

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #41: WAS SATAN EVER IN HEAVEN?

By John Temples

This week's article will be an extra-long read, but I think you will find it interesting. I present it not as a matter of faith, but as a stimulus to re-examine traditional views of several passages of Scripture. My question is this:

Has Satan, *as Satan*, ever been in heaven?

It may surprise you to learn that there is no Bible passage that explicitly and unequivocally places Satan in heaven or affirms that he led a rebellion there. Two passages are often quoted which seem to say so. One is Revelation 12:7-9, which we will examine forthwith; and the other is Job 1:6 (Job 2:1 is virtually identical). We will look at the Job passage in a bit.

Let's look at the Revelation text. Revelation 12:7-9 says, "And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."

Sounds pretty cut and dried. But beware--many things in Revelation are not what they seem. The book is filled with apocalyptic imagery and symbols.

The traditional view of most scholars is that this text describes a rebellion by Satan, a heavenly angel; and the subsequent casting out of him and his minions (fellow rebellious angels) by God.

I've never been comfortable with the idea of "war in heaven." Heaven is, well, *heaven*. It is under God's complete, divine control. God's will is always done perfectly and completely in heaven (didn't Jesus pray that God's will would be done on earth "as it is in heaven"?). And what's a dragon doing there?

It is my view that this passage has nothing to do with Satan's origin; rather, it is describing in figurative language the struggle between the church and the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries.

Here is the way I dealt with this passage in my commentary on Revelation¹:

“The focal point of this vision is a woman. In Revelation, a woman usually represents a church.... This woman is clothed with the sun and has the moon under her feet and a tiara of twelve stars on her head. Sun, moon, and stars usually represent rulers or dignitaries. In Malachi 4:2, Christ is called ‘the sun of righteousness.’ If this is what is intended by the symbol, then the church is pictured as clothed with Christ. The sun may also refer to the light of the New Testament, the law of the church. Perhaps ‘the moon under her feet’ represents the Old Testament, the ‘lesser light’ that reflects the brighter glory of the New Testament. The crown of twelve stars in all likelihood symbolizes the apostles. All the elements of this vision point to the church in its original pure state, when it had the approval of God, before it was corrupted and changed into a false church.

“The woman is pregnant and about to deliver. Before the woman gives birth, she is persecuted by a great dragon (verses 3, 4). However, the dragon is unable to prevent the child from being born (verse 5). She bears a male child who is said to rule all nations with an iron rod and was caught up to God and to His throne. Who is the woman and what do these symbols mean? Remember that a woman represents a church. A pregnant woman, or a woman giving birth, would symbolize a growing church. The symbol points to some time during the first three centuries, when the church was growing in spite of persecution.

“Where did the persecution come from? Remember, the first tactic Satan tried to destroy the church was the use of earthly political and/or military power—specifically, the political Roman Empire. The dragon, then, not only symbolizes Satan (verse 9), but also the earthly powers under his control. The color of the dragon is red. Red is the symbol of blood; hence, the vision suggests that the church's struggle would be a bloody and violent one.... Historically, the Roman

¹ John Temples, *Pictures From Patmos*, a Kindle ebook available on Amazon.

persecution of Christianity reached a climax during the reign of Diocletian in 303. Diocletian's goal was the complete destruction of Christianity. Truly, the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, ready to devour her offspring (verse 4). The church was growing and Diocletian was determined to stop it. His campaign was vicious, but it was brought to an abrupt end with the ascension of Constantine to the throne in 313. Constantine not only ended the persecutions, but also passed a series of laws favorable to Christianity. He even presided over a church council in 325 and was said to have become a Christian. Within a few decades, the Roman Empire became 'Christian.' In this, the male child (the offspring of the church, Christians) was not only born successfully, but was exalted ('caught up to heaven,' verse 5).

