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Satan in the Bible, God's Minister of Justice

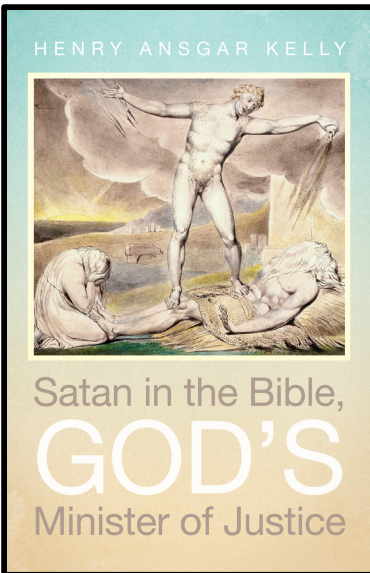
by Henry Ansgar Kelly

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New Title from Henry Ansgar Kelly ***Satan in the Bible, God's Minister of Justice***



Throughout the ages, Satan has been seen as God's implacable enemy, fiercely determined to keep as many human beings as he can from entering the heavenly kingdom. But according to Henry Ansgar Kelly, this understanding dates only from post-biblical times, when Satan was reconceived as Lucifer, a rebel angel, and as the serpent in the garden of Eden. In the Bible itself, beginning in the book of Job and continuing through the New Testament, Satan is considered to be a member of the heavenly government, charged with monitoring the human race. In effect, he is God's Minister of Justice, bent on exposing sin and vice, especially in virtuous-seeming persons like Job and Jesus. He fills the roles of investigator, tempter (that is, tester), accuser, prosecutor, and punisher, but also obstructor, preventer of vice, and rehabilitator. He is much feared and despised, accused of underhanded and immoral tactics. His removal from office is promised and his eventual punishment hoped for. The later misreading of Satan as radically depraved transformed Christianity into a highly dualistic religion, with an ongoing contest between good and evil. Seeing Satan in his true nature, as a cynical and sinister celestial bureaucrat, will help to remedy this distorted view.

Henry Ansgar Kelly is Distinguished Research Professor in the Division of the Humanities at UCLA. He is the author of *The Devil, Demonology, and Witchcraft* (2004), *The Devil at Baptism* (2004), and *Satan: A Biography* (2006).



What is the thesis of *Satan in the Bible, God's Minister of Justice*?

That's easy, the thesis is right there in the title. Satan as he appears in the Bible is not a rebel angel or a fallen angel or an enemy of God. Rather, he works for God. Think of him as a "bad cop," while God is the "good cop." We are here to be tested, and Satan is the tester. In Hebrew and Greek and Latin, "test" and "tempt" are the same word.

Isn't he called "the Evil One"? How can someone evil be working for God?

That's a misleading translation; sure, he's "bad news," and you have to watch out for him—he means trouble. The same is true of lightning-strikes, floods, and cancer, and other events connected with "the problem of evil." Besides, we all have some evil in us, and we can still try to serve God. Consider persons with flawed characters and underhanded methods who have acted for the American government, like J. Edgar Hoover and Senator Joseph McCarthy.

So, who exactly is Satan, and what does he do?

You can see his main functions in the Book of Job. He is one of the angels, whose duty it is to patrol the earth, check out humans, and report on them. These functions carry on through the whole New Testament. Jesus in the desert acknowledged Satan's control of the earth and submitted to his testing/tempting. Jesus predicted Satan's fall from power, but it had not happened yet, and people still had to be on guard against his unscrupulous tactics. We have to get rid of the medieval idea that angels have to be either all-good or all-bad, never something in-between.

Doesn't Jesus say he saw Satan fall like lightning?

Yes, but he was talking about the collapse of Satan's dominion initiated by the success of the disciples's mission. Elsewhere he says that Satan WILL be thrown out. In the Book of Revelation, Satan's fight with Michael is explained as an allegory about the termination of Satan's job as accuser of humans; it will take place only after many Christians have been martyred.

