

How the Serpent in the Garden Became Satan

Adam, Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden

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Introduced as “the most clever of all of the beasts of the field that YHWH God had made,” the serpent in the Garden of Eden is portrayed as just that: a serpent. Satan does not make an appearance in Genesis 2–3, for the simple reason that when the story was written, [the concept of the devil had not yet been invented](#). Explaining the serpent in the Garden of Eden as Satan would have been as foreign a concept to the ancient authors of the text as referring to [Ezekiel](#)’s vision as a UFO (but Google “Ezekiel’s vision” now, and you’ll see that plenty of people today have made that connection!). In fact, while the word *satan* appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, it is never a proper name; since there is no devil in ancient Israel’s worldview, there can’t yet have been a proper name for such a creature.

The noun *satan*, Hebrew for “adversary” or “accuser,” occurs nine times in the Hebrew Bible: five times to describe a human military, political or legal opponent, and four times with reference to a divine being. In Numbers 22, the prophet Balaam, hired to curse the Israelites, is stopped by a messenger from Israel’s God YHWH, described as “[the satan](#)” acting on God’s behalf. In Job, “[the satan](#)” is a member of God’s heavenly council—one of the divine beings, whose role in [Job’s story](#) is to be an “accuser,” a status acquired by people in ancient Israel and Mesopotamia for the purposes of particular legal proceedings. In Job’s case, what’s on trial is God’s assertion that Job is completely “blameless and upright” vs. the *satan*’s contention that Job only behaves himself because God has rewarded him. God argues that Job is rewarded because he is good, and not good because he is rewarded. The *satan* challenges God to a wager that if everything is taken away from poor Job, he won’t be so good anymore, and God accepts. Though a perception of “the *satan*” as Satan would make this portrait of God easier to swallow, the story demonstrates otherwise; like Yahweh’s messenger in

Numbers 22, this *satan* acts on YHWH's instructions (and as a result of God's braggadocio) and is not an independent force of evil.

In Zechariah 3, the prophet describes a vision of the high priest Joshua standing in a similar divine council, also functioning as a tribunal. Before him stand YHWH's messenger and the *satan*, who is there to accuse him. This vision is Zechariah's way of pronouncing YHWH's approval of Joshua's appointment to the high priesthood in the face of adversarial community members, represented by the *satan*. The messenger rebukes the *satan* and orders that Joshua's dirty clothing be replaced, as he promises Joshua continuing access to the divine council. Once again, the *satan* is not Satan who we read about in the New Testament.

The word *satan* appears only once without "the" in front of it in the entire Hebrew Bible: in 1 Chronicles 21:1. Is it possible that we finally have Satan here portrayed? 1 Chronicles 21 parallels the story of [David's census](#) in 2 Samuel 24, in which God orders David to "go number Israel and Judah" and then punishes king and kingdom for doing so. The Chronicler changes this story, as he does others, to portray the relationship between God and David as uncompromised; he writes that "a *satan* stood up against Israel and he provoked David to number Israel" (1 Chronicles 21:6–7; 27:24). Although it is possible to read "Satan" here instead of "a *satan*" (Hebrew uses neither uppercase letters, nor indefinite articles, e.g., "a"), nothing else in this story or in any texts for another 300 years indicates that the idea of an evil prince of darkness exists in the consciousness of the Israelites.

So if there's no Satan in the Hebrew Bible, how does the serpent in the garden become Satan?

The worldview of Jewish readers of [Genesis 2–3](#) profoundly changed in the centuries since the story was first written. After [the canon of the Hebrew Bible](#) closed,¹ beliefs in angels, demons and a final apocalyptic battle arose in a divided and turbulent Jewish community. In light of this impending end, many turned to a renewed understanding of the beginning, and [the Garden of Eden](#) was re-read—and re-written—to reflect the changing ideas of a changed world. Two separate things happened and then merged: Satan became the proper name of the devil, a supernatural power now seen to oppose God as the leader of demons and the forces of evil; and the serpent in the Garden of Eden came to be identified with him. While we begin to see the first idea occurring in texts two centuries before the New Testament, the second won't happen until later; the serpent in the Garden is not identified with Satan anywhere in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament.

The concept of the devil begins to appear in second and first centuries B.C.E. Jewish texts. In 1 [Enoch](#), the “angel” who “led Eve astray” and “showed the weapons of death to the children of men” was called Gadreel (not Satan). Around the same time, the Wisdom of Solomon taught that “through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who are on his side suffer it.” Though this may very well be the earliest reference to Eden’s serpent as the devil, in neither text, nor in any document we have until *after* the New Testament, is *satan* clearly understood as the serpent in Eden. At [Qumran](#), though, Satan is the leader of the forces of darkness; his power is said to threaten humanity, and it was believed that salvation would bring the absence of Satan and evil.

By the first century C.E., Satan is adopted into the nascent Christian movement, as ruler over a kingdom of darkness, an opponent and deceiver of [Jesus](#) (Mark 1:13), prince of the devils and opposing force to God (Luke 11:15–19; Matthew 12:24–27; Mark 3:22–23:26); [Jesus’ ministry](#) puts a temporary end to Satan’s reign (Luke 10:18) and the conversion of the gentiles leads them from Satan to God (Acts 26:18). Most famously, Satan endangers the Christian communities but will fall in Christ’s final act of salvation, described in detail in [the book of Revelation](#).

But curiously, although the author of [Revelation](#) describes Satan as “the ancient serpent” (Revelation 12:9; 20:2), there is no clear link anywhere in the Bible between Satan and the serpent in the garden. The ancient Near Eastern combat myth motif, exemplified in the battle between Marduk and Tiamat in Enuma Elish and Baal and Yam/Mot in ancient Canaan, typically depicted the bad guy as a serpent. The characterization of Leviathan in Isaiah 27 reflects such myths nicely:

On that day YHWH will punish
With his hard and big and strong sword
Leviathan the fleeing serpent,
Leviathan the twisted serpent,
And he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.

So the reference in Revelation 12:9 to Satan as “the ancient serpent” probably reflects mythical monsters like Leviathan rather than the clever, legged, talking creature in Eden.

In the New Testament, Satan and his demons have the power to enter and possess people; this is what is said to have happened to [Judas](#) (Luke 22:3; John 13:27; cf. Mark 5:12–13; Luke 8:30–32). But when [Paul](#) re-tells the story

of Adam and Eve, he places the blame on the humans (Romans 5:18; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:21–22) and not on [fallen angels](#), or on the serpent as Satan. Still, the conflation begged to be made, and it will seem natural for later Christian authors—Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian, Irenaeus and Augustine, for example—to assume Satan’s association with Eden’s talking snake. Most famously, in the 17th century, John Milton elaborates Satan’s role in the Garden poetically, in great detail in *Paradise Lost*. But this connection is not forged anywhere in the Bible.

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