



Satan the Enemy

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SPIRITUAL WARFARE

For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not is equal.

Many interpret these lines from the first stanza of “A Mighty Fortress” to be merely a colorful trope.¹ Martin Luther (1486–1546) meant them literally. He considered the lordship of Satan over the world “an article of faith.”² Satan is the greatest enemy that Christians face: “Satan is his name, i.e. an adversary. He must obstruct and cause misfortune; he cannot do otherwise. Moreover, he is the prince and god of this world, so that he has sufficient power to do so.”³ Satan teaches us to acquiesce to his terrible divinity by attacking our health and well be-

¹Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” trans. Frederick H. Hedge, in *Service Book and Hymnal*, No. 150.

²“Aber der Teuffel ist herr jnn der welt, und ich have es selbs nie können gleuben, das der Teuffel solt Herr und Gott der welt sein, bis ichs nu mals zimlich erfahren, das es auch ein artickel des glaubens sey: Princeps mundi, Deus huius seculi.” *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–1980) 50:473; quoted in Heiko Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 67.

³*Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 37:17 (hereafter *LW*). I am indebted to Mark L. Nelson, *Luther’s Conception of the Devil* (St. Paul: Luther Theological Seminary M.Th. Thesis, 1979), for gathering quotations from Luther on the devil.

The figure of Satan is deeply woven into the fabric of the Bible and theology, including the theology of Martin Luther. Satan symbolizes evil better than any other symbol in history.

ing;⁴ disturbing marriage;⁵ upsetting the rhythms of daily life, including religious practice;⁶ inciting murder;⁷ mixing politics and religion;⁸ and confusing the interpretation of Scripture.⁹ This is *Anfechtung* or “personal affliction”: spiritual and physical assault on the Christian that is meant to destroy faith.

In cataloguing these works of Satan, Luther was guided by the New Testament. Scripture ascribes to the devil enormous powers which rival the powers of the divine. Luther knew this biblical truth by a plain reading of the text.¹⁰ In the mainline church today, in which we live under “the eclipse of the biblical narrative,” we no longer read the Bible plainly. We need the historical scholar to remind us of what Luther saw without difficulty: “The figure of Satan in the New Testament is comprehensible only when it is seen as the counterpart, or counterprinciple, of Christ.” To fail to recognize this is to do “violence to the essence of Christianity.”¹¹

What is the scope of this satanic “counterprinciple”? The New Testament teaches that the devil is prince of the world, space, and time (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph 2:2; 1 Cor 2:6). He is the lord of matter and flesh (Eph 2:3). He is the principal adversary of Christ who challenges the Lord at the very start of his ministry (Matt 4:1–11). Satan seeks to pervert humanity as tempter (1 Thess 3:5), liar, and murderer (John 8:44), a cause of illness and death (Luke 13:16; Heb 2:14), a power behind the storm (Mark 4:39). He attacks by possession (Mark 5:7–8). He can enter a person’s heart (Luke 22:3). He is the master of sorcery and idolatry (Acts 13:8–10). Above all, he works to obstruct the mission of Christ: “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4); “For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and

⁴“In all grave illnesses the devil is present as the author and cause...[and] he is the author of death.” *LW* 54:53.

⁵“At first everything goes all right, so that, as the saying goes, they are ready to eat each other up for love....[T]he devil comes along to create boredom in you, to rob you of your desire in this direction, and to excite it unduly in another direction.” *LW* 21:89.

⁶“The devil comes at unsuitable places and times, as in the choir during songs of praise to God, or at night when one ought to sleep, in order to ruin the head....Or elsewhere, when other things are being done in common, so that he hinders these things or sees that they are done with less dedication.” *LW* 10:348–349.

⁷“[The devil] incites the Cainites against their brother, just as Christ declares in John 8.44 that the devil was a murderer from the beginning.” *LW* 1:322.

⁸“The devil never stops cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into each other. In the devil’s name the secular leaders always want to be Christ’s masters and teach Him how He should run His church and His spiritual government. Similarly, the false clerics and schismatic spirits always want to be the masters, though not in God’s name, and to teach people how to organize the secular government. Thus the devil is very busy on both sides, and he has much to do.” *LW* 13:194.

