

Why I Don't Believe in the Devil

This is the first time I've written on this subject. I expect I will have to revise it as I think about it more. I'm writing this only because so many of my friends seem baffled as to why I disbelieve in the Devil. There are a whole set of reasons. Let me begin with the most cogent reason, then briefly mention some others.

What Does It Mean to Believe?

"Believe" has two distinct meanings. One is to intellectually accept a propositional statement that something exists, or that something is true. I will call this Sense 1. The second, which is far more important to the world of faith, is "to have faith in, to totally trust, etc." I'll call this Sense 2.

So when David, in the 27th Psalm, says, "I had fainted, unless I had *believed* to see the goodness of the Lord" (KJV), he is speaking of Sense 2 belief. And when Asaph, in the 78th Psalm, says, "They did *not* believe in God or trust in his deliverance" (NIV), he is speaking of Sense 2 disbelief.

It is in this second sense, most basically, that I do not believe in Satan or devils or demons or whatever. I exercise disbelief in the devil by refusing to give it the credibility it does not deserve. As Jesus cautioned his disciples in Luke 10:20, "Do not rejoice that the demons submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

It is incumbent on Christians to believe in God. We believe (Sense 1) in God's existence. We also believe we can entrust our lives to his unfailing love (Sense 2). In Sense 2 believing, we develop a positive, personal relationship with God. It is impossible to have such a relationship with the Devil (consider Goethe's *Faust*). So I believe *against* the Devil, or I *disbelieve* in the Devil.

The First-Century Jewish Worldview

That doesn't necessarily mean I disbelieve in the existence of the Devil. But it may mean that I believe in the Devil's existence and reality in a way *different* from the way most Christians speak of the Devil, or Satan. For me, this Sense 1 belief or disbelief is based on my reading of Scripture.

In the first place, Satan is referred to specifically only three times in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament): I Chronicles 21:1, Job 1-2, and Zechariah 3:1-2. Each of these books were written during or after Israel's exile in Babylon. That is to say, they were written while their authors were exposed to the influence of Persian religion. The Hebrew writers had long pondered the conundrum of the existence of Evil in God's creation. The Persians offered Satan as an explanation of Evil. Thus Satan appears only in the later books of the Old Testament.

Satan is mentioned with increasing frequency in the Apocrypha. These are Jewish writings that appeared in the 400-year period between Malachi and Matthew. These apocryphal writings contributed many details about Satan that do not appear in the Hebrew Bible. Thus by the time of Jesus, Satan was a well-established feature of the Jewish worldview.

In this essay I am using Satan and Devil interchangeably. Both words refer to the same entity. The former is from the Hebrew language, the latter from Greek.

On Reading the Bible

Every serious reader recognizes that the Bible cannot be read solely as simple prose. Parts of it are poetry, parts communicate exotic visions, and parts consist of allegories, parables, figures of speech, similes, metaphors and symbols. When the Bible employs a metaphor or symbol, we must read it as metaphor or symbol, not as reality. We recognize that Uncle Sam stands for the United States of American. No one believes that Uncle Sam is real. Uncle Sam merely points to the reality of the USA. Similarly, I believe that Satan, the Devil, demons, and so on are metaphors and symbols. They point to the reality of powers of darkness. They are symbols of Evil in its various forms – the same reality the authors of the Hebrew Bible (up to the time of Exile) pointed to when they used the symbols of “sea” to denote the chaos present in the universe.

Evil, as Solzhenitsyn insisted, is a reality present in each of us. It also exists in the universe in form of diseases, including mental disease, and natural disasters. Evil is also present in the corporate institutions of society: family, military, government, education, religion, etc. So whether one speaks of Evil as chaos, sea, dragon, serpent, Leviathan, Lucifer Beelzebub, Satan, Devil, or whatever, it is the reality of Evil that must concern us, not the figure of speech. These figures of speech describe our consciousness of Evil for which we find we do not have adequate prose language.

This is why, when I use the terms Satan or the Devil, I try to refer to “It” rather than “He” because Satan is not a real person. Only God is truly personal, and human beings are personal insofar as we have been created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:28). Thus Satan is clearly a nonperson, an antiperson, a subperson – in short, all that God is not. Along with N. T. Wright and other evangelical scholars, I think it is more accurate to understand Satan as a force, or a variety of malevolent forces, inherent in the nature of the created universe. We personify these forces, just as we personify God when we speak of God's arms or mouth. We do this because we have no sure way of speaking about God otherwise. So Evil is real, but our way of personifying Evil is an accommodation to language.

Jesus and the Devil

The big sticking point for most of my friends is simply this: Why would I disbelieve in something that Jesus believed in? We're talking now, of course, about belief (Sense 1) – belief “in the existence of.” My response goes something like this:

First, I don't question that Jesus believed in the reality of Evil, and spoke of it in terms of the Devil and demons. All four Gospels attest to this. But consider for a moment the implications of Jesus' Incarnation, that basic tenet of Christian faith. Jesus was “truly man.” The apostle John declares that to deny that Jesus came “in the flesh” is to be anti-Christ (1 John 4:1-4). Jesus did not merely have the *appearance* of humanity (this is the heresy of doceticism): he was human. Further, as a truly human being he necessarily ministered within the worldview of first-century Jews. Therefore he communicated in language and deeds appropriate to that worldview.

The fact that Jesus believed in and spoke of the Devil and demons, however, does not necessarily mean that they exist as literal beings. ??? Clearly, Jesus was in conflict with Evil, expressed in various forms. To cite just one example, he was tested “by the Devil” during his 40-days in the wilderness. That testing, as we clearly see from the biblical story, was an inward testing. It was psychological: Should I seek popular appeal? Provide bread and circuses? Should I make the decision that a later Faust would succumb to? How we understand such psychological experiences of Evil, and how we talk about them in the 21st century as compared with the 1st, may differ, but can't distract from the reality of the forces at work.

Another example: Jesus – by virtue of his faith (his belief, Sense 2) in his heavenly Father – healed a woman with a long-standing blood flow. He described her as being “held captive by Satan.” In another instance, he “cast out demons” from a man.

These were what today we call "natural evil" in the form of severe physical and mental disease. What we call it – in 1st century language or 21st century – is of less importance than overcoming the evil. Jesus was incarnated to reveal the nature of God as the ultimate conqueror of Evil, not to explain the universe scientifically.

Scripture declares that Jesus came to "destroy the works of the Devil." Not the Devil, please note, but the works of the Devil.?? For if the Devil is the mere personification of Evil, or the symbol of Evil, there is no Devil to destroy. We Christians believe that the decisive battle with Evil was fought at Calvary, and ultimate victory was guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection.

There are other reasons why I don't believe in the Devil, and they are based on my reading of the nature of God, of God's creation, and the nature of Evil as presented in Scripture. But it would expand the length of this essay too much to try to go into them at this time. Let the above suffice for now.