

Thomas Farrar

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Jonathan Burke, Christadelphian Apologist

Dear Jonathan:

I am writing to you to respond to your comments on my paper, *The Accuser of our Brethren: Unmasking the Biblical Devil*, published on my website (www.dianoigo.com) on 5 October.

First of all, I commend you on your zeal for theology and I appreciate your having taken the time to critique my paper. I found some of your comments to be constructive and this will help me to refine my argument.

I am not interested in engaging with you in debate on a web discussion forum. My circumstances have changed such that I have more responsibilities and less time to devote to the study of the Word, and I believe there are more productive ways to spend this limited time. However, I do think it is important to respond to you since you raised a number of points that I have not previously encountered. If you choose to reply further, I will be happy to read your thoughts but will probably not carry the dialogue beyond that unless you produce arguments with more weight than what you've presented so far.

I. Satan and demons

It was not clear to me whether you were responding to both my recently paper about the devil and Satan and my paper from three years ago on demons, or only the paper about the devil. You only cited the paper about the devil, but your response focused as much on demons as on the devil and Satan, whereas *The Accuser of our Brethren* only discusses demonology where it dovetails with the devil and Satan. I did not specifically challenge the Christadelphian view of demons in this paper (although I do reject it!)

II. Christadelphian Scientific Rationalism

I commented that, "In Thomas Williams' mind, the idea of a personal supernatural devil could be ruled out a priori on rational grounds," and you stated that Williams did not actually say this. Can you please clarify how my comment is qualitatively different from the quotation from Williams: "To a reasonable mind...a naked statement of the popular belief of the devil is all that is required to secure rejection" (Williams, section 3)?

I acknowledge that I did not devote a lot of space to tracing the influence of scientific rationalism on the founders of the Christadelphian movement. Recounting the sources and history of this belief system was not my main purpose. However, I did point out that Dr. John Thomas, like many post-Enlightenment

opponents of the supernatural devil idea, came from a scientific background, and that Robert Roberts wrote of him that his scientific intellect was one of the traits that qualified him to do the work of an apostle.

Can I tell who is possessed by a demon and who is not? This is a red herring; the power to discern demon possession is not a prerequisite for a correct understanding of biblical demonology.

You ask whether I visit a doctor when I am unwell, or an exorcist. I would answer your question with one of my own: when you are unwell, do you visit a doctor, or pray to God? If (as I suspect) your answer is “Both,” then you would agree that my question created a false dichotomy between the physical and spiritual realms, as though the two cannot overlap. Your question did the same.

Satan: The Old Testament

I would agree that at the level of authorial intent, the writers of the OT *satan* passages were not describing the Devil in the NT sense; and as you point out, this is the scholarly consensus, found even in Evangelical works such as Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. To claim otherwise would be anachronistic and inconsistent with the principle of progressive revelation.

This, however, is not the crucial issue about the OT usage of *satan*. The crucial issue, in my opinion, is to understand the relationship between the OT usage of *satan* and the later NT usage of *satan* and *diabolos*. I contend that Satan in Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 is best interpreted as a supernatural personal being, and a case can be made for this in 1 Chr. 21:1 as well (your quotation from Tate appears to admit this possibility, as ‘a satan or other divine agent’ could be an angelic being). Couple this with the translation of *satan* with *diabolos* in the LXX and the importation of *satan* into the Greek NT and we have a plausible antecedent for an NT Satan/devil who is also a supernatural personal being. Under the mainstream Christian interpretation, the doctrine of Satan in the OT is a lot like the doctrine of Satan in the NT; the difference is one of specificity.

However, what Christadelphians rarely even attempt to explain is how the OT usage of *satan* serves as an antecedent for an NT *satan* which is an abstract theological concept, what Roberts calls “the spirit or inclination of the flesh.” Indeed, I have never read a Christadelphian writer who observed anything beyond a basic lexical relationship between the OT *satan* and the NT *satan* (i.e., they happen to use the same word meaning adversary). Satan, for Robert Roberts, was just a word meaning adversary in its “simple and general sense,” yet he felt justified in giving it a very subtle and very specific meaning in certain NT passages, without any OT precedent for doing so. This is surprising since Christadelphians are usually scrupulous about building NT doctrine on OT foundations.