Doesn't the fight of Michael with Lucifer take place before the creation of Adam and Eve, and doesn't Lucifer then become Satan and tempt Eve?

That's the way it happens in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but not in the Bible. Satan is not identified with the Eden serpent until the second century AD. Satan is not called Lucifer (which means the Morning Star) until the third century AD. In the New Testament, it is Jesus who is called Lucifer. Stories of Satan as the serpent, and Satan as Lucifer the bright rebellious angel, are post-biblical fantasies. I explain where they come from.

Is your idea of Satan as working for God a new idea? Why have other biblical scholars not realized it, if it's true?

Some scholars admit that the Satan who tempts Job is not a fallen angel, but no one else has drawn the conclusion that the same is true of Satan in the New Testament. It's a pretty neglected subject. Everyone still seems tacitly to believe the early post-biblical interpreters who came up with the notion of the pre-Adam rebellion of the angels, even though they are unable to demonstrate this idea in the Bible.

As a Christian, in what ways has your faith been influenced by researching for this book?

Actually, I've been doing research on Satan for all of my scholarly career, and this book is just the latest product. I started while I was a Jesuit seminarian at St. Louis University, when studying the Salem witch trials in a literature class. I was scandalized by the fact that Christians of all sorts had believed such ridiculous things about the Devil, like diabolical pacts and worship. The more I investigated, the more I found that most beliefs about Satan were based on misinterpretations of what was truly set forth in the Bible. So I began a campaign to purify Christian faith on these points, and to show that our religion should not be seen as a struggle between a good God and a powerful spiritual opponent who is the embodiment of evil. Rather, this earth is a proving ground where we encounter evils allowed by Our Father, whether or not through the intervention of an assistant (Satan), which we pray to avoid or overcome through the example and help of His Son, Jesus.

Is Satan real?

Satan is clearly portrayed as real in the New Testament. Jesus, St. Paul, and everyone else think of him as having hostile intentions towards them ("satan" means adversary in Hebrew), determined to trip them up and demonstrate to God that they are unworthy, just as he tried to do with Job. He is cynical and suspicious of humans, eager to expose seemingly good persons as sinners. The rebel Lucifer of later belief is just the opposite. He hates God, and tries to make good people bad.

Are we supposed to believe in him?

That's up to you. But if you think that you do have to believe in Satan, because he is portrayed as real in the Bible, you should believe in the Satan who is actually described in the Bible, not the fallen Lucifer invented later. But you might want to take Jesus at his word, when he said that Satan would soon be put out of the way. Maybe Satan's job was taken away from him when Jesus died for our sins, and he is no longer around to tempt us.

What about demons? Isn't Satan called the Prince of demons?

No, that's a mistake. Beelzebub is the prince of demons, and Satan is not Beelzebub. Demons are also presented in the Gospels as real, but they are not fallen angels, but miserable spirit-parasites that cause disease and derangement by living in human bodies; they don't do any tempting or any other of Satan's functions. Believe in them if you think you must, but don't make them something other than how they are described in the Bible.

How does St. Paul view Satan?

Paul sees Satan as obstructing and testing, but also as punishing sinners with a view to rehabilitation. Satan inflicts illness on Paul's own body, with God's approval, to keep him from pride. We see something similar in the Gospel of Luke. Satan gets permission to test the apostles further, but Jesus intervenes so that the testing is not too severe, and Peter will be able to help the others when he recovers from giving in to temptation. In the Our Father, we ask God not to lead us into temptation, but to deliver us "from evil" or "from the Evil One," which suggests that God and Satan are acting together, as they do in the case of Job.

An Excerpt from Satan in the Bible, God's Minister of Justice

The basic paradigm of the biblical Satan is that which is presented in the Book of Job, in which God and Satan confer about whether and how much Job should be tested in order to ascertain his moral character. God comes across as easily satisfied, with no need for action, while Satan is skeptical and insistent that further evidence is required. A New Testament example of a similar situation appears in Luke, when Jesus at the Last Supper congratulates his apostles for persevering with him through various trials. However, he says that Satan requested that they be subjected to more trials and tests, so that they could be "sifted like wheat," that is, their impurities made manifest. Satan's request was granted, Jesus indicates, and it is a foregone conclusion that all of them will fail the tests. But Jesus says that he intervened with a plea, that at least Peter's testing would not be so severe that he could not recover and help bring back his brethren. This petition too was granted.

