

The LORD and the Attorney General

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[Job 1:1](#), [Job 2:1-10](#), Psalm 26, Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

Have you ever considered that the mention of Satan at the beginning of the Book of Job is probably the oldest clear reference to the character of Satan that we have in the Bible. I know that people often assume that Satan first appears in the story of the Garden of Eden, but go back and read that story in Genesis 3 and you will notice that it never says that the serpent who appears to the woman is Satan, or even that it is a demon. It says that the serpent who spoke to Eve was just another creature made by God, albeit a very crafty one.

So Satan, as a distinct character, doesn't really appear on the scene until we get to the Book of Job. But is that character who appears in the Book of Job really the same one that we come to know and hate in later Christian tradition? What is the story that really unfolds between the LORD and Satan at the beginning of this book? Even more important, what, if anything, does this character really have to do with the challenges we all face living today in this world? Today I would like to delve into one of the most classic tales of the Bible, one that leads us to one of the most elemental questions: why do good people suffer?

Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time in the land of Uz there lived a man called Job. And Job lived a good life. He worked hard. He was an entrepreneur who ran all kinds of businesses like restaurants and hair salons. And he loved to have the public come into his businesses and he always treated them right and gave them exactly the kind of service that pleased them. He treated his employees well also, paying them a living wage. And he was always fair and kind in his treatment of them.

He was a faithful friend. He enjoyed going out with his friends and maybe doing some dining and dancing. He loved to go to sports events with them and cheer for the home team. He was generous to them, sometimes to a fault.

Job had a good life, but that just seemed right to everybody because he was a good person. That is how it's supposed to work after all, isn't it?

Meanwhile in the Heavenly Realm

Now, one day, Yahweh, the great high God of the Israelites, was hanging out with all of the other gods. They were coming to Yahweh and giving their reports, for they were under God's authority. And while they were doing this, Satan also came.

"Well, well, well," said Yahweh, "if it isn't Satan, my old nemesis. If it isn't the great dragon, that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray and who steals souls away and condemns them to outer darkness for all eternity."

Satan or Hasatan?

"Wait, wait" said Satan, "what are you talking about? That's not who I am at all. I am Hasatan, *the* Satan. Think of me as your Attorney General. I am one



of your servants, the one who goes out and goes to and fro on the earth and walking up and down on it to see what all of those humans of yours are up to. I'm one of the guys on your team, remember, just like all of these other so-called "sons of God."

"That whole idea of me as your adversary locked into a conflict with you for all eternity, that's not an idea that's even going to come into being until maybe hundreds of years after the writing of this particular story.

The Origins of Satan

In fact, some people think that it is a concept that was influenced by a dualistic way of looking at the universe – you know, a way of thinking where everything is seen as a conflict between two opposites: good and evil, light and darkness, black and white. Judeans might have picked up such ways of looking at the universe from the Persians during the time of the exile. But that way of understanding me as big bad Satan has still not yet even been envisioned."

"Oh sorry, of course you are right," replied Yahweh. "I guess that is a problem when you are an *eternal* being. When you are living simultaneously in the past, present and future all the time, sometimes it can be difficult to keep all of that straight. So, let's start all over again and I'll greet you properly.

"Welcome back home, Hasatan, my faithful Attorney General. I would be happy to hear your report on the doings of the people of the earth. Tell me, what do you think of my man Job? There is a good example of a faithful human, am I right? He always tries to do the right thing. He treats people fairly. And he only ever has good things to say about me. Doesn't Job reflect really well on me, his creator?"

A Deal is Made

"Well," said Hasatan, "it is true that Mr. Job has nothing but good things to say about you. But why would he say any different? It's like he lives a charmed life and everything he sets his mind to only brings him success. Let him experience a little bit of failure, some frustration and disappointment and then we shall see if he changes his tune."

"Fine," said Yahweh, "you have a devious mind, but that's exactly what I like about you. Go ahead and do your worst. But do me one favour, don't hit him directly, but you can mess things up around him."

"Done," cried the prosecutor. And he went out of the divine presence.

What Happened to Job

So, what did Hasatan need in order to accomplish his mission? Did he require incursions of marauding Sabeans and Chaldeans? Did he need tornadoes or hurricanes blowing in with all their destructive power? These are indeed the hazards that sometimes afflict us in this life. But Hasatan hardly needed anything as dramatic as that to accomplish his goals. He only needed a small thing – a tiny little virus.

The virus and the fear of the virus accomplished everything else. Public health officials shut down all of Job's restaurants and his salons. His income dropped so drastically that he had to lay off all of his workers, which broke his heart. All of a sudden everything that had made him feel safe and secure, was taken away from him and he felt lost.

At the same time, he was also immediately cut off from all of his friends. He couldn't go out and enjoy dinners or sporting events. He was trapped inside with no place to go and he felt as if his life was completely miserable.

But he said to himself, "Hey, at least this is something that we're all in together and we're all going to get through it together." And so, in all of this, Job did not lose his goodness and righteousness.

