

The Church's Characterization of Satan in the Past and Now: The Implication for the Place of God in the Affairs of this World

Abraham Mbachirin, Ph.D,

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,
Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

Abstract

This paper is about what the Church in the past believed and taught in respect of the role of the Devil and what the Church today especially the Nigerian Pentecostal Church believes and teaches is the role of the Devil and its implications of the teaching on the role of God in the affairs of this world. The Nigerian Pentecostal ascribes almost every human and world problems to the devil. The devil seems to be responsible for every evil and bad thing that happens to individuals and the world. This paper compares the Pentecostal understanding of the role of Satan with the teaching of the Bible, the Church from the apostolic age and the mainline Church. Generally, the Pentecostal Church differs in many ways with mainline Churches but recently it is having a lot of influence on the mainline Churches. The Pentecostal representation of the role of the devil is a major shift from historic biblical Church. The Pentecostal representation implies that the devil is almost completely in charge of this world. The writer employs historical and analytical methods for the presentation of this paper.

Introduction

One of the things that is becoming noticeable in the Pentecostal Churches and is significantly making its way into mainline Churches is the reference to the devil. Every problem no matter its magnitude is accredited to the work of Satan. Satan also known as devil is presented as being responsible for every human and social problem, be it spiritual or natural. According to Pentecostals, the devil is capable of all these because he has many agents. According to this belief, there are many demons and evil spirits, evil and wicked people, witches, parents and relatives that serve him. The devil causes death, sicknesses, accidents, natural disasters, broken homes, corruption, embezzlement, addictions, stealing, all forms of abuses, all kinds of immorality, kidnapping, raping and among such other related crimes. The devil is presented as one in charge of this world and runs the affairs of this world. Hollenweger says "what is offered nowadays as theology is often nothing but Satanology" (377). Dean notes that "since the mid-1970s, the increased growth of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement brought with it a renewed interest in the

demonic, and a new focus on spiritual warfare”(n.p). James Boyce also observes that “Pentecostalism is obsessed with the Devil to an extent that it is heretical to mainstream Christianity. “Satan” is not an abstract idea but a highly personal fallen angel, who, through his ability to manipulate and direct non-believers, largely runs the “world” (n. p). Pentecostals do not accept the idea that sickness comes from God also. Such a belief is against prosperity gospel and according to Hollenweger erit “cripples the prayer of faith of the sick, and prevents all from being healed” (358).

The questions raised by this kind of theology are: Is the Church not ascribing too much power to Satan? Is every human and societal problem from Satan? Is there anything again like human responsibility? Under this, can humans be blamed for their actions? Where is the place of God in human affairs? This paper investigates the representation of the devil in the biblical times and in the history of the Church and conversely the mainline Churches. The paper attempts to present an analysis of the concept of Satan as understood in different epoch of the history of the Church.

The Biblical and the Church Representation of Satan

There are not many references to Satan in the Old Testament, but his work is nonetheless recognized, he appears more in the New Testament. Matos observes that Satan “as a proper name occurs in not more than three passages in the Old Testament, and they are all late and probably not independent of each other (6). The New Testament certainly introduces a new, improved, and more intimate Satan than the Old Testament. In the New Testament we find the “Devil,” the most common synonym for Satan used 30 times” (Matos 6).

The Bible presents Satan as a fallen angel. He was created good but due to the sin of pride he was thrown out of heaven. Some Medieval scholars say that the sin of the devil was the desire to be like God (Donnelly n.p). He rebelled against God together with a host of angels. These fallen angels are known as demons (Elwell 972). Elwell says these demons do Satan bidding (973). The Hebrew word for Satan has the connotation of an accuser or slander which can be rendered adversary (Freedman 980). This name suggests his role and activities. The Greek word for Satan is *diabolos* which means accuser or calumniator (Hastings 407).

