

# A Few Words About the Devil

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DEALING with the Devil has been a perilous experiment. In 1790, an unfortunate named André Dubuisson, was confined in the Bastille, charged with raising the Devil. In the reign of Charles I, Thomas Browne, yeoman, was indicted at Middlesex Sessions, for that he did “wickedly, diabolically, and feloniously make an agreement with an evil and impious spirit, that he, the same Thomas Browne, would within ten days after his death, give his soul to the same impious and evil spirit,” for the purpose of having a clear income of £2,000 a year. Thomas was found not guilty. In 1682, three persons were hanged at Exeter, and in 1712, five others were hanged at Northampton, for witchcraft and trafficking with the Devil, who has been represented as a black-visaged, sulphurous-constituted individual, horned like an old goat, with satyr-like legs, a tail of unpleasant length, and a reckless disposition to buy people presumably his without purchase. I intend to treat the subject entirely from a Biblical point of view; the Christian Devil being a Bible institution. I say the Christian Devil, because other religions also have their Devils, and it is well to prevent confusion. I frankly admit that none of these religions have a Devil so devilish as that of the Christian.

I am unable to say certainly whether I am writing about a singular Devil or a plurality of Devils. In many texts “Devils” are mentioned (Leviticus xvii, 7; Mark i, 34, &c.) recognising a plurality; in others “the Devil” (Luke iv, 2), as if there was but one. Seven Devils went out of Mary called Magdalene (Luke viii, 2). The Rev. P. Hains, a Wigan church clergyman, tells me that where “Devils” are to be found in the Gospels it is mistranslated and should be “Demons” — these being apparently an inferior sort of Devils. Hershon (Talmudical Commentary on Genesis, p. 299), quotes from Rabbi Yochanan, “There were three hundred different species of male demons in Sichin, but what the female demon is like I know not;” and from Rava, “If anyone wishes to see the demons themselves let him burn and reduce to ashes the offspring of a first-born black cat; let him put a little of it in his eyes and he will see them.” Assuming that either there is one Devil, more than one, or less than one, and having thus cleared away mere numerical difficulties, we will proceed to give the Devil his due. The word Satan שָׂטָן SheTeN occurs 1 Samuel xxix, 4, and is there translated “adversary,” (Cahen) “obstacle,” see also I Kings xi, 14. Satan appears either to have been a child of God or a most intimate acquaintance of the family, for, on “a day when the children of God came to present themselves before the Lord, Satan came also amongst them,” (Job I, 6) and no surprise or dis-

approbation is manifested at his presence. Some trace in this the Persian demonology where the good spirits surround Ormuzd and where Ahriman is the spirit of evil. The conversation in the Book of Job between God and the Devil has a value proportioned to the rarity of the scene and to the high characters of the personages concerned, despite the infidel criticism of Martin Luther, who condemns the Book of Job as “a sheer *argumentum fabula*.” A Christian ought to be surprised to find “God omniscient” putting to Satan the query: Whence comest thou? for he cannot suppose God, the all-wise, ignorant upon the subject. Satan’s reply: “From going to and fro in the earth, and from going up and down it,” increases our surprise and augments our astonishment. The true believer should be astonished to find from his Bible that Satan could have gone to and fro in the earth, and walked up and down it, and yet not have met God, if omnipresent, at least occasionally, during his journeying. It is not easy to conceive omnipresence absent, even temporarily, from every spot where the Devil promenaded. The Lord makes no comment on Satan’s reply, but says: “Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil?” It seems extraordinary that God should wish to have the Devil’s judgment on the only good man then living: the more extraordinary, as God, the all-wise, knew Satan’s opinion without asking it, and God, the immutable, would not be influenced by the expression of the Devil’s views. Satan’s answer is: “Doth Job fear God for naught? Hast thou not made an hedge about him, and about all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blest the work of his hand, and his substance is increased in the land; but put forth thine hand now and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face.” God’s reply to this audacious declaration is: “Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand.” And this was Job’s reward for being a perfect and upright man, one that feared God and eschewed evil. He was not actually sent to the Devil, but to the Devil was given power over all that he had. Job lost all without repining, sons, daughters, oxen, asses, camels, and sheep, all destroyed, and yet “Job sinned not.” Divines urge that this is a beautiful picture of patience and contentment under wrong and misfortune. But it is neither good to submit patiently to wrong, nor to rest contented under misfortune. It is better to resist wrong; wiser to carefully investigate the causes of wrong and misfortune, with a view to their removal. Contentment under wrong is a crime; voluntary submission under oppression is no virtue.

“Again, there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord [as if God’s children could ever be absent from him], and Satan came also among them to present himself before the Lord. And the Lord [again] said unto Satan, From

whence comest thou? And Satan answered the Lord and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth? a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? and still he holdeth fast his integrity, **ALTHOUGH THOU MOVEDST ME AGAINST HIM TO DESTROY HIM WITHOUT CAUSE.**” Can God be moved against a man to destroy him without a cause? If so, God is neither immutable nor all-wise. Yet the Bible puts into God’s mouth the terrible admission that the Devil had moved God against Job to destroy him without cause. If true, it destroys alike God’s goodness and his wisdom.

