

Book Review

Ryan E. Stokes. *The Satan: How God’s Executioner Became the Enemy*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019, xxv + 275 pages, softcover, \$40, ISBN: 978-0-8028-7250-0.

The Old Testament introduces the Satan as an agent of Yahweh at first. Later, he became God’s enemy and a troublemaker. In this volume, Stokes traces the development of this tradition. He does this in a “careful, balanced, and enlightened way.” The volume has been called “the most thorough treatment of Satan in ancient Jewish literature” and “an essential item” for understanding “the symbolism of evil in biblical and early Jewish literature” (back cover). This is a highly recommendable and insightful book.

In the *Foreword*, John J. Collins writes a useful overview of the Satan tradition. He notes that the Hebrew Bible has no Satan that is the epitome of evil (ix), that the last two centuries BCE saw much development in the Satan tradition (xi) and that the serpent in Gen 3 was only associated with the Devil in first century (x).

In the *Preface*, Stokes notes that Rev 12:10-11 falls late in the development of the Satan tradition and differs from what is found in the Hebrew Bible (xiii, xiv). Stokes does not construct a theology of Satan or evil nor does he evaluate the theology of ancient authors. He merely describes the development (xv). Developments in the Satan tradition were a reaction to the problem of evil, which is how the Satan got blamed for many problems (xv). Most volumes on the Satan focus on the later theology and literature while the early Jewish tradition and its origin and development are obscured (xvii, xx). Stokes acknowledges the works of Day (1988), Pagels (1995) and Brand (2013) that engage the pre-Christian tradition (xviii).

Chapter 1—The Origin of the Satan: Here (1-28) Stokes surveys the Satan tradition as found in the Hebrew Bible and shows its development. Ill and good were usually accredited to Yahweh but in some cases others were seen as the agent, of which the Satan is the most notorious (1-2). Sometimes, when the Satan is taken to be an accuser, he is actually an executioner (14). He should be considered in the light of other agents of death in the Hebrew scriptures (26). Later traditions should not be read into earlier ones (7). The three most important passages on the Satan tradition are Num 22 (10-11), Zech 3 (12-17) and Job 1-2 (29-47). Stokes shows that interpretation is impacted by whether ‘the Satan’ is a title (13) or a common noun (11) rather than a name. Postexilic writings’ emphasis on the transcendence of God and the use of intermediaries impacted the Satan tradition as well (17).

Chapter 2—The Satan and the Innocent Job: Job portrays the latest development found in the Hebrew Bible (6). In comparing the parts that mention the Satan and those that do not (31), Stokes found that those that do not mention the Satan can stand alone (35). Stokes argues convincingly that these comments on the Satan should be taken as later additions (36-40). The Satan is not an intruder in the heavenly council (41) and he is shown to be an attacker here rather than an accuser (45). The late development is also shown by the Satan attacking the innocent (43). By these additions, the editor alleviates God of the responsibility for Job's misfortune (44).

Chapter 3—Demons, Evil Spirits, Fallen Angels and Human Sin: Stokes starts with a section on taxonomies and terminology of harmful superhuman beings in the Hebrew Bible (48). He does this for some other literature as well (Chs. 4, 7 and 9). Here Stokes considers traditions about demons, evil spirits and Sons of God (51-61). He shows how these traditions are brought together and developed in the Book of the Watchers. He specifically focuses on the Watchers introducing forbidden knowledge on earth (62-63), the origin and activity of evil spirits (63-68) and the worship of false gods (69-73). The Book of the Watchers shows a belief that much of human trouble can be traced to when the watchers descended and married female humans (62).

Chapter 4—The Prince of Mastema and His Deceptive Spirits: In the Book of Jubilees (10:11), the Satan appears as the Prince of Mastema (81). Jubilees is a heavily redacted book, therefore, determining what it is supposed to communicate as a whole is tricky (79). Jubilees is also only available in translation, further complicating its interpretation. (80). The Prince is shown not only as an agent of God to harm the nations but also as an enemy of Israel (79). One shift in the traditions is that the Prince and evil spirits are seen as involved in human sins. Here also, the Prince is associated with the children of the watchers (93), which is the first time that evil spirits are identified with the Satan and are found in a hierarchy (92).