⁹“When we wish to deal with Scripture, [Satan] stirs up so much dissension and quarreling over it that we lose our interest in it and become reluctant to trust it.” *LW* 37:17. “It’s the supreme art of the devil that he can make the law out of the gospel.” *LW* 54:106.

¹⁰“Western Christian reading of the Bible in the days before the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth century was usually strongly realistic, i.e., at once literal and historical, and not only doctrinal or edifying. The words and sentences meant what they said, and because they did so they accurately described real events and real truths that were rightly put only in those terms and no others.” Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974) 1.

¹¹Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977) 222.

again—but Satan blocked our way” (1 Thess 2:18). Against Satan and his infernal host, Christians are engaged in spiritual warfare: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).

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Early Christians understood spiritual warfare as the crucible in which their faith and witness were put to the test. In battle against evil the believer reaped the reward of salvation. This is why Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35–107 A.D.) in a famous passage from his *Letter to the Romans* declares that he is eager to enter the arena and sacrifice his life for his faith. The arena, where Christian martyrs died for the sport of the masses, was the sand-strewn field of combat in the amphitheater that not only provided entertainment for the masses, but also symbolized the centrality of warfare in Roman culture. To Christians the arena epitomized the true nature of the world. Satan is powerful in the arena. He blocks the way to Christ. In his letter Ignatius proclaims that he is willing to take up the challenge of the arena to gain Christ: “Come fire, cross, battling with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil—only let me get to Jesus Christ!”¹²

Luther embraces this ancient tradition of spiritual warfare in the imagery of his hymn. His intent is christological. The power that Satan has over us on the battlefield of the world is beyond our resources to defend or counter. We have no place to go but the Lord. Like Ignatius, Luther sees the purpose of combat as gaining salvation in Christ:

Did we in our own strength confide
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his Name,
From age to age the same,
And he must win the battle.¹³

This battle with Satan begins as soon as we enter the world. In baptism we flee from the Prince of Darkness to the Mighty Fortress of God. Baptism is an exorcism. This is ancient church teaching. It is preserved in the Roman rite. In obedience to

¹²Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, 5.3, in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Touchstone, 1996) 105.

¹³Luther, “A Mighty Fortress,” stanza 2.

this liturgical tradition, Luther emphasizes exorcism in his baptismal orders of 1523 and 1526. Recognizing that the devil is *princeps mundi* (prince of the world) who owns us at our birth, the order begins by calling on the devil to vacate his property: “Depart thou unclean spirit and give room to the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ The minister prays in “the name of the eternal God and of our Savior Jesus Christ” to adjure the devil and cause him to “depart trembling and groaning, conquered together with [his] hatred, so that [he shall] have nothing to do with the servant of God who now seeks that which is heavenly and renounces [the devil] and [his] world.” After prayer, the exorcism follows directly: “I adjure thee, thou unclean spirit, by the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost that thou come out of and depart from this servant of God, for he commands thee, thou miserable one, he who walked upon the sea and stretched forth his hand to the sinking Peter.”¹⁵

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mighty and lifelong enemy.’”*

Baptism is the beginning of the perilous journey of life. The minister intercedes on behalf of the baptized as this journey begins. The minister prays “that [the baptized] may be sundered from the number of the unbelieving, preserved dry and secure in the holy ark of Christendom, serve thy name at all times fervent in spirit and joyful in hope, so that with all believers he may be made worthy to attain eternal life according to thy promise; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”¹⁶ In his instructions to the Christian reader at the end of his baptismal order, Luther warns that “it is no joke to take sides against the devil.” Baptism means that the child will be burdened with “a mighty and lifelong enemy.” The child needs the “heart and strong faith” of fellow Christians along with their earnest intercession through prayer. Corporate faith demonstrated in intercessory prayer is the key to the sacrament; not the liturgical trappings of a rite. “Signing with the cross...anointing the breast and shoulders with oil, signing the crown of the head with chrism, putting on the christening robe, placing a burning candle in the hand...are not the sort of devices and practices from which the devil shrinks or flees. He sneers at greater things than these! Here is the place for real earnestness.” Luther laments that for many people, baptism makes no difference. They lose their way on the perilous journey on earth. This is the fault of the church: “I suspect that people turn out so badly after baptism because our concern for them has been so cold and careless; we, at their baptism, interceded for them without zeal.”¹⁷