I understand the OT Satan to be the personal, supernatural Satan of later NT thought, not because such a being is explicitly described in the OT, but because my doctrine of Scripture allows me to see the NT as an authoritative commentary on the OT. That is, I believe it is justifiable to understand the OT in light of later NT revelation. However, most liberal scholars would object to this approach; and thus it is not surprising that the many scholars should deny even an embryonic doctrine of Satan in the OT.

On that point, I want to mention a couple of difficulties with your appeal to scholarly consensus on the usage of Satan in the OT (even though I concede the point as far as authorial intent goes). I suspect you are holding up this particular scholarly consensus as authoritative because it serves your purposes, even though it is likely that many scholars who participate in this consensus reached their conclusions via methodologies that you would (I think) reject, such as higher criticism.

Furthermore, the scholarly consensus is that the NT writers and early church believed the devil and Satan to be a supernatural personal being; in fact this is hardly controversial. Do you consider the scholarly consensus to be authoritative in this case, or is the scholarly consensus only authoritative when it supports your views?

I think it is very important to read and consider expert scholarship, but I am not afraid to disagree with the scholarly consensus when it results directly from a higher-critical, naturalistic approach to Scripture (e.g. the Maccabean date for the Book of Daniel).

Satan: the New Testament

Although demons are not the subject of this paper, I would point out that the word *daimon* occurs six times in John's Gospel. While he does not report any exorcisms, to infer from this that he disbelieved in the reality of demons is an argument from silence. Indeed, none of the Signs of John's Gospel resembles events that the Synoptics describe as exorcism.¹

If an argument from silence is weak, then an argument from *infrequency* is weaker still! John's Gospel mentions Satan once, and the devil twice (thrice including the anarthrous use in 6:70), of which one reference is one of the most definitive in the NT (8:44). We should also not forget that John refers to Satan by other titles, such as the ruler of this world and the evil one.

If you are interested in scholarly consensus on the audience of John's Gospel, I am not aware of any contemporary scholar who asserts that John's Gospel is written for 'mature Christians.' The two most popular views over the past few decades (discussed in Kostenberger's *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*) are that John was written for a community of Jewish Christians who had recently been excommunicated from the synagogue, or that John was written to Jewish Christians seeking to understand the recent destruction of the Temple.

You then claim that the process of marginalizing Satan can be observed in the New Testament, which is consistent with the Christadelphian view of accommodation. (Also, I was not aware that Christadelphians held an accommodation view of Satan; I thought this was limited to demons).

In support of this marginalization hypothesis, you claim that outside the Gospel and Acts, "There are only seven references to satan and demons, and no references to possession or the gift of exorcism."

¹ The only possible exception is the demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute in Matt. 12:22-23, cp. the sign in John 9. However, Matthew does not in this passage conflate blindness with demon-possession, and no other healings of blindness in the Synoptics are described as exorcisms.

With respect to the claim about Satan,² it is first of all dubious to see a chronological progression from ‘the Gospels and Acts’ to the other books of the NT. No doubt you are aware that the NT was not written in the order in which the books appear in our Bible. Scholarly consensus places most of the NT epistles chronologically prior to the Gospels and Acts. For instance, Galatians – widely believed to be the first NT book to be written, is one of the few NT books *not* to mention the devil or Satan.

More importantly, there are 17 occurrences of *satan* in the NT outside of the Gospels and Acts, **not** seven as you claim. This is one **more than** the 16 occurrences in the Gospels and Acts. You also neglected to mention that there are also 18 substantive uses of *diabolos* in the NT outside of the Gospels and Acts (again, **more than** the 16 occurrences in the Gospels and Acts). The inaccuracy of your assessment of the NT witness outside the Gospels and Acts is bewildering.

The emphasis on the devil and Satan outside the Gospels and Acts only increases when one considers the frequency of these words relative to total word count.³ In the Gospels and Acts, *diabolos* occurs about every 5200 words and *satan* also about every 5200 words. In the rest of the NT, *satan* occurs about every 3200 words and *diabolos* about every 3000 words. On the whole, *satan* and *diabolos* occur about 66% more frequently outside the Gospels and Acts than within them!