But Satan answered the Lord and said: “Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life; put forth thine hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face.”

Does the Lord now drive the Devil from his presence? Is there any expression of wrath or indignation against this tempter? “The Lord said unto Satan: Behold, he is in thine hand, but save his life.” And Job, being better than everybody else, finds himself smitten in consequence with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown. The ways of the Lord are not as our ways, or this would seem the reverse of an encouragement to virtue.

In the account of the numbering by David, in one place “God,” and in another “Satan,” occurs (1 Chron. xxi,1; 2 Sam. xxiv, 1), and to each the same act of “moving” or “provoking” David to number his people is attributed. There may be in this more harmony than ordinary men recognise, for one erudite Bible commentator tells us, speaking of the Hebrew word *Azazel*: “This terrible and venerable name of God, through the pens of Biblical glossers, has been *a devil, a mountain, a wilderness, and a he-goat.*”<sup>1</sup> Well may incomprehensibility be an attribute of deity when, even to holy and reverend fathers, God has been sometimes undistinguishable from a he-goat or a Devil. Moncure D. Conway writes: “There can be little question that the Hebrews, from whom the Calvinist inherited his deity, had no Devil in their mythology, because the jealous and vindictive Jehovah was quite equal to any work of that kind — as the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, bringing plagues upon the land, or deceiving a prophet and then destroying him for his false prophecies.”<sup>2</sup>

God is a spirit. Jesus is God. Jesus was led up of the Spirit to be tempted of the Devil. All these propositions are equally credible.

On the temptation of Jesus by the Devil, the Rev. Dr. Giles writes: “That the Devil should appear personally *to the Son of God is certainly not more wonderful* than that he should, in a more remote age, have appeared *among* the Sons of God, in the

presence of God himself, to tempt and torment the righteous Job. But that Satan should carry Jesus, bodily and literally, through the air — first to the top of a high mountain, and then to the topmost pinnacle of the temple — is wholly inadmissible; it is an insult to our understanding.”<sup>3</sup> It is pleasant to find clergymen zealously repudiating their own creeds.

I am not prepared to speak strongly as to the color of the Devil. White men paint him black; black men paint him white. He can scarcely be colorless, as otherwise the Evangelists would have labored under considerable difficulties in witnessing the casting out of the Devil from the man in the synagogue (Luke iv, 35, 36). This Devil is described as an unclean Devil. The Devils were subject to the 70 disciples whom Jesus appointed to preach (Luke x, 17), and they are not unbelievers: one text tells us that they believe and tremble (James ii, 19). It is a fact of some poor Devils that the more they believe the more they tremble. According to another text the Devil goeth about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter v, 8), though the Devil’s “doctrines” presumably include vegetarianism (1 Timothy iv, 1, 3). I am not sure what drinks devils incline to, though it is distinguished from the wine of the communion (1 Corinthians x, 21). Devils should be a sort of eternal salamanders, for there is everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels (Matt. xxv, 41); and there is a lake of brimstone and fire, into which the Devil was cast (Rev. xx, 10). The Devil has, at least upon one occasion, figured as a controversialist. For we learn that he disputed with the arch-angel Michael, contending about the body of Moses (Jude 9); in these degenerate days of personality in debate, it is pleasant to know that the religious champion was very civil towards his Satanic opponent. The Devil was imprisoned for 1,000 years in a bottomless pit (Rev. xx, 2). If a pit had no bottom, it seems but little confinement to shut the top. But, with faith and prayer even a good foundation may be obtained for a bottomless pit. The writer of Revelation, adopting the view of some Hebrew writers, speaks of “the dragon, that old serpent which is the devil and Satan” and following this, it is urged that the Devil was the serpent of Genesis — that is, that it was really Satan who, in this guise, tempted Eve. There is this difficulty in the matter — the Devil is a liar (John viii, 44); but in the interview with Eve the serpent seems to have confined himself to the strict truth (Gen. iii, 4, 5, 22). There is, in fact, no point of resemblance — no horns, no hoof, nothing except a tail.

Kalisch notes that “the Egyptians represented the eternal spirit Kneph, the author of all good, under the mythic form” of the serpent, but they employed the same symbol “for Typhon, the author of all moral and physical evil, and in the Egyptian symbolical

alphabet, the serpent represents subtlety and cunning, lust, and sensual pleasure.”

The Old Testament speaks a little of the Devils, sometimes of Satan, but never of “The Devil;” yet Matthew ushers him in, in the temptation scene, without introduction, and as if he were an old acquaintance. I do not remember reading in the Old Testament, anything about the lake of brimstone and fire. Although Malachi iv, 1, speaks of the day “that shall burn as an oven when the wicked shall be burned up.” This feature of faith was reserved for the warmth of Christian love to develop from some of the Talmudical writers. The Rev. C. Boutell in his Bible dictionary says, that, “it is at the least unfortunate that the word ‘hell’ should have been used as if the translation of the Hebrew ‘sheol.’” Zechariah, in a vision, saw “Joshua, the High Priest, standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to resist him” (Zachariah iii, 1). Why the Devil wanted to resist Joshua is not clear; but, as Joshua’s garments were in a very filthy state, it may be that he was preaching to the priest the virtues of cleanliness. Jesus said that one of the twelve disciples was a Devil (John vi, 70). You are told to resist the devil and he will flee from you (James iv, 7). If this be true, he is a cowardly Devil, and thus does not agree quite with Milton’s picture of his grand defiance, almost heroism. But then Milton was a poet, and true religion has but little poetry in it.

