

Did the devil make me do it?

And other questions about Satan,
demons and evil spirits



Mike McKinley



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Introduction



I have had two conversations with friends that have shaped the way I think about the devil. As a Christian in the United States, Satan played a fairly small role in my understanding of the way the spiritual world worked.

I knew the devil was real and I read about demons in the Bible, but that didn't seem to have much to do with my day-to-day life. In fact, the preachers on the TV who were always going on and on about demons seemed to be slightly insane, obviously deceptive or entirely too interested in the subject for their own mental wellbeing (or quite possibly all three).

Normal people didn't really spend a lot of time thinking about the devil or demons.

Then one summer I remember a friend of mine coming back from a ministry trip to a Caribbean island. He had been there working with a church group, and when he returned he took me to a coffee shop to share what he had experienced.

In hushed tones he described things that he had seen that he could not explain: inanimate objects flying across rooms, strange lights without an obvious source, people standing on rooftops crying out in loud voices, others being healed violently after prayers for their deliverance from evil spirits.

I knew my friend was cynical about these kinds of things, but he was also the most ruthlessly honest person I know. He had concluded that the town he had been visiting was over-run by demons. How could I make room in my mind for a world where these kinds of demonic activities really happened?

Disbelief

Years later, another good friend returned from living in a major African city. He had been studying at a seminary in that country and told me how all the Christians and pastors there spoke about dealing with evil spirits as if they were a normal part of Christian ministry. Their duties as pastors required them to interact regularly with people that were under the influence and attack of demons.

When my friend mentioned to his classmates that most Americans don't believe in the devil (a 2009 poll of American Christians revealed that 60% of them didn't believe that the devil was real), they could not stop laughing at the ignorance of westerners. It was roughly like saying to them that most Americans don't believe in cheese or anxiety or the month of July; it was just denying an inescapable reality of life.

I struggled to figure out why these experiences seemed

to be so foreign to my experience of life. It seemed as if the old C.S. Lewis line from *The Screwtape Letters* might be right after all:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or magician with the same delight.

If my friends and their experiences were correct and demonic realities were in fact a normal part of life here on earth, then I was surely walking around unaware of some important facts about the world I lived in! Perhaps Satan's greatest trick is getting billions of people to forget that he exists.

But, startling as that was, I never knew exactly what to do with this information. Did it matter that I wasn't aware of evil spirits in my day-to-day walk with God? Should I start looking for the devil underneath my struggles with sin and behind the otherwise normal aspects of my life? Or should I just press on living my life—trusting that God would take care of the details? Could I be falling victim to the devil just by not being aware of him?

After I became a pastor, I learned that a lot of the people in my congregation were asking these same questions. Maybe you are as well.

Well, it is my hope that this book can help to answer

some of the questions you may have about the devil and evil spirits. But before we get started, let me just put all of my cards on the table so that you know where I am coming from...

I believe that the Bible is true. We must believe what it tells us and live accordingly. Logic, feelings, and personal experiences may make some valuable contributions to understanding this subject, but they are secondary and subservient to the word of God.

I also believe that the Bible *doesn't tell us everything we might like to know about the devil.* We should not expect that all of our curiosity will be satisfied and all of our questions will be answered. But it is enough that God has told us what we need to know.

The Bible is always true, *but some passages are clearer and easier to understand than others.* There will be times when we must be humble enough to leave it at: "This seems to be the teaching of Scripture, but it is not explicit". It is not normally wise to speculate when dealing with a subject that inspires this much imagination and superstition.

Whenever possible, I have tried to show how I have reached my conclusions from the Bible. I encourage you to read on with an open Bible nearby so that you can carefully examine what it says for yourself.

We should always study God's word with a commitment to humility, prayers for understanding, and an intention to obey.

Let's get started by asking some basic questions about who Satan is and what he does...

Origins: Where did Satan come from?



If you start reading the Bible on page one, everything seems to go just about the way you'd expect. You've got God, the Creator and Designer of an amazing world. You've got the creation itself, which reflects God's genius in its diversity and grandeur. And at the pinnacle of creation you have mankind, made in God's image and charged to rule over creation under God's authority. But somewhere around page three or four (depending on the size of your Bible) you read something that seems utterly out of place:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" *Genesis 3 v 1*

What!?

Here in God's perfect creation—a world that God made out of nothing, a world that he designed and controls—something has gone rogue. One of God's creatures is now trying to undermine his authority and bring down humankind.

That raises a huge number of questions! And while the Bible doesn't tell us everything we might want to know about the devil, we can be confident that God has told us everything we need to know. So let's take a look at what the Bible tells us about this subject.

