead, this “reflects the common Semitic use of ‘son’ ... to denote membership in a class or group. [Thus] *bənê hāʾēlōhîm* [means] beings belonging to the heavenly or divine sphere.”³⁶

Byrne hypothesizes that this term reflects a stage when Israel’s religion was influenced by the pantheism of the Canaanite religions. The sons of God are always found in the context of the Heavenly Court, and they are subordinate to God (Job 1:6; 2:1; Pss. 29:1; 82:6, Deut 32:43 LXX).³⁷ “Eventually, the ‘sons of gods’ were fused with the concept of angels – a development already to be seen in Dan. 3:25 and reflected, for the most part, in the LXX.”³⁸ In this scene, the Satan is one of the members of the Heavenly Court. He comes with others to present himself before God, and to report on the fulfilment of his duties. He is presented as having an adversarial relationship with humans, but he is firmly under God’s control and authority. It is to be noticed that Job 1:7-12 and 2:2-6 are the only instances in the Hebrew Scriptures where the Satan and God converse with each other. In both instances, God is the one who initiates the conversation (1:7; 2:2): “The LORD said to Satan, ‘Where have you come?’”³⁹

³⁴ M.H. POPE, *Job*. AB 15, New York: Doubleday 1965, 9-10.

³⁵ B. BYRNE, “Sons of God”, *ABD* VI, New York: Doubleday 1992, 156.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ B. BYRNE, “Sons of God”, 156.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁹ T.C. YOUNG, “Satan”, 987.

The Satan replies by describing his activities: "From going to and fro (*miššûṭ*) on the earth, and from walking up and down (*mēhithallēk*) on it." (v. 7). The use of the verb "going to and fro, *šûṭ*" is a play on words with the noun Satan: the two form a poetic parallel.⁴⁰ But more importantly, *šûṭ* occurs in Zechariah 4:10b, where, in the prophet's fifth vision, the lampstand symbolizes God, and the seven lamps upon it are "the eyes of God" which go to and fro through the whole earth. Pope observes that there is a related context in the Persian empire, whereby, according to Herodotus, there were royal officials who were called "the eyes and ears of the king," whose job was something like royal secret police. Pope suggests: "The empire depended in great measure for its security on the well-developed system of the highways and communications which linked the provincial capitals, and on an efficient intelligence agency which kept the powerful governors under surveillance to detect and prevent sedition and rebellion."⁴¹ These were officers who were constantly in attendance on the king. This is confirmed by Xenophon: "The king has many eyes and ears."⁴²

Thus, there is a strong possibility that the function of the Satan and the roving eyes of Zechariah 4:10b are analogous to the Persian security system. The Satan is a roving secret agent, who patrols the earth and reports to God of the evils found therein. The Satan's answer implies that, "he has been patrolling the earth looking for disloyalty or sinful behaviour to indict before [the Lord]."⁴³

God's question (v. 8) introduces the topic of Job into the heavenly dialogue. God's characterization of Job repeats what the reader knows from scene one. But God praises Job even more. God refers to Job as "my servant" and exclaims that "there is none like him on the earth." This adds weight to the narrator's picture of Job in scene one.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ M.H. POPE takes this as an etymology of the noun Satan. Cf. *Job*, 11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ C.A. NEWSOM, "The Book of Job", 349.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Newsom hypothesizes that God's question to Satan suggests an ongoing rivalry between them: "The grounds for such an edgy relationship are implicit in the [Satan's] function. One who defends a king's honour by zealously ferreting out hidden disloyalty simultaneously exposes the king to dishonour by showing that he is disrespected. ... Hence, [the Lord] preempts such activity and in effect defends his own honour by directing attention to ... Job ... the one person whose perfect loyalty and regard for God cannot be doubted."⁴⁵ This is manifested in the Satan's reply to God in verses 9-10.

In his reply (v. 9), the Satan shifts the ground for the debate. He not only questions Job's sincerity and motives, namely, whether his piety is disinterested or not, but also he accuses God of divine patronage. God has blessed Job by multiplying his possessions, and he has protected him: God has "put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side" (v. 10). It is not difficult to form the opinion that for the Satan, "Job serves God to get what he really wants, which is prosperity ... Thus, the [Satan] directly impugns Job's motives for service to God and indirectly accuses God of divine patronage."⁴⁶ By doing this, the Satan challenges the validity of the doctrine of Divine Justice and Retribution, as a system that rewards righteousness with material prosperity. Day concurs with this opinion: "If the righteous inevitably prosper, how do we know that their righteousness is motivated by true piety and not base greed?"⁴⁷

Day is of the opinion that there is a shift of focus from Job to God; the test shifts from a test of Job's loyalty to a trial of God, i.e., the Satan attacks the world order that God has set up.⁴⁸ Although this claim seems to go too far, here clearly the Satan raises a fundamental question about the human motives for serving God and places in a state of suspicion the possibility of disinterested piety. The question at stake is: Can human beings serve God for God's sake, if God rewards them for their piety towards Him?