Chapter 5—The Prince of Mastema, Enemy of God's People: Stokes highlights the verses from Jubilees that portray the Prince as one who harasses Israel (100). Stokes looks at three stories in Jubilees that portray this view of the Prince (101-109). In the stories of Abraham sacrificing Isaac (103) and where Moses is in danger because of his uncircumcised son (105), the Prince is made out to be the villain. Stokes shows that by the second-century BCE, the Satan was still not seen as an 'accuser' (111-115). Jubilees also traces the origin of evil to the union between the Watchers and human women (116) and seems to indicate a belief that the Prince and the harmful spirits were not created by God (117).

Chapter 6—Demons, Evil Spirits, the Satan and Human Responsibility for Sin: Here, Stokes explores the writings of authors who put the responsibility for sin on humans and avoid implicating God in it (120). He inspects the Wisdom

of Ben Sira (121-126), the Epistle of Enoch (126-138), Barkhi Nafshi (138-139) and the Epistle of James (139-140). One comment from Ben Sira shows that he was responding to some who blamed God for their wandering (123). Stokes shows that the Epistle of Enoch polemically engages with contemporaneous literature (129). The Epistle of James is unique in that it absolves God from blame while still recognising the role that superhuman forces play (140).

Chapter 7—Belial, Sin and Sectarianism: The tradition found in the Dead Sea Scrolls resembles earlier traditions but contain some novel ideas (142). As a collection, it does not contain a uniform idea (143). In the DSS, the Satan is generally called Belial and is thought of as the instigator of sin (142). Stokes looks at different harmful superhuman beings, including demons, spirits, satans and other harmful superhuman beings (144-149). Then, he focuses on Melchiresha in the Vision of Amram (149-151), Belial in the Damascus Document (152-160) and Belial in the Community Rule (163-165). He also looks at whether Belial is the same as the Prince of Mastema (160-163) and concludes that the Satan tradition in the DSS is a development of what is found in the Hebrew scriptures (166).

Chapter 8—Belial and the Power of Darkness: The Treatise on the Two Spirits and the War Rule are two texts that refer to a cosmic conflict between light and darkness (167). They both depict the Satan as an enemy rather than a functionary of God (167). Stokes shows that the two spirits should be understood as superhuman beings rather than human dispositions, though they are not the same as the Angel of Light and the Angel of Darkness (170-171). The Treatise considers moral evil far more comprehensively than what goes before (177). The author suggests that God created evil (181). In considering the War Rule, Stokes looks at Belial’s involvement in sin and punishment (183-185), Belial’s co-operation with the Sons of Darkness against Israel (185-188) and Belial as enemy of God (189-190). He also explains why the Angel of Darkness does belong to the Satan tradition (174).

Chapter 9—The Satan in the New Testament: In this chapter, Stokes investigates how the NT authors conceived of Satan, especially in relation to earlier Jewish notions (195). He looks at Satan’s activities, especially his involvement in sin (204-205), as an attacker (205-207) and as God’s agent and enemy (208-210). He examines the notion of Satan as the accuser of the “comrades” (NRSV; 210-214) and as ancient serpent, specifically as it relates to Gen 3 (216-220). He lays out the three stages of development connected the Satan to Gen 3. The NT also contains the tension as to whether the Satan is an adversary or agent of God (203). Stokes questions whether the NT sees the Satan as an ‘accuser.’ Evidence of this idea prior to the second-century CE is “scant” (211). Stokes argues that in Rev 12:10 the idea is that the Satan persuades God to test those who seem to be faithful to him (212). The book ends with a short

conclusion and provides indexes for authors (255- 259), subjects (260-263), ancient sources (264-275).

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