Luther’s understanding of the devil’s presence was vivid and ever present in

¹⁴Martin Luther, “Order of Baptism” (1523, 1525), in *LW* 53:96, 107.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 98, 108.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 102.

his life. But it was not the childish fear of a boogeyman. Luther learned from the theology of Gabriel Biel (ca. 1420–1495) to dismiss as superstition the notion that the devil could be embodied in human form and take a frightening physical shape. To be sure, the devil “can ape and deceive our senses. He can cause one to think he sees something when he sees not,”¹⁸ but only God can become human.¹⁹ Should the devil appear, Luther’s advice was to be defiant and contemptuous; lift one’s cloak and show him the backside: “But if that is not enough for you, you Devil, I have also shit and pissed; wipe your mouth on that and take a hearty bite.”²⁰ Luther’s skepticism of superstition could lead him, at least at times, to adopt an attitude that is almost modern in its sensibility. Luther reports that on a Good Friday evening, as he meditated in his study on the suffering of Christ on the cross, he was suddenly startled by a vision of the Savior bright and shining on the wall, the five wounds of his passion clearly manifest. Such a vision was not uncommon for the religious person in the Age of Faith. Luther’s reaction was anything but conventional. “I reflected that it must needs be an illusion and juggling of the devil,” he declared, “for Christ appeared to us in his Word, and in a meaner and more humble form; therefore I spake to the vision thus: Avoid thee, confounded devil: I know no other Christ than he who was crucified, and who in his Word is pictured and presented unto me. Whereupon the vision vanished, clearly showing of whom it came.”²¹ Luther was here intensely involved in his reforming work. At every opportunity, even in the privacy of his study, he sought to expose idolatry, magic, and false religion in order to ground Christian faith in real life.

SATAN AND THEODICY

In the sixteenth century, real life was harsh and unforgiving. Europe lived under the long shadow of the Black Death, which between 1347 and 1350 had taken between a fourth and a third of the population. Even without the plague, half the population could expect to die by age ten. Of Luther’s eight siblings, only four made it to adulthood. Hunger was a constant companion. Between a third and a half of the population lived at subsistence level, even in years when the harvest was plentiful.²² While the pressing weight of natural evil was constant and heavy, its burden was made worse by the horrors of human evil. Plague and hunger kill; greed, war, and religious intolerance kill as many, if not more. We sometimes forget that for all of its theological glories, the Reformation’s immediate consequence was to plunge Europe into a century of religious warfare that, at the behest of one

¹⁸Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. and ed. William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, n.d.) 323.

¹⁹Oberman, *The Reformation*, 59.

²⁰*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden* [Table Talk], 6 vols. (Weimar, 1912–1921) 6:216, #6827. Quoted in Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) 107.

²¹Luther, *Table Talk*, 126.

²²See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971) 1–21.

church or another, brought violent death to millions of people. In the sixteenth century, life expectancy was about forty years of age; in the seventeenth century, as religious war raged and its horrors piled up, life expectancy dropped below thirty. During one phase of this warfare, the so-called Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), the German population of about twenty-one million was reduced to about thirteen and a half million. In some cities—Augsburg and Marburg are good examples—over half the population perished or abandoned their homes.²³ If evil is “the infliction of pain upon sentient beings,”²⁴ then Protestants and Catholics did the work of evil against each other.