⁴⁵ C.A. NEWSOM, "The Book of Job", 349.

⁴⁶ T.C. YOUNG, "Satan," 987.

⁴⁷ P.L. DAY, *An Adversary in Heaven*, 79.

⁴⁸ C.A. NEWSOM, "The Book of Job", 349.

In verse 11, the Satan does not propose a wager, but rather a challenge that becomes a test. Newsom proposes the following idea: the Satan insinuates that “Job and God are mutually self-deceived in thinking that piety can ever be freely offered when it is routinely met with blessing. Breaking the nexus will prove the accuser right. If God breaches the protective hedge and destroys what Job has, Job will openly repudiate God.”⁴⁹ In verse 11, “bless” (בִּרְכָה) is used euphemistically to mean “curse”, just as in Job 1:5. God then gives the Satan the permission to test Job. God removes the fence around all that Job has, but reserves for Himself the protection of the person of Job (v. 12). Having received the permission, the Satan goes out from the presence of God to do what he wishes to do, namely, test Job.

In scene three (vv. 13-22), the setting shifts to the earth, where God has removed the fence around Job’s possessions. Consequently, Job’s possessions are systematically removed from him, in a series of catastrophes, which are reported to Job. But the climax of the scene runs contrary to the Satan’s expectations (vv. 21-22): Job blesses the name of the Lord, and he does not sin or charge God with wrong. Ironically, the Satan had claimed the Job would curse (“bless”) God to his face (v. 12), but in verse 21 Job “blesses” God – an act of worship that reaffirms his fidelity to God.⁵⁰ Thus, Job’s words and deeds contradict the Satan’s prediction and expectations. Disinterested piety is possible, and Job has proven that up to this point in the story.

3.3 Scene 3. The Second Dialogue between God and the Satan (Job 2:1-6)

2:1 וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים לְהִתְנַצֵּב עַל־יְהוָה
 וַיָּבֹא גַם־הַשָּׁטָן בְּחֹכֶם לְהִתְנַצֵּב עַל־יְהוָה:
 2 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־הַשָּׁטָן אֵי מִזֶּה תָּבֹא
 וַיַּעַן הַשָּׁטָן אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר מַשֵּׁט בְּאָרֶץ וּמַהֲתַהַלֵּךְ בָּהּ:
 3 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־הַשָּׁטָן הֲשָׂמֹת לְבָדְךָ אֶל־עַבְדִּי אִיּוֹב

⁴⁹ C.A. NEWSOM, “The Book of Job”, 349.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 352.

כִּי אֵין כְּמֹהוּ בָאָרֶץ אִישׁ תָּם וְיֹשֶׁר וְרָא אֱלֹהִים וְסָר מִרָע
וְעָדְנֹו מִחֲזִיק בְּתַמָּתוֹ וְחִסִּיתָנִי בּוֹ לְבַלְעוּ חַנָּם:
⁴ וַיַּעַן הַשָּׂטָן אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר
עֹזר בְּעַד־עֹזֵר וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְאִישׁ יִתֵּן בְּעַד נַפְשׁוֹ:
⁵ אִוְלָם שְׁלַח־נָא יָדְךָ וְגַע אֶל־עַצְמוֹ וְאֶל־בְּשָׂרוֹ
אִם־לֹא אֶל־פְּנֵיךָ יִבְרַכְךָ:
⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־הַשָּׂטָן הֲנֹו בְּיַדְךָ אֵךְ אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ שְׁמֹר:

^{2:1} Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. ² And the LORD said to Satan, “Whence have you come?” Satan answered the LORD, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” ³ And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause.” ⁴ Then Satan answered the LORD, “Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. ⁵ But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face.” ⁶ And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your power; only spare his life.”

In scene four (Job 2:1-6), another session of the Heavenly Court takes place. Verses 1-3a of this second chapter are almost a *verbatim* reproduction of Job 1:6-7. The word breaks with 1:6-7 starts in verse 3b in God’s description of Job’s character. This signals a change of the focus of attention, namely, the focus falls on God’s and the Satan’s actions: “He still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause: *wəʕōdennû maḥāzîq baḥummātô wattəsîṭēnî ḥō ləballəʕō ḥinnām*” The Satan has incited God to treat Job undeservedly.