Jeroboam, one of the Jewish monarchs, ordained priests for the devils (2 Chron. ix, 15). In the time of Jesus, Satan must, when not in the body of some mad, deaf, dumb, blind, or paralytic person, have been occasionally in heaven; for Jesus, on one occasion, told his disciples that he saw Satan, as lightning, fall from heaven (Luke x, 18). Jesus told Simon Peter that Satan desired to have him, that he might sift him as wheat (Luke xxii, 31); perhaps Jesus was chaffing his disciple. Paul, the apostle, seems to have looked on the Devil much as some bigots look on the police, for Paul delivered Hymeneus and Alexander unto Satan, that they might learn not to blaspheme (1 Timothy i, 20).

Revivalists are much indebted for their evanescent successes to hell and the Devil. Thomas English, a fair specimen of those very noisy and active preachers who do so much in promoting revivals, spoke of “dwelling with devouring fire, bearing everlasting burning, roasting on the Devil’s spit, broiling on his gridiron, being pitched about with his fork, drinking the liquid fire, breathing the brimstone fumes, drowning in a red-hot sea, lying on fiery beds.”<sup>4</sup> The vulgar tirades of Reginald Radcliffe, Richard Weaver, and C. H. Spurgeon, will serve to evidence that the above quotation is no exaggeration. In London, before crowded audiences, Mr. Weaver, without originality, and with only the merit of copied coarseness, has called upon the Lord to “shake the ungodly for five minutes over the mouth of hell.” Mr. Spurgeon has drawn pictures of hell

which, if true and revealed to him by God, would be most disgustingly frightful, and which being but the creation of his own morbid fancies, induce a feeling of contempt as well as disgust for the teacher, who uses such horrible descriptions to affright his weaker hearers.

Calmet says that “By collecting all the passages where Satan (or the Devil) is mentioned, it may be observed, that he fell from Heaven, with all his company; that God cast him down from thence for the punishment of his pride; and by his envy and malice, death, and all other evils came into the world; that by the permission of God he exercises a sort of government in the world over his subordinates, over apostate angels like himself; that God makes use of him to prove good men, and to chastise bad ones; that he is a lying spirit in the mouth of false prophets, seducers, and heretics; that it is he, or some of his, that torment, obsess, or possess men, that inspire them with evil designs, as did *David*, when he suggested to him to number his people, and to *Judas* to betray *Jesus Christ*, and to Ananias and Sapphira to conceal the price of their field. That he roves about full of rage, like a roaring lion, to tempt, to betray, to destroy, and to involve us in guilt and wickedness.

“That his power and malice are restricted within certain limits, and controlled by the will of God; that he sometimes appears to men to seduce them; that he can transform himself into an angel of light; that he sometimes assumes the form of a spectre, as he appeared to the Egyptians while they were involved in darkness in the days of Moses; that he creates several diseases to men; that he chiefly presides over death, and bears away the souls of the wicked to hell; that at present he is confined to Hell, as in a prison, but that he will be unbound and set at liberty in the year of *Anti-Christ*; that hell-fire is prepared for him and his; that he is to be judged at the last day. But I cannot perceive very clearly from scripture, that he torments the souls of the wicked in hell, as we generally believe.”

In his interesting volume on Elizabethan demonology Mr. Spalding urges that “the empire of the supernatural must obviously be most extended where civilization is the least advanced,” and he gives three reasons for the belief in devils — 1. “The apparent incapacity of the majority of mankind to accept a purely monotheistic creed.” 2. “The division of spirits into hostile camps, good and evil.” 3. “The tendency of all theological systems to absorb into themselves the deities extraneous to themselves, not as gods, but as inferior or even evil spirits.”

Even if I were a theist I should refuse to see in God a being omniscient and omnipotent, who puts us into this world without our volition, leaves us to struggle through it unequally pitted against an almost omnipotent and super-subtle Devil; and who, if

we fail, finally drops us out of this world into Hell-fire, where a legion of inferior devils finds constant and never-ending employment in inventing fresh tortures for us; our crime being, that we have not succeeded where success was rendered impossible. No high thinkings are developed by the doctrine of Devils and damnation. If a potent faith, it degrades to imbecility alike the teacher and the taught, by its abhorrent mercilessness; and if mere form instead of a faith, then is the Devil doctrine a misleading sham.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> G.R. Gliddon's extract from Land's "Sacra Scriptura," chap, iii, sec. 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Demonology and Devil-lore," vol. i, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> "Christian Records," by the Rev. Dr. Giles, p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> "Pilgrim's Progress from Methodism to Christianity."

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