Who is the serpent of Genesis 3?

Genesis doesn't explain where the serpent came from or why he was trying to tempt Eve. All we are specifically told is that it was part of God's creation, but it was *craftier* than all the other animals. But it is clear from the beginning that we are dealing with more than your garden-variety snake.

First, it is able to *talk*. I don't know where you live, but in my neck of the woods we don't have a lot of talking animals. And nowhere in Scripture are we led to believe that animals in general had the ability to speak when God first created the world. The only other instance in Scripture of a talking animal is Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22 v 28), and there we are told specifically that "the LORD opened the donkey's mouth". This seems to indicate that the serpent of Genesis 3 was under the control of a personal being.

As the story of the Bible goes on, it becomes clear that this serpent is a manifestation of Satan. The things that the serpent does in the Garden of Eden have the

distinct smell of satanic activity. The serpent tempts Eve to disobey God; Satan is referred to as “the tempter” by the authors of the New Testament (Matthew 4 v 3; 1 Thessalonians 3 v 5). The serpent succeeds in deceiving human beings; the Lord Jesus called Satan “the father of lies” (John 8 v 44). And the serpent opposes God’s good work; Satan is said to have been “sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3 v 8).

And so it should come as no surprise when John’s Revelation makes the connection explicit. In Revelation 12 v 9 we read about the defeat of Satan, and notice how John refers to him:

The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.

In this passage, there is a clear echo of Genesis 3. Satan is the “ancient serpent” who deceives the world. So we can safely conclude that, even though Genesis does not specifically use the name “Satan” in connection with the serpent in the garden, the snake is in fact a manifestation of the evil one.

Where did Satan come from?

Scripture is not concerned to tell us much about Satan’s origins. He shows up abruptly in Genesis 3 and his presence is then assumed throughout the Bible.

Piecing together the evidence, it seems that Satan was created as an angel. Paul says that he “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11 v 14), and the

element of disguise is located not in the fact that he appears to be an angel, but that he appears to be an angel “of light”. Even though the Bible does not answer every question that we might have about Satan’s origins, we can say a few things with certainty:

- *God created Satan! Nothing exists that was not made by God. God made the world out of nothing, and so all creatures in heaven, on earth, and under the earth owe their existence to God (Colossians 1 v 16). Satan is no exception.*
- *God created Satan good! Everything that God created was very good (Genesis 1 v 31) and there is no sin, deception, or evil in God (1 John 1 v 5; James 1 v 13). Therefore, we can conclude that when God created Satan, he created him morally pure.*
- *Some created angels rebelled against God. Seemingly at some point between Genesis 1 v 31 (where everything is very good) and Genesis 3 v 1 (the serpent in the garden), some angels turned against God and became wicked (their rebellion is spoken of in 2 Peter 2 v 4 and Jude v 6). We’ll think more about this in chapter 3.*
- *Satan has authority in the realm of demons. At several points in the Bible, Satan is spoken of as the leader of the demonic forces (John 12 v 31 and Ephesians 2 v 2). We also see Satan taking leadership in the work of attacking and tempting God’s people (Job 1 v 6; 1 Chronicles 21 v 1; Zechariah 3 v 1).*
- *Satan’s evil came from within himself. He was not*

tempted and led astray (for there was no one to tempt him) but he produced sin and deceit from within himself (John 8 v 44).

So Satan is the leader of the pack of angels who rebelled against God, and he was cast out of God's presence.

There is quite a bit of mystery here that we simply cannot know or understand. We do not know how it is that a morally pure creature could rebel against God. We do not know why a group of angels would choose to follow Satan in his rebellion. It seems wise for us to be careful about speculating beyond those basic facts.

What about Isaiah 14 v 12-15?

Many Christians throughout history have understood Isaiah 14 v 12-15 to give an account of Satan's fall from heaven. In that passage we read:

How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.

In these verses the prophet describes someone whose heart is consumed by pride and a desire for self-exalta-

tion. This person's ambition deludes them into thinking that they can be like God, but ultimately they are brought down—they die and are cast into the realm of the dead.

On the face of it that sounds like a pretty convincing back-story for Satan. So much so, in fact, that the name *Lucifer* (from the King James Bible translation of verse 12; the NIV translation for the same word is “morning star”) has become a popular name for the devil.

The picture that emerges from this understanding of Isaiah 14 is that Satan (aka *Lucifer*) was once part of God's inner circle—an angel of light, and a glorious part of God's creation. But at some time, and for some reason, he was overcome by his own ambition and tried to make himself at least equal to (if not greater than) God Himself.

This interpretation was popularised through great works of literature such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, both of which seized on Isaiah's vivid imagery and applied it to Satan's fall from grace.