Why such misery? Why does evil triumph even in the church? These are questions of the ages. “A Mighty Fortress” gives this explanation: the world is “with devils filled”; “the prince of darkness” rages. Sinful humanity does the devil’s work. Suffering, persecution, the loss of property and loved ones: these are our lot in life. But we are not without hope. The hymn assures us that “[the devil’s] rage we can endure,” because we are promised that “his doom is sure, one little word shall fell him.” In witness to this hope, not yet realized; facing the trials of Job, realized every day, we make this witness in song:

Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also:
[literally from the German: “Let them take body,
Possessions, fame, child, and wife]
The body they may kill:
God’s truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.²⁵

This apocalyptic scenario of present evil and future hope is the core of Luther’s theodicy. That God governs the world and brings salvation, justice, and peace is the good news; but it can only be understood eschatologically. Heiko Oberman is right when he argues, “In discovering the Devil, Luther pushed the doctrine of omnipotence almost to the breaking point, then filled it with a completely different content.”²⁶ This “different” content is the confession that evil has its own omnipotence apart from God. The devil rules in this world. The church is under the power of the Antichrist. That God is *gubernator mundi*; that he is doing all things for the good, will only be known in the last days, when redemption is fully come to pass. Until then God is at war with Satan the enemy. “God is now, here and today, fully occupied in the attempt to win back his creation; he will fight with Satan until the Last Day. Only then, on the day of the great *reformatio*, will his omnipotence be fully deployed and visible, when he is all in all, in heaven and on earth.”²⁷

²³C. V. Wedgewood, *The Thirty Years War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944) 512–516.

²⁴Russell, *The Devil*, 11.

²⁵Luther, “A Mighty Fortress,” stanza 4.

²⁶Oberman, *The Reformation*, 67.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 67–68.

THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

Luther grounds his theodicy in Scripture and the Fathers. In Luther's interpretation, Scripture teaches that a contrary will to God exists from the beginning and shapes the tragedy of history. It is in the garden when the serpent tempts Adam and Eve (Gen 3:1). The serpent is Satan (Wisdom of Solomon 2:24; Rev 12:9). It is in the wilderness as Jesus begins his ministry. The devil puts him to the test (Matt 4:1). What is the origin of this contrary will? Justin Martyr (100–165 A.D.), “the first to discuss the problem of evil in theological terms,”²⁸ locates the source of the most significant opposition to God in the primeval history when the mysterious “sons of God” (*bene ha elohim*) mate with the daughters of the earth (Gen 6:1–4). This strange passage—bizarre by our standards—was of enormous interest to the early Fathers. Justin interprets the *bene ha elohim* to be rebellious angels who disobeyed the divine command to protect humanity and instead “transgressed this appointment...captivated by love of women, and begat children who are those that are called demons.” These “afterwards subdued the human race to themselves...by teaching them to offer sacrifices, and incense, and libations, of which things they stood in need after they were enslaved by lustful passions.”²⁹ These same demons inspired “poets and mythologists” to create idols such as “Neptune and Pluto.”³⁰ Socrates attacked these pagan legends “by true reason and examination” in order

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to “deliver men from the demons.” For his efforts, he was called “an atheist and a profane person” and was put to death. Socrates witnessed to “the Word, the Logos Himself,” who fights demonic religion whenever it arises. This Logos “took shape, and became man, and was called Jesus Christ.” Christians “in obedience to Him...not only deny that they who did such things as these are gods, but assert that they are wicked and impious demons, whose actions will not bear comparison with those even of men desirous of virtue.”³¹ Christians and Socrates—along with all those who stand for reason—share the same mission: spiritual warfare against the demons. This warfare between the forces of reason and the forces of evil is the meaning of history.

Justin identifies the origin of spiritual warfare in disordered passion. St. Irenaeus (second century A.D.) locates it in the freedom of the will. Angels and hu-

²⁸Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981) 63.

²⁹Justin, *Second Apology* 5, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Robert Alexander and James Donaldson (New York: Scribner, 1908) 190. Recall that the demonic religions of Baal and Molech and the like, all of which demanded the sacrifice of sons and daughters, wreaked havoc in the time of the Judges (Judg 2:11–19; Ps 106:37–39) and brought down both the Kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 7:7–17) and the Kingdom of Judah (Jer 32:30–35).

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Justin, *First Apology* 5, in *ibid.*, 164.

manity are endowed with the gift of freedom to choose good or evil. *Liberum arbitrium* (free will) means “there is no coercion with God.” Obedience to God is voluntary, not compulsory, “so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves.”³² It is inevitable that in freedom there will be those who turn from God and choose what is evil. The presence of evil in the world is thus a function of freedom. Evil is entailed by the excellence of creation, not its deficiency.