In the prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples, the final pair of petitions ask Our Father not to lead us into testing, but to free us from harm, or the Harmful One. If the latter interpretation is accepted, that is, as referring to Satan, it looks like another instance of the interplay between God and Satan on the need for putting us through our paces. Like Jesus in the case of the apostles, we should all implore God to moderate the pressure put on us, so that we can more readily remain faithful. We have already assured Our Father of our good will, in promising to forgive those who are indebted to us, or who have trespassed against us. We also anticipated the final request about "harm," asking God not to test our virtue by depriving us of sufficient physical nourishment, but rather to make sure that we acquire our daily quota of bread.

In Second Corinthians, Paul presents still another case of temptation as a negotiation involving God, Satan, and the human subject. Paul says that he prayed time after time for God to remove the thorn in his flesh that was causing him so much torment. He identifies this thorn as "an envoy from Satan." Each time he prayed, God reassured him that the trial would not be too much for him to bear, and that his strength of character would be sufficient for him not to succumb to despair or anger, or any other immoderate reaction. There was a good purpose for the ordeal: it was meant to keep him from being puffed up, from taking excessive pride in the privileged place he had in spreading the good news of Christ.

One of Paul's impersonators, the author of Second Thessalonians, predicts that God will cooperate with Satan in bringing about the hardships that will come with the Man of Lawlessness. The other chief paradigm of Satan from the Old Testament appears in the Book of Zechariah, in which Satan plays the role of accuser against humans in the heavenly court. In accusing the high priest Joshua, Satan obviously has the evidence on his side, symbolized by the filthy clothes that Joshua wears, yet God intervenes and lets him off, dismissing as well the charges against the other priests who are waiting in the dock.

The clearest example of Satan as heavenly prosecutor in the New Testament comes in the Book of Revelation, where Michael's coming defeat of Satan is explained as Satan's dismissal from his role of accuser of humans in God's presence. In the case of Job, Satan was not able to make any accusation against him, because Job had done no wrong, so instead he got permission to provoke him into committing sin. If Job had bent under the pressure and lashed out against the injuries inflicted upon him, then Satan would have moved on to his accusatorial function, named Job's sins, and demanded appropriate punishment.

Many of the references to Satan in the Gospels and Epistles detail the sort of tests and trials he brings to bear on the subjects of his attention, with the primary case being his personal appearance in testing Jesus in the desert. One of his methods is to put obstacles in the way, as Paul complains to the Thessalonians. He prays that his disciples in Rome will be able to trample over such obstacles of Satan. Jesus rebukes Peter as a satanic roadblock, a "scandal," a description that harks back to the episode in Numbers when the Angel of Yahweh appeared as a satan in the road to prevent Balaam from proceeding.

Praise for
Satan in the Bible, God's Minister of Justice

“A world expert on Satan in the Bible, Henry Ansgar Kelly offers the fruits of years of research. His intriguing thesis is that Satan is not God's enemy in the Old and New Testaments but God's employee, a divine prosecuting attorney working for the celestial government. At once learned and provocative, this book is bound to be controversial in probing the biblical foundations of evil.”

—**Mark S. Smith, Helena Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis, Princeton Theological Seminary**

“Henry Ansgar Kelly traces the story of the biblical Satan from its earliest sources to the post-biblical developments that dominate popular culture. In doing so, he carefully attends to the biblical contexts of references to the Adversary, distinguishing them from the misinterpretations and misappropriations that have accrued over the centuries. As such, Kelly has written an interesting, accessible, and biblically literate book of interest to scholars, students, and the general public.”

—**Mary Ann Beavis, Department of Religion and Culture Undergraduate Chair, Religion and Culture Program, University of Saskatchewan**

