

OVERCOMING THE DEVIL IN THE *ACTS OF THE MARTYRS*

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In the early years of the third century, a group of Christians in Carthage was arrested and sentenced to death in the arena. Among them was the catechumen, Vibia Perpetua, a recently married twenty-two year old woman with a child at her breast. The *Passion of Perpetua* tells the story of her and her companions' martyrdom. The bulk of the central section of this martyr act purports to come from Perpetua's prison diary, in which she describes four visions.¹

Her fourth vision occurred the day before her execution.² In this vision she sees herself in the amphitheatre about to face a vicious Egyptian in hand-to-hand combat, an opponent who surprises her since she knew she was condemned *ad bestias*. The vision has received much attention because as she prepares to meet her opponent, Perpetua's clothes are stripped off and she notices suddenly that "I became a man" (*facta sum masculus*; 10.7).³ As

¹ The narrator who frames the account states: "Now from this point on the entire account of her ordeal is her own, according to her own ideas and in the way that she herself wrote it down" (2:3). There is reason to conclude the redactor has been more heavy-handed than he admits. Nonetheless, if even a fragment of that text is authentic, this would represent the first piece of writing from a Christian woman. For discussion, see the positive assessment by Jan N. Bremmer, "Perpetua and her Diary: Authenticity, Family and Visions" in *Märtyrer und Märtyrerakten* (ed. Walter Ameling; *Altertumswissenschaftliches Kolloquium 6*; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2002), 77–120. For doubts on the authenticity of the diary section, see Ross S. Kramer and Shira L. Lander, "Perpetua and Felicitas" in *The Early Christian World* (ed. Philip F. Esler; New York: Routledge, 2000), 1048–68. Unless otherwise stated, translations of the martyrs acts are taken from Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

² For dream analysis in the ancient and modern world, see Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 92–115.

³ For discussion, see for example, L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 85–92; and especially Elizabeth A. Castelli, "'I Will Make Mary Male': Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity" in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub; London: Routledge, 1991), 29–49.

the two engage in combat, the Egyptian attempts to grab her feet, but Perpetua kicks him in the face several times with her heel, pummels his body, and forces him to the ground:

I put my two hands together linking the fingers of one hand with those of the other and thus I got hold of his head. He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head (*calcavi illi caput*; 10:11).⁴

The dream causes her to re-evaluate theologically her impending execution. Despite knowing she was condemned to the beasts, she concludes: “I realised that it was *not* with wild animals (*ad bestias*), but against the Devil I would fight (*contra diabolum esse pugnaturam*), but I knew I would win the victory” (10:14). In this essay, I examine the role of the Devil in Christian martyrology, particularly in the two related tropes of fighting against the Devil and overcoming the Devil. I will argue that in the Martyr Acts there is a significant development in early Christian Satanology.

A. Treading on the Devil’s Head

Perpetua’s dream causes her to reinterpret her day in the arena as a cosmic contest in which she and her fellow martyrs will battle against Satan.⁵ At face value, this is a plausible interpretation of the vision, for it contains a number of allusions to the Satan figure in Genesis. The description of the contest clearly alludes to the enmity placed between humanity and the serpent. Just as the Egyptian’s main strategy of attack is to grab Perpetua’s feet, to

⁴ It is not entirely clear what action is taking place here. Thomas J. Hefferman, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 269, points to a parallel in Ovid’s account of the wrestling match between Achelous and Hercules (*Metamorphoses* 9