In Genesis especially, in the temptation account he is represented as the Serpent who caused man to sin and that remains his major activity. Generally, the appearances of Satan are limited in the Bible. Sometimes he appears and acts alone but other times he acts under God’s authority, like in tempting Job and Jesus. He has, many names, these include, the Serpent, he is once called Lucifer, prince of this world, prince of demons, the god of this world, the prince of powers of the air, ruler of darkness of this age, Morning Star, Antichrist, Leviathan, Cherub, one that has fallen from heaven, and Beelzebub (Freedman 988, Erickson 448). He is also called the enemy (Mat. 13: 38), evil one (Mat. 13:38), a tempter (Mat. 4: 3), an adversary (1Pet.5:8), the father of lies, a murderer, a liar (Joh. 8:44), a deceiver (Rev. 10:9), an accuser (Rev. 10:10,) and one who disguised himself as the angel of light (2Cor. 11:14). In the Revelation of John, he is called the Old Serpent, Appolyon, Dragon

and the Devil. He is the agent of evil. He is evil but God permits and controls his evil activities.

The names prince of this world and the lord of this world are interpreted by some to mean that all the unsaved are under him. Elwell says, "The unsaved are largely under Satan's authority, and he rules them through the evil world system, over which, he is the head of which the unregenerate are a part" (973). For the saved, Satan is in continued conflict with them (Eph.6:11-18), he tempts, he seeks to corrupt and destroy their testimony, and even physical life (1 Cor. 5: 5; 1 Jo. 5:16)" (973). Similarly, Douglas presents the devil as an opponent, malignant power and one who brings all that can manifest itself into human sin. According to him, in the Old Testament the devil is the one who incites people into folly and sin (295). Satan is jealous of God's people, works to hurt the salvific progress of God's people, cause people to destroy themselves, disobey God and incites evil in them. Majorly, Satan is associated with sin. In support of this assertion, Bavick says, "Satan is the supreme revelation of evil... In Satan, God gave sin every opportunity to show what it is and what it can do" (146). Satan is indeed, the personification of evil.

About the demons, Bavinck opined that "Always and everywhere they are the adversaries of God, the disturbers of his kingdom, the opponents of Christ, the deceivers of humans, the accusers of God's children. They live in sin as their natural elements." (146). Satan brings false, damaging, inaccurate claims and charges against God's people and deform their character (Freedman 985).

Following this Douglas says that in the Book of Daniel, "there is a suggestion of the kingdom of evil, a continuing war in heavenly places, and a satanic power in the earthly political movements and conflicts" (295). Herman Bavick says that in the New Testament we find the kingdom of evil and at the head of it is Satan (146). He continues "subordinate to him are numerous demons, evil spirits, unclean spirits, and spiritual hosts of wickedness, which are in turn subdivided into various classes and ranks. Together, they form Satan's messengers" (146). Similarly, Montgomery Boice says that in the Bible we find a legion of fallen angels under the rulership of Satan who are opposed to God's rule and seek to harm God's people (171).

Freedman contends "so far we have seen that (the) *satan* is a maligner of character (Job1 and 2), an accuser of God's servant (Zech 3:1), and a seducer of Israel's royal leader (1Chr 21:1). Clearly, in the Old Testament *satan* (and other demons) is not connected with some primordial realm, but with sin" (987). Matos attests that 1Pet. 5:8 is one of the Biblical verses that effectively, characterizes the biblical view of Satan. "He works against God by preying on humanity" (12).

Demon possession is also spoken of in the Bible. Those possessed were tormented and afflicted with sickness and madness while some who were possessed committed evil. For example, King Manasseh was possessed by Beliar (Is.3:11), Satan entered Judas and it is also recorded that evil spirits entered people. It is also said that Satan desired to have Peter (Luke 22:31). In his ministry, Jesus casted out demons from people. This is a proof that Satan is not all power and he is subject to God power. The examples we see in the Bible include Satan inflicting people with diseases such as blindness, dumbness, convulsion, paralysis, lameness (Mark 9:25; Mat. 12:22; Luk. 9:39; Acts. 8:7). Christ healed many sicknesses without

mentioning the devil or saying that such sicknesses were connected with the devil. Erickson says there were sicknesses such as leprosy that were never attributed to the demons (450).

In the Bible and throughout the history of the Church, Satan was not so venerated. Confirming this Bavick says “for the teaching of Christianity, the doctrine of Satan is immaterial... He is not an original being but a fallen angel” (147). Boice too does not see Satan as the champion of fallen men. He attributes the glorification of Satan to the *Paradise Lost* of John Milton and insists that the impression of the Bible about Satan is different from what we find in the *Paradise Lost* (173). He insists that Satan is not in control of hell or evil, he is not heroic but he like any other disobedient person is going to hell. However, he says we should regard Satan as “dangerous, deceitful and malicious, but he is a sinner and failure” (174).