Meanwhile, Again

So it happened that another day Yahweh, the great high God of the Israelites, was hanging out with all of the other gods. They were coming to Yahweh and giving their reports for they were under God's authority. And while they were doing this, Satan also came.

So Yahweh greeted him. "Hey Satan. . . I mean. . . Hasatan, what do you say now? I saw that you did your worst to my good buddy Job and he didn't crack. You might just be losing your touch."

"Oh no, replied the Attorney General. "I did everything just right. If only your limitations hadn't held me back, he would have reacted differently. Let me move directly against him and you will see that his façade will crumble like a house of cards"

"Yeah, whatever," said the LORD, "Go ahead and do your worst."

Phase Two of Destroying Job's Life

So Hasatan went out from the presence of Yahweh and systematically destroyed any sense of well-being that Job still had. That sense that everyone was going through these difficult times together, the Attorney broke that down very effectively. He quickly spread misinformation by means of his favorite tool, social media. Soon it seemed as if even the most sensible precautions against the spread of a virus, like wearing a mask and distancing and even vaccines had become political footballs that people used to turn friend against friend and neighbour against neighbour.

All of this broke Job's spirit. And then he too fell sick with the virus, even if it was a mild case (because, of course, he had done what he could to protect the community by being vaccinated).

Job felt discouraged and robbed of all strength, but still in this he did not curse God, still he held onto faith that, at least, he was not alone in all of this because his God was with him.

The Issues in Job

The Book of Job, if it were not in the Bible, would still be considered one of the great works of human literature. It is an extensive discussion, written in poetic form, of one of the most intractable questions that humanity has ever faced – why do bad things happen to good people? And most of the philosophical and theological discussion of that question takes place within the extended poetic section in the middle of the book in a series of dialogues between Job and three or four of his friends. But I wanted to focus today, instead, on the brief prose story that begins and ends the book.

More than Framing Narrative

I know that many people have dismissed this story, suggesting that it's merely a framing narrative that sets up the much deeper discussion in the poetic section. But I'm not so sure about that. Yes, the poetic dialogues in the Book of Job do find their own resolution to the difficult problem of evil. But I do think that, in its own way, the prose story also tries to resolve this difficult question.

It all comes down to the character of Satan. He never reappears after the opening scenes, he never gets mentioned in the poetic dialogues. Nevertheless, he is the apparent instrument of Job's misery. I cannot help but feel that if we could better understand the purpose of this character in the story, we would better grasp the author's understanding of the problem of evil.

Satan's Baggage

And we must, first of all, dispense with most of the cultural and later biblical baggage that comes with the name of Satan. There is no sense that this character is a powerful nemesis to God in this story. The opening scene in heaven makes it clear that he is on God's team.

The opening scene shows the LORD, Yahweh, surrounded by figures who are called, in Hebrew, "the sons of God." This is a Hebrew idiom. In Hebrew, when you said sons of man, it meant humans. When you said sons of God, it meant gods. So this story, which is quite ancient, actually reflects a time before the people of Israel had really figured out that Yahweh actually was the one and only true God.

And Satan comes as one of these gods who serve the high God, Yahweh. He is not called by the proper name Satan but he is rather *Hasatan*, which means *the satan*, or perhaps the adversary or the prosecutor. He is, in other words, the kind of person who, in a royal human court, dealt with legal matters and with the prosecution of individuals accused of crimes. So, he may not be a popular member of God's court, but he is definitely part of it.

So What is the Satan?

So, if he doesn't represent the personification of evil in the story, how should we see this Satan who is the author of all of Job's misery?

Well, this is how I understand it. That opening heavenly scene in the Book of Job is pretty clearly not meant to be taken as a literal description of the state of affairs in heaven. The scene, with a high king who is attended by a court full of servants including his own attorney general, is clearly based on the real-life situation that the author would have witnessed in a king's court where he, no doubt, personally served. And he means us to see it exactly as an observer in that world would observe a discussion between a king and his prosecutor as they looked into the affairs of one of the king's subjects.

God and Human Suffering

Neither the king nor the advocate desires or intends for anybody to suffer. The satan, I suspect, simply represents an intractable truth about life – that things sometimes go wrong. Sometimes they go horribly wrong. And such misfortune may visit anyone. It does not fall exclusively on the unjust nor on the just. And of course we are tested severely when such things enter into our lives.

I think that this story affirms this basic, inescapable truth about life. I know we would like to affirm something different. We would like to affirm that all suffering carries with it meaning and purpose. But the presence of the Satan in the high king's court seems to say otherwise. But that does not mean that we are lost and alone in the midst of the suffering of this world.

The other thing that this story affirms is that God, the high king, actually does care about our sufferings and, in the end, he draws near to Job when he's at the worst of them. And that is not nothing. That is the central theme of the story of the Christian gospel, that God, in Christ, draws near to us when we are at our very worst.