In this text, “for nothing, *ḥinnām*” recalls the Satan’s words in 1:9 that Job does not serve God “for nothing.” This word could mean, ‘without compensation,’ ‘in vain,’ ‘without cause,’ ‘undeservedly.’ But whether the word means the same in both verses 1:9 and 2:3, Newsom argues that the use of the same word in these verses suggests a complex issue underlying the whole

story: "The didactic tale has been guiding the reader to affirm that disinterested piety, a fully unconditional love of God, is both possible and commendable. [The Lord's] echo of the term *ḥinnām* in the context of 'gratuitous destruction' however, suggests the dark possibilities inherent in a relationship that is radically unconditional."⁵¹

In Job 2:4-6, instead of admitting defeat, the Satan shifts the ground of the argument. He proposes a more severe level of the test, namely, to afflict Job's own person. For the Satan, the test had been too lenient: "the real test of the relationship of Job's piety and his prosperity has not yet begun, he means to say; it is only when the man himself, his own 'bone' and 'flesh' is smitten that one can determine the truth about the piety of Job."⁵² The Satan quotes a proverb, "skin for skin, *ʿôr bəʿad-ʿôr*." The meaning of this proverb is enigmatic. Clines gives a likely meaning of this proverb as follows:

The phrase may well have had to do originally with what was *fair*: proverbially speaking, the only indisputably fair exchange for one pelt is another pelt Job judged his possessions (including his children) and his own life (including his health) to be of equal value to him; he can afford to forgo his goods to save his life – and indeed he must, for if he refuses to afford to, he loses his life ... the only means he has of securing his life is to give up his possessions with good grace – and not curse God.⁵³

Understood in this way, the proverb means that Job has held fast in his integrity "to save his own skin," for it was understood that whenever someone cursed God, God would smite him instantly (cf. 2:9, Job's wife's suggestion).

In this way the Satan proposes a new test, that God allow Job to suffer physical harm, "his bone and his flesh," hoping that Job will curse God (v. 5). God gives him the permission to afflict Job, but again, God reserves for himself the protection of Job's life. Just as in scene two, the Satan goes forth from God's presence, to act according to the permission he has received (verse 7a) in scene

⁵¹ C.A. NEWSOM, "The Book of Job", 354.

⁵² D.A. CLINES, *Job 1–20*, 43.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 44.

five. The Satan afflicts Job with miserable bodily ailments, but Job maintains his piety towards God, and this proves the Satan wrong: disinterested piety is possible: “In all this Job did not sin with his lips” (Job 2:10).

In this analysis we have seen how the Satan carries out his function as a prosecuting attorney, an accuser. Unlike the other texts treated, the Satan does not point out human sinfulness and disloyalty to God, but he examines motives; he suggests putting humans to the test in order to reveal ulterior motives for serving God. In carrying out this task however, the Satan not only puts himself in opposition to human beings but also in opposition to God. The Satan questions the system that God has put into place, the one which rewards virtue with material prosperity and stable physical health. But, in the final analysis, the Satan is firmly under God’s control, and does only what God permits him to do.

In Job 1–2, the author brings to light the Satan’s activities and functions in order to address the fundamental questions that he intended to address throughout the entire book. The author simply uses the concepts that were already present in the biblical tradition: the concept of a legal, heavenly accuser, the concept of the Heavenly Court, and more fundamentally, the notion inherent in Deuteronomistic theology that human righteousness meets with God’s blessings through material prosperity and physical well-being, and that sins are met with divine punishment (see Deut 27-28). This would explain why the Satan disappears from the dialogues, and never appears at all in the epilogue, for the author conceives of him as the trigger that raises the fundamental questions that he aimed to address in the poetic section.

The dialogue between the Satan and God lays a firm foundation for the book, since it puts forward the premises that are discussed at length in the poetic section of the book of Job. Job and his friends exhaust every possible explanation of Job’s misfortunes. The dialogues between Job and his friends hinge on the fact they are unaware of what transpired in the heavenly court. However, they address the questions that arise therein, namely, does human righteousness automatically lead to God’s blessings through material prosperity and general well-being and vice versa?

4. Interpretation of the Figure of Satan in the Hebrew Bible

After examining the four texts in which the celestial Satan appears, the question remains whether there is a meaningful relationship among these usages. R.S. Kluger is of the opinion that these texts reflect a development in the concept of Satan. He believes that there is a metaphysical understanding that underlies this concept: the appearance and function of the Satan reflects the way biblical authors understood the nature of divine causality.⁵⁴

In the earlier appearance of the Satan, as we have seen, the concept is functional. In the earliest text, Numbers 22:22, the angel of the Lord functions as an adversary to Balaam, in complete obedience to God's will. The angel of the Lord is merely a messenger, who functions under God's directive. The text does not suggest any permanent office or function of a heavenly adversary. Kluger hypothesizes that the function of the angel is a personification of a divine function.⁵⁵ God intends to thwart the plans of the mercenary prophet, by standing as an adversary to him, in the form of an angel, at least in the hostile tradition about Balaam, as we have indicated.