“Augustine understands light versus darkness not as the dialectic of abstract categories, but as the clash of spiritual beings”

St. Augustine (354–430) makes this same argument. The gift of creation is freedom of the will. Freedom of the will engenders the will to undo. The result is conflict. But Augustine goes further by contending that this conflict is so essential to the nature of creation that creation itself must be understood as warfare. The state of nature thus is a state of war. Scripture seems to point to this truth, however obscurely, as it witnesses to a great primeval calamity when “war broke out in heaven” (Rev 12:7) and “God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness” (2 Pet 2:4; see Jude 6; Matt 25:41). Augustine seeks to ground this obscure biblical witness theologically in an interpretation of Gen 1:3: “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.” He acknowledges that his interpretation is a matter of speculation, because “the matter is so profound that it may give rise to many interpretations.”³³ Augustine asserts that the original conflict of creation was entailed by the creation of light. When God said “Let there be light” it could only be at the expense of darkness. Augustine understands light versus darkness not as the dialectic of abstract categories, but as the clash of spiritual beings. The light brings forth the angels: created by God; bestowed with the gift of freedom; able to obey, thus giving meaning to light; or to rebel, thus giving meaning to darkness. Freedom means that angels have intelligence, the power of choice, the capability to change in an environment without coercion.³⁴ These attributes allow the angels to desire God and serve him willingly. This is why the light is “good.” These same attributes permit other angels to choose darkness. But choosing darkness ultimately serves God’s plan, for it brings about a greater good: “[God] foreknew that some of the angels, in their pride, would wish to be self-sufficient for their own felicity, and hence would forsake their true good; yet he did not deprive them of their power, judging it an act of greater power and greater goodness to bring good even out of evil than to exclude

³²Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.37.1, in *ibid.*, 518.

³³Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 467 (XI.32). See Bernhard Lohse, “Zu Augustins Engellehre,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 70 (1959) 278–291.

³⁴Augustine, *City of God*, 468f. (XI.33).

the existence of evil.”³⁵ Good out of evil is what Christ accomplishes. Christ is “the light of the world” (John 9:5).

INTERPRETATION

What is one to do with this language of Scripture and church tradition regarding Satan, demons, obedient and rebellious angels? Karl Barth (1886–1968) warns against succumbing to “the far too interesting mythology of the ancients” that can make of the devil a fetish. If we fall for this, “we ourselves might become just a little or more than a little demonic.”³⁶ On the other hand, there is the danger of following “the far too uninteresting ‘demythologization’ of the moderns” that can lead humanity to think “it can tackle its lesser and greater problems with a little morality and medicine and psychology and aesthetics, with progressive politics or occasionally a philosophy.”³⁷ This is an illusion. Emil Brunner (1889–1966) agrees. Each generation must learn anew that “the Christian Faith is bound to admit the existence of a sinful supernatural power” and that human sin cannot be reduced to psychology, habit, or vice.³⁸

In the figure of Satan, we are obviously dealing with myth and imagery; but it is myth and imagery so deeply woven into the fabric of the Bible and theology that it cannot be easily dismissed. Even in mainline Protestantism, which is usually eager to reduce the content of faith by discarding what it finds uncongenial, the devil is bound to show up from time to time. He appears in the Sunday lectionary and must be addressed; he is named in the “Renunciation,” a traditional feature of the baptismal liturgy that demands explanation; he is sung about in “A Mighty Fortress,” the signature hymn for Lutherans and other Protestants, and people need to know what the hymn means. We cannot understand the theology of Luther without the devil. Most importantly, we cannot hope to comprehend theologically the historical record of the twentieth century, including the first decade of the twenty-first, without taking evil seriously as “the will to undo.” Satan symbolizes this will to undo better than any other symbol of history. Satan is the enemy. ⊕

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³⁵Ibid., 1022 (XXII.1).

³⁶Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961) 369, 519.

³⁷Ibid., 369, 526.

³⁸Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952) 140.