But if you look closely at the context of these verses, it doesn't seem that Isaiah was primarily intending to give us a description of Satan's fall. Chapters 13-23 of Isaiah contain a series of prophecies against the hostile nations surrounding Israel. Chapters 13 – 14 are the first of those prophecies. The verses that are commonly taken to be about Satan (14 v 12-15) come in the middle of this.

But look at how Isaiah himself explains this section of Scripture. In Isaiah 14 v 3-4, we read:

On the day the LORD gives you relief from your suffering and turmoil and from the harsh labour forced on you, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon:

The verses about the fall of the “morning star” come in this section of Isaiah’s prophecy. They are part of a song that the people of Israel would sing to taunt the king of Babylon, their long-time oppressor. Though he once shook the world and overthrew its cities (v 16-17), now he has been brought low by God’s justice. For all his pomp and power, the king of Babylon is just a frail man like the rest of us (v 10), who will be thrown into his grave and eaten by worms (v 11). You can see how this would be a cause for joy for the people of Israel!

With this context in mind, we can say that it seems very unlikely that in the middle of this larger “taunt song”, Isaiah would break (without introduction or explanation) to tell us about Satan’s fall. Instead, these words most naturally and clearly apply to the king of Babylon, whose pride and arrogance caused him to forget that he was merely a man.

We may be able to detect something of Satan’s activity and motivation lurking behind the king’s pride, and perhaps this is why Jesus seems to echo this passage when he talks about Satan’s fall in Luke 10 v 18. But we shouldn’t understand Isaiah 14 v 12-15 to be an attempt to explain the devil’s origins.

Is the devil “real” or just a personification of evil on earth?

For many people in the West, the idea of an evil spirit who plots and plans to oppose God’s work seems a bit far-fetched.

Categories like “wicked” and “evil” seem old-fashioned and irrelevant. We tend to use words like “dysfunctional” to describe people’s bad behaviour, as if human beings are machines that sometimes do not perform as they should. When people do bad things, we now look to brain chemistry or childhood trauma or larger socio-economic forces for an explanation. There simply doesn’t seem to be much room for the devil in a modern world.

In light of this, some Christians wonder if the Bible’s teaching about Satan is really just a pre-scientific way of trying to come to grips with and explain the evil that we all experience in the world. Perhaps, when the Bible speaks about Satan, it is just God’s way of explaining things in a way that would have made sense to people who believed in evil spirits and demons. But now that we know better, we can find better explanations for why things go wrong here on earth.

It is true that not all evil can be directly attributed to Satan. In fact, if you think about it, the Bible spends relatively little time and energy talking about the activity of demons. Instead, the Bible more normally says that evil springs out of the human heart (Matthew 15 v 19) and flows out in our words (James 3 v 5-6) and our actions (Galatians 5 v 19-21).

We pass on patterns of spiritual depravity to our

children (1 Peter 1 v 18) and in our societal structures (James 4 v 5-6). In short, human beings have proved that they are pretty adept sinners even without direct demonic influence.

But Scripture does say more than that. And in fact, there's no way to make sense of the Bible's teaching if Satan isn't a real and personal being. Look at the different personal activities that are ascribed to the devil:

- *He speaks (Matthew 4 v 6).*
- *He lies (John 8 v 44).*
- *He works (1 John 3 v 8).*
- *He contends (fights) with God's angels (Jude v 9).*
- *He desires (John 8 v 44).*
- *He prowls (1 Peter 5 v 8).*
- *He has designs and plans to outwit believers (2 Corinthians 2 v 11).*
- *He blinds unbelievers (2 Corinthians 4 v 4).*
- *He deceives (Revelation 20 v 2-3).*
- *He has a character (John 8 v 44).*
- *He gets angry (Revelation 12 v 12).*

No impersonal force or generalised concept could be said to do any of these things. These are the behaviours and activities of a *person*. Most convincingly (and importantly!), Jesus Himself at every point treats Satan like a personal being. Jesus called him by name repeatedly,

spoke directly to him, and taught about his works and strategies.

The big picture

There is a lot we don't understand about Satan's origins. God doesn't tell us why he allowed the devil to rebel against Him. He doesn't tell us why he didn't destroy Satan a long time ago.

But we must remember that, at the most basic level, he is merely a twisted part of God's creation. He is not a competing god. And as we go on in this book, we will see that he never surprises, out-duels or frustrates God. Satan is still (in the words of Martin Luther) "our ancient foe", but he is not worthy of our fear or anxiety. Jesus has dealt him a death blow (Hebrews 2 v 14); it's now just a matter of waiting for Satan's end to come.