"Satan's intense campaign against the church (forcing the woman to flee into the wilderness) is called in verse 7 a 'war.' This war is said to be 'in heaven.' Many scholars believe this refers to a literal war among the angels at some time in the distant past, which resulted in Satan's being cast out of heaven. But remember—almost everything in Revelation is symbolic. The subject of the immediate context is the church's struggle against the powers of evil before and during the Dark Ages, so the 'war' must refer to that. The fact that the war was seen 'in heaven' is simply a reflection of the fact that everything John has seen so far has happened in heaven, because heaven is the setting for the visions (4:1). The events symbolized, however, take place on earth. Satan's 'war' (his use of Roman military and political power against the church) singularly failed, and he was 'cast out of heaven' or humiliated (verse 9). This was the outcome when Constantine reversed all the harmful decrees against Christians and ordered the closure of all the pagan institutions of Rome. There is a clear reference to the Age of the Martyrs and the church's struggle with Roman persecution in verse 11: 'They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.'" (End of quote)

I am not the only commentator to take the view that this "war" was the struggle between the church and the Roman Empire. B. W. Johnson says, "It must be remembered that Michael, the woman, the man child, the dragon, the conflict, and the casting down of the dragon are all symbols. This symbolism indicates the defeat of the dragon in his attempt. He is not only vanquished, but humiliated,

‘cast down.’ The first mighty attempt of Satan to ‘abolish the Christian name from the earth,’ signally fails. We have already written enough to show the reader that this represents the facts of history. Pagan Rome, the dragon, struck at the heart of the Church. Blood flowed in rivers, the blood of the saints, but the grandeur of their lives and the heroism of their deaths struck fear and conviction to the hearts of their enemies. Each martyr called forth an army who were ready to die for Christ. God exalted the man child, caught it to his bosom, protected it, and Pagan Rome went down. The dragon prevailed not. Baffled, he is cast to the earth.” (B. W. Johnson, *The People’s New Testament With Notes*, comments on Revelation 12:7.)

John T. Hinds took a similar view in his commentary: “The words describe what John saw in the picture; they symbolically represent the efforts to destroy the true church.... Just as Jesus operates through His followers, so Satan operates through human agents. In this case pagan Rome is the instrumental dragon, the devil the influencing dragon. Hence, the visible war refers to the conflict between pagan Rome and the church.” (John T. Hinds, *A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, Gospel Advocate Company, Nashville, Tennessee 1937; page 180.)

In addition, there are some factors which make it very clear that the “heaven” referred to here is not the heaven which is the eternal abode of God, and that it has no reference to the devil being cast out of that heaven. For one thing, the dragon was in the same place the woman was; for it is said that he “stood before the woman... to devour her child as soon as it was born.” But the woman represents the church on earth (compare verse 17, which plainly identifies the woman’s offspring as Christians).

So to repeat, it is my view that this passage has nothing to do with Satan’s origin; rather, it is describing in symbolic form the struggle between the church and the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries. That would mean, then, that these verses are describing a battle on earth, not in heaven. Now it may be true that Satan was once in heaven, and that he did lead a rebellion of angels, and that he was cast out of heaven as a result--I just don’t believe Revelation 12:7-9 proves that.

But as I studied these matters, I came to ask myself a question: Has Satan (evil spirit that he is) ever been in heaven? To answer that question, we need to look at several passages that have traditionally been viewed as teaching Satan's presence in heaven. We will examine Luke 10:18, Isaiah 14:12-15, Ezekiel 28:12-17, Ephesians 6:12, 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6, and Job 1:6/2:1.

LUKE 10:18

In this text, Jesus says, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." To correctly interpret this verse, we need to look at what was going on before to cause Jesus to say those words. Go back to Luke 9:1,2--"Then He called His twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases. He sent them to preach the kingdom of God and heal the sick." (We call this the "limited" commission.) Later, the Lord sent out seventy additional disciples with the same authority and mandate (Luke 10:1).

Now look at Luke 10:17, the verse immediately before verse 18: "Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.'" This glowing report caused Jesus to exclaim that he saw Satan "fall like lightning from heaven." It is easy to see that Jesus was not discussing the origin of Satan, but rather his defeat and humiliation at having his demonic agents cast out by ordinary disciples.