It is true that Satan has caused havoc to the human race but he is not a hero and he is under God. Boice asserts that Satan is a limited being. He is not like God in anyway. That is why he is judged and will be judged, punished, chained, locked up and will be released as it pleases God. He is completely under God, he is not omnipotent, omniscience and not omnipresent (174). Boice refuses making Satan look like God's equal. He says, “although we should be aware of Satan and be warned about him, we should not get into the habit of thinking of the tempter as anything like an evil equivalent of God” (174). Erickson an Evangelical voice also avows that Satan is limited in his power and action and even in carrying out temptations like in the case of Job (401; Erickson 449).

The problem of this world is sin. It is sin that brought the curse on man and the world. Erickson says “the evils which we now experience are a result of the curse of God upon the creation” (428). He suggests that in discussing evil in this world it is important to separate natural evil from moral evil. Moral evil is related to human willing and acting” (428). This means that we have to recognize human responsibility in sin and evil. The act of blaming the devil for every human action takes away human responsibility. Dean condemns the practice of blaming Satan for every Christian failure. For he asserts that that practices takes away Christian responsibility. He refers to what is happening today among Pentecostals as neo-spiritual warfare and cautions the practice of ascribing everything to demon possession (n.p).

It is interesting to note that God sometimes achieves and works through evil also, which means he can at times permit evil. In the case of Joseph, God permitted and used the evil intention of his brothers. There are many of such cases in the Bible. Erickson says that God sometimes redirects evil and evil men (400). In the Bible, there are not many instances of Satan tempting people or inflicting people with sickness or causing natural disasters. He is never presented as being responsible for every evil or harm in this world. The Bible presents natural disasters as wholly the work of God. He is the only one who has power over nature and not Satan. God alone uses natural disasters to punish.

The Roman Catholics teach an ongoing battle between the people of God and the devil. They teach that Saint Michael the archangel has the principal responsibility to lead the battle. They also say “the evil that surrounds us today, the disorders that plague our society, man's inconsistency and brokenness, are not only the

results of original sin, but also the result of Satan's pervasive and dark action" (Dean n.p.).

The Jews Theology of Sickness and Calamity

Sin has a major place in Jews theology. The Jews believe it is sin that brought all kinds of problems to man, the creation and the society. It is associated with man's problems including death, pain, sickness, poverty, hardship and bad relationships. Whatever problems we experience are a result of sin. When Satan brings sickness to Job it is to cause him to sin. According to the Bible, calamity came on people, the nation of Israel, Sodom and Gomorra, because of their sins.

According to the Jews, problems befall a person because he has sinned. This was the position of Job's friends and the disciples who probed Jesus to find out whose sin was responsible for the blindness of the man who was born blind. For the Jews judgment temporal and final is contingent upon one's sins. In 1 Corinth. 11 Paul makes it clear some are sick and some die because of their sins. The Jews look at Satan as a distant enemy. In Jewish tradition, he is also the angel of death.

In the Quran literature, Satan is represented as Belial, the worthless one, as the spirit of darkness, one who exercises control over the world and controls evil people (Freedman 988). In the same vein Russell writes "What history shows is the concept of the Devil, a coherent historical development growing from pre-biblical roots through Hebrew and Christian thought into the present" (25). He further stated that although Satan can be seen in Jewish apocryphal texts such as The Book of Enoch, influencing early Christians, "The concept of the Devil has been much less significant in Judaism than in Christianity" (26).

The Medieval Church's Characterization of Satan

The Early Church fathers did not differ much from the apostolic teachings about Satan. They recognized him as one who preys God's people and works against His plans. Justin believed there was a war between Satan and Christ. For early church fathers, Christ's primary assignment was to break the power of Satan and he did this through the incarnation and death on the cross. Thus, Tertullian called Christ, the conquer of Satan (Matos 16). They taught that the work of Satan is to seduce humanity to sin and he devotes himself to evil. He has relentless desire to lure humans.

The Medieval Church had a diversified teaching on the personality and character of Satan. On the other hand, adhered to what the Bible teaches and on the other it went heretical. In the Medieval Church people had limited access to the Bible so it was easy for them to go heretical on any subject. Another problem of the Medieval Church was the failure to distinguish between superstitions from biblical facts.