In the next text, Job 1–2, there is clearly a development in the function of the Satan. As one of the "sons of God," the activities of the Satan takes place in the divine realm, the Heavenly court. Kluger recognizes that in the opening chapters of the Book of Job, the Satan is a personal figure who has a relationship with the divine realm – God allows him to communicate to him. Yet Kluger also seems to find hidden within the text that the Satan is a personification rather than a personal figure: "What is new ..., is that the adversary is not merely God's messenger; he stands over against God in a dialectical relation. Here he has become a personal figure in divine realm, but here too, he is the personification of a divine function."⁵⁶ The adversarial relationship emerges more sharply; the Satan not only stands against humans, but also takes

⁵⁴ R.S. KLUGER, *Satan in the Old Testament*, trans. H. Nagel, Evanston: Northwestern 1967, 38-53.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

the same stance against God by challenging the order that God has put in place.

In Zechariah 3:1; the Satan stands over against the angel of the Lord (*malʾak yhw̄h*), and by implication, against God, to accuse Joshua. Here again, Kluger imagines that the Satan is only the personification of a divine function: “[the Satan] is not a personality essentially differentiated from [the Lord] who confronts the *malʾak yhw̄h*, but rather two aspects of God who confront each other.”⁵⁷ In other words, two aspects of the divine, the merciful one and the just one, confront each other in an inner dialogue.⁵⁸

In the last appearance of the concept of the Satan in 1 Chronicles 21:1, the concept appears without a definite article. This seems to be a further development from the previous texts. This text interprets 2 Samuel 24:1, “the anger of the Lord,” as an activity of Satan. In this text, Satan becomes an independent personality, with a particular function, instead of God: “The term can refer only to the figure which alone has been mentioned so far, the hypostatized divine function of “opposition” which has become an independent personality.”⁵⁹ Thus, Kluger sees an attempt by biblical authors to separate from God some functions which they were increasingly becoming uneasy to attribute to God. It is a movement away from attributing to God all causality, of separating from God morally dubious functions, and attributing them to an independent heavenly figure. Thus, in the earlier texts, the concept of Satan is not a proper name at all, only in the latest passage does it become so. This development, according to Kluger, shows that “the Old Testament *šāṭān* ... is still a personified function of God, which ... develops itself step by step and detaches itself from the divine personality.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ R.S. KLUGER, *Satan*, 39.

⁵⁸ Kluger’s position, however, may be questionable: the text speaks not of a personification but rather of two angels: one is a good angel, the angel of Yahweh, who is in communion with God while the other is the Satan who is the target of the good angel’s rebukes. The angels are in obvious communication with each other as intelligent spirits. (Ed.)

⁵⁹ R.S. KLUGER, *Satan in the Old Testament*, 40.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 52. The editor notes that once one opens the investigation to include adversarial powers that may not be precisely labelled “Satan”, there

Therefore, in all the texts we have examined, the Satan appears as a hostile being. The figure is always acting on behalf of, and under the authority of God, but it slowly emerges as more independent and more hostile personality, in carrying out its functions. Eventually, once it was totally separated from God, the concept prepared a ground for a further development in the intertestamental literature and in the New Testament. Therein, especially in the New Testament, the Satan emerges as demonic, diabolic, wholly and totally evil, completely opposed to God, always working to frustrate God's plan, and an arch-enemy of humans (the Devil). Yet, even in the New Testament, its fate is firmly under God's power and plan (see for example, Luke 10:18; Rev 20:7-10).⁶¹

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, in this article we have examined the etymology and meaning of the figure of Satan in the Hebrew Bible, and established that this term was used to refer to both terrestrial and celestial beings. We have traced the emergence and development of the celestial Satan in four texts where it appears, and suggested that the usage of this terminology started as a description of a divine function, but slowly, this function was more and more detached from God, and, in the last text, namely, 1 Chronicles 21:1, this figure acts independently. We have dwelt at length on Job 1–2, and examined how this figure carries out its function, namely, not only does it point out human sins and bring them to God's attention (as in Zech. 3:1), but also, it is suspicious of human genuineness, and thus, it probes for hidden motives and intentions. By employing the figure of Satan, the author of Job

seems to be an angelic power even from the first moments of human history that seems to possess an intelligence superior to the human being and is indeed hostile to God. In Genesis 3, for example, this hostile power speaks and acts in such a way that would seem to preclude Kluger's position that at this stage of biblical history the Scriptures reflect the presence of an adversarial power that is no more than a personified function of God. Father Rambau settles the issue with great clarity: *the devil remains an adversarial creature that can neither outwit nor overwhelm God.*

⁶¹ Cf. T.C. YOUNG, "Satan", 988.

manages to bring to light the questions he intended to address in the rest of the book.