It's worthwhile at this point to note that "falling from heaven" is a standard Biblical symbol for defeat, humiliation, or fall from a lofty position. By the same token, "being exalted to heaven" or "being caught up to heaven" is a figure of speech for being highly honored or receiving special privilege or power.²

ISAIAH 14:12-15

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;

² In Luke 10:15, Jesus described the city of Capernaum as "being exalted to heaven." Obviously, the whole city was not miraculously transported to heaven; Jesus was referring to the special status the city enjoyed because of its being the site of many of Jesus's miracles.

I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.' Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit.”

Everyone admits that God is not talking directly to Satan in this passage; rather, He is addressing the king of Babylon (see verse 4). But the language seems to point to some spirit being beyond the merely human king of Babylon. For that reason, many scholars see these words as an “aside” to Satan.

But here’s my question: if this is indeed addressed to Satan, is there anything in the passage that clearly places him in heaven? No. Note verses 13 and 14: “For you have said in your heart, ‘I will ascend into heaven...I will be like the Most High.’” Rather than locating Satan in heaven, it actually has him on earth aspiring to get into heaven!

But what about verse 12--“How you are fallen from heaven”? Again, this is simply symbolic of humiliation or defeat. And remember, these words in their literal sense are directed to the king of Babylon. He certainly didn’t fall from heaven (but he did fall from his lofty position as king).

EZEKIEL 28:11-17

“Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, take up a lamentation for the king of Tyre, and say to him, Thus says the Lord God: You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering: the sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald with gold. The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes was prepared for you on the day you were created. You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you. By the abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within, and you sinned; therefore I cast you as a profane thing out of the mountain of God; and I destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the fiery stones. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;

you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor; I cast you to the ground, I laid you before kings, that they might gaze at you.”

We have here a passage just like Isaiah 14:12-15--language addressed to an earthly king, but which seems to transcend the human king and speak to the malevolent spirit that motivated him.

But again, IF the subject of the language is Satan (which is not conclusive by any means), we still see no clear and definite reference to Satan’s ever having been in heaven. In fact, verse 13 says, “You were in Eden.”

And look at verse 14--”You were the anointed cherub who covers.” A cherub is an angelic being. “Anointed” means that this cherub was honored or appointed by God for a specific task. And what task might that be? Look at Genesis 3:24--”So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.” Cherubim are usually pictured as being around the throne of God³; but when man fell, some of them were appointed as a “guard detail” to prevent further access by man to the tree of life.

What if there were a cherubic guard detail in Eden BEFORE the fall? Do any Scriptures support or suggest this? Go back to Ezekiel 28:14--”You were the anointed cherub who covers.” That’s the reading in the NKJV. Here is that text in some other versions:

- “You were anointed as a *guardian cherub*.” (NIV)
- “You were an *anointed guardian cherub*.” (ESV)
- “I ordained and anointed you as *the mighty angelic guardian*.” (NLT--New Living Translation)

Could THIS be the true origin of Satan? He was head of an angelic guard detail in the garden of Eden? And the rebellion which he led took place, not in heaven, but in Eden? I could believe that a lot more readily than that Satan led a rebellion of angels in heaven, right under God’s nose.

³ Psalms 80:1, Isaiah 37:16, Ezekiel 10:20, 11:22.

EPHESIANS 6:12

Here, Paul said, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

Does the expression “the heavenly places” here refer to God’s heaven? If so, then we are forced to say that heaven is crawling with “spiritual hosts of wickedness”! No, “heavenly places” here means high, exalted positions of power.

2 PETER 2:4 AND JUDE 6

“...God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness to be reserved for judgment....” (2 Peter 2:4). “And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day....” (Jude 6).

Both these passages affirm that at some time angels sinned, and that God delivered them into a state of restraint and punishment until the ultimate day of judgment. But neither passage states that the angelic sin and rebellion took place in heaven.

JOB 1:6 AND 2:1

These texts are virtually identical: “Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. And the Lord said to Satan, From where do you come? So Satan answered the Lord and said, ‘From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it.’”