One of the outstanding teachings about Satan in the Middle Ages comes from Gregory the Great. He taught that Satan is the enemy of God and man. Satan main work is to tempt man so that man ends in hell. He said, before Christ came all humans belonged to Satan. Christ came and freed the believers, the unbelievers are still in the hands of Satan. In his words "he (Christ) broke open the bulwarks of the

lower world, rescued the elect who were held there...brought them to the heavenly kingdom” (Donnelly n.p).

The Medieval Church saw people as agents of Satan. These agents caused people to sin and very prominent among the agents of the devil were women and witches. Women lured people into sexual sin while witches tormented people. Witchcraft was the work of the devil. This is while women were mostly accused of witchcraft, as such, Satan was called a seducer. They believed that Satan has made a pact with people and has given them supernatural powers to serve as his servants. Matos saw the Middle Ages making Satan responsible for sickness, death and even natural disasters (18).

The Middle Ages was an era of arts. The artists represented what people believed in painting. The characterization of the Middle Ages about Satan was also depicted in their arts. Various portraits depicted him with horns, tail, wings, and an ugly black figure. and sometimes like an animal. He is engage in war, trying to seduce people and sometimes riding a horse. The most prominent one was by John Milton in the *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*. Milton depicted Satan as one who has fallen from grace and antagonizes the work of God. Satan represents all those that rebel against God. He is the enemy of God and man, he is the master of wickedness and tempter of man. Milton contends that there is a great cosmic battle between heaven and hell and the world is the battle ground (Matos 16). Another depiction of Satan was by Dante Alghieri in his poem the Divine Comedy. He brought the idea that Satan rules over hell. One of the sects in the Middle Ages, the Cathars believed that it was the devil that created the physical universe. This was because of their dualism.

The Reformation Era

The reformers who returned to the biblical and apostolic teaching did not present a different view of the devil from that of the Bible. For them the devil is a creation of God and not his counterpart. Luther said the devil is under God; “the Devil is God’s Devil” (Douglas 295). They considered the devil as an enemy of Christ and one outside the Church. During the reformation Satan was a symbol of one’s enemy. Thus, the Protestants referred to the Roman Catholic as instrument of Satan, the Pope as the devil and anti-Christ while Protestants were devils in the eyes and thinking of the Roman Catholics (“Changing Faces of Satan” n.p). Martin Luther said the Pope was Satan incarnate. Generally, he said the devil was a real, living power, a concrete personality, and he used to characterise him as the good Lord’s hangman, and the instrument of his anger and punishment. God needs the Devil for a servant and utilises his malignity for the procreation of the good (Carus n.p.).

The Anabaptists, a dissenting reformation group denied the reality of the devil. They said he was only an allegory. Liberal scholars who promoted demythology of the Bible and Christianity like Rudolf Bultmann said that Satan was not a literal figure.

Pentecostals

It must first be acknowledged that the over-emphasis of activities of Satan is linked to the deliverance and healing ministries of the Pentecostals. These ministries have the focus of identifying the causes of people's problems and solving these problems. Pentecostals chiefly identify almost all problems to have a spiritual cause and this leads them to this kind of theology.

They believe that all sicknesses and misfortunes are the work of the devil. They believe and teach that there is a spiritual war between God and the devil. Adeboye teaches Satan has captured humans and Christ has come to deliver them. He thus, unknowingly, teaches the ransom theory of atonement. Adeboye attributes all afflictions, oppressions, caning, spiritual repression, backwardness, distraction, rigid addiction, and all kinds of misbehaviour to the devil (Owoeye 6-8). He states that

“many Pentecostals believe that demonic spirits in individuals account, to a large extent, for commission of evils in the society, embezzlement of money, corruption of various description, robbery, cultism, and other economic crimes. Evil spirits are so powerful as to obstruct or hijack a country's sovereignty” (9).

Adeboye contends that “Nigeria's present socio-economic and political difficulties and those of African nations can be explained in terms of evil powers” (Owoeye 9).