Moreover, the two NT books with the most frequent mentions of the devil or Satan (on a per-word basis⁴) are none other than 1 John and Revelation, which are probably among the latest books to be written and are both attributed to John. Thus, in both the progression of John’s writings and the progression of NT writings as a whole, there appears to be an increasing emphasis on the devil and Satan rather than a marginalization.

Finally, it is worth noting that every NT writer uses either the word *diabolos* or *satan* at least once. The marginalization theory is utterly opposed to the NT data, so the question of why the devil and Satan have been marginalized in the Christadelphian community still needs to be answered.

Satan: Historical Belief

I did acknowledge one non-literal reference to Satan among the vast diversity of interpretation that can be found in rabbinic commentary, while noting that describing Satan figuratively is not the same thing as denying that Satan exists literally.

As to early Christian belief, you ignored all of the witnesses I quoted except for the *Didache*, and use this one document to build an argument from silence. Why should the *Didache*’s silence outweigh the positive evidence for belief in a personal devil found in so many other writings from the 1st and 2nd centuries?

² I won’t discuss the point about demons, as this is not the main topic of my paper, and there is not a lot to discuss as you have only made an argument from silence.

³ There will be very slight variations in these statistics depending on which Greek NT text is used. My statistics are derived from the Analytical Greek New Testament available in Silver Mountain software.

⁴ Jude actually has a higher rate but is excluded from this analysis due to its small sample size of words.

The Apostles' Creed makes no mention of the devil or Satan, nor does the Mass of the Roman Rite, or the authorized creeds of the Church of England or the Lutheran Church. I don't think anyone would claim on this basis that those who confess these creeds deny or marginalize Satan's existence.

General Comments

I agree with you that I could strengthen my paper by citing more contemporary Christadelphian scholarship, although I think the pioneers of the movement remain legitimate witnesses as Christadelphian doctrine has not radically changed since their time.

The references to Satan's equality to God in the Church which you have quoted are anecdotal and not theological statements. The fact that some people exaggerate Satan's importance should not lead us to the opposite extreme, i.e. denying his existence altogether. That is the flaw of the excluded middle.

You objected to my assessment that you had attributed the decline in Christian belief in Satan to increased biblical literacy. But your pamphlet said, "Increasingly, Christians are coming to an understanding of what the Bible really says about 'satan'." How should I have understood this statement if it does not describe an increase in biblical and theological literacy?

Do you have empirical evidence to back up your claim of an inverse relationship between belief in a literal 'satan' and Biblical literacy?

Trees and Fruit

The Christian Church has believed in a personal, supernatural Satan all through the ages. There have been, and are, innumerable Christians for whom belief in a personal Satan does not lead to the demonizing of opponents or the burning of witches. For many, it leads to a deeper gratitude to the victory over the powers of darkness that Christ achieved on the cross, and a deeper appreciation for the power of prayer. These could hardly be described as bad fruits.

However, as is pointed out by C.S. Lewis' statement on the front page of my paper, an excessive interest in the kingdom of Satan is as dangerous as its denial. I would personally suggest that the infiltrations of Satan's forces can be seen more in the Church's abuses of power, than in any shortcomings of those whom they persecuted. That is, it was ironically the witch hunters, rather than the witches, who were captives of Satan. After all Paul wrote that Satan masquerades as an angel of light; he is a master of imposture.

Meanwhile, the Christadelphians' rationalistic worldview may not tend to witch-burning or superstition, but I would argue that it tends toward deism, with an emphasis on human self-sufficiency and a minimized role of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Your response raises some interesting points and some angles that I had not thought of, and I thank you for that.

However, you have focused on peripheral issues, relied on arguments from silence, and made inaccurate claims about the NT witness to Satan. What is more, you have not interacted with any of my main arguments. Perhaps this is because I failed to make my main arguments stand out in the course of my lengthy paper. If so, I hope they will be set out more plainly in the series of videos on YouTube in which I am summarizing the content of the paper.

I pray the Lord will bless and guide you in your continued quest for his will.

Tom