Most people (myself included) have always read into these verses that Satan appeared IN HEAVEN before the Lord, but THE PASSAGE DOES NOT SPECIFICALLY SAY SO.

The correct understanding of these passages hinges on the identity of the “sons of God.” Who are they? Angels is the conventional answer.

Here are all the references to “sons of God” in the Bible:

- Genesis 6:1-4--“Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose. And the Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.’ There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown.”
- Job 1:6 and 2:1, the passages we are discussing.
- Job 38:4-7--“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”
- Matthew 5:9--“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”
- Luke 20:36 (speaking of faithful persons who attain the resurrection from the dead) “...nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.”
- Romans 8:14--“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”
- Romans 8:19--“For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.”
- Galatians 3:26--“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”

There are nine references to “sons of God” in Scripture--four in the Old Testament, five in the New.

I can tell you this right off the bat: in ALL of the New Testament references, “sons of God” refers to human beings, not angels. There is more debate about the Old Testament references, especially Job 38:7; but the majority of the Old Testament references probably mean the same as the New Testament ones.

What would be the significance of this in regard to Job 1:6 and 2:1, which speak of the sons of God coming to present themselves before God, and Satan coming among them? If the “sons of God” were human beings, then *these verses would be describing an assembly of God’s people on earth for worship*. Isn’t a church service the coming together of the sons (children) of God to present themselves before Him? And isn’t the Lord present with us when we assemble?

Consider these comments from Burton Coffman: “Satan does not have access to heaven.... When the sons of God came to present themselves before Jehovah, Satan also came among them (Job 1:6). Before Jehovah! Ah, there it is, doesn't that refer to heaven? No! The words ‘before Jehovah’ generally refer to what men do on earth. ‘Nimrod was a mighty hunter before the Lord’ (Genesis 10:9). In heaven? Of course not. Where do men usually hunt? This morning at church, the deacon who led the prayer at the Lord's table began, ‘Father in heaven, we are assembled in thy presence ... etc.’; nobody jumped to the conclusion that all of us had suddenly been transported into glory..... Throughout the period of human history, *Satan’s theater of operations has been the earth.... What is revealed in [Job 1] is a typical gathering of God’s people*, with Satan usually (if not indeed always) present, ever looking for sins and shortcomings of God’s people.” (Burton Coffman, Commentary on Job, Introduction to Chapter 1; accessed at <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/bcc/job-1.html>.)

A lot to think about here. Let me summarize:

The possibility of a rebellion of angels in heaven, or a “war in heaven,” is contrary to all we read and infer about that celestial domain, which is ever and always filled with God’s divine presence and peace.

Being a created spirit being, Satan could have been in heaven prior to the fall; but no passage literally and/or specifically places him there.

If you take away the “war in heaven” passage in Revelation 12 as referring to Satan’s origin, and rather assign it to the church’s struggle with the Roman Empire in the first three centuries, then there exists no other clear and definite statement in Scripture that Satan, as *Satan*, has ever been in heaven, or has led a rebellion in heaven.

Figurative passages in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, if they describe Satan, point to him as being on earth but desiring to ascend to heaven; and also place him in Eden as an angelic guard.

The angelic rebellion, thus, may have taken place in the garden of Eden and not in heaven. (Adam and Eve had the power of choice in the garden; perhaps the angels present also had that power.)

Every Bible passage speaking of Satan’s past and current sphere of operations in human affairs has him walking to and fro in the earth, not in God’s presence in heaven.⁴

CONCLUSION

It is my considered view that Satan has never had, and does not have, access to heaven and God’s throne, at least since the angelic rebellion. He does, however, have access to our assemblies; and constantly seeks to overthrow the faith of the sons of God. But again I emphasize: this is a possible explanation of certain Bible passages. It makes sense to me, but I do not present it as a matter of faith or fellowship. --John Temples

⁴ Genesis 3:1-15; Job 1:7, 2:2; John 12:31; Ephesians 2:2; 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 2:13, 20:7,8