For the leader of Deeper Life in Nigeria, W. F. Kumyi, the devil is responsible for poverty, socio-economic and political instability of this nation (Owoeye 10). Pentecostals of his type believe that all problems of life are the works of the devil. Bishop Samson Grace of Life Gate Church International teaches that all problems of ill-health such as HIV/AIDS, all kinds of spiritual torments and the problems of the society are works of the devil (Owoeye 12). A statement that summarizes their teaching says “it is the spiritual realm that controls the physical realm and that the physical serves as a vehicle for the spiritual, an act of omission and commission on the part of man opens an avenue for demonic attack” (Owoeye 13).

Another Pentecostal pastor, Brain Tamaki announced that the Corona virus is from the devil. It is sign that God is not with us. He teaches that the demons and evil spirits energized the outbreak of things like Black Death, Ebola and Cholera to punish sinners (Ayling n.p). This implies that anyone inflicted or has died of Corona is a sinner and under the devil. Subsequently, it is only sinners who experience sickness. Tamaki is of the belief that Satan controls everything in the world but not believers. These kinds of teachings turn the world completely under the control of Satan.

The teaching of the Pentecostals ascribing everything to Satan has the implication of herofying and glorifying him and making him God's equal. By elevating and constantly making reference to him, they make us think about him more than God, they indirectly honor him, and falsely elevate him to a position he does not occupy. They draw people's attention away from God and make Satan the most powerful being on earth. Indirectly, their ministry promotes Satan instead of God.

Conclusion

This paper is not to underestimate the power and work of Satan but to state that it is also wrong to overestimate his power and make him God's equal. The Bible teaches that we can overcome him and we are above him (1Cor. 10:13). In the Bible, evil is ascribed to Satan and he is capable of doing evil, but he is not responsible for every evil. Even adherents of African Traditional religion acknowledge that not all sicknesses are from the devil. African traditionalists recognize God as one who gives sickness, thus Opoku quotes an Akan healer saying "When God gives you sickness He provides the Cure" (149).

It is important to acknowledge that some sicknesses are hereditary while others are due to some generic make-up. Some are a result of sexual intercourse, personal contact with the inflicted persons and others are airborne. Boyce makes this important concluding statement that "It needs to be emphasised that making nonbelievers so completely subject to Satan's whims and wiles, seeing the end times in so certain terms, and ascribing this level of righteousness and sanctification to the saved is contrary to the teachings of the mainstream Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church" (n.p).

Works Cited

- Ayling, Louise. "Controversial Church Leader says the Coronavirus is the Work of SATAN" 12/7/2020 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8077919/Brian-Tamaki-says-coronavirus-outbreak-work-SATAN-sign-world-strayed-God.html>
- Bavick, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatic: Sin and Salvation in Christ*. Translated by John Vriend, Edited by John Bolt. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Boice, James Montgomery. *Foundation of Christian Faith: A Comprehensive and Readableheology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986.
- Boyce, James. "What do We know about the Prime Minister's Pentecostalism?" 12/7/2020 Feb.2019. <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2019/february/1548939600/james-boyce/devil-and-scott-morrison#mtr>
- Carus, Paul. "The Age of Reformation." <https://www.sacred-texts.com/evil/hod/hod17.htm>
- Dean, Robert Jr. "The Frightening Pentecostal Accounts of Demonic Possession" 12/7/2020 <https://www.atmofear-entertainment.com/opinions/spirituality/the-frightening-pentecostal-accounts-of-demonic-possessions/>
- Donnelly, Colleen. "Apocryphal Literature, the Characterization of Satan, and the Descensus adInferos Tradition in England in the Middle Ages." *Religion and Theology* Vol. 24: Issue 3-4, 2017. Online Publication.
- Douglas, James D. *The New International Bible Dictionary*. Grand rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1999.
- Elwell, Walter A. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986.
- Freedman, David Noel. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 5. New York: Doubleday, 1972.
- Hastings, James. *A Dictionary of the Bible* Vol. 4. Plabody City: Henderickson Publishers, 1988.

- Hollenweger, Walter J. *The Pentecostals*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1988.
- Matos, Morgan A. "The Satanic Phenomenon: Medieval Representation of Satan."
A Master of Liberal Studies to Master Project submitted to Rollins College
2011. [Http://scholarship-rollis.edu/mls](http://scholarship-rollis.edu/mls). Accessed on 28-7-2020
- Opoku, Kofi Asare. *West African Tradition Religion*. Accra: FEP International
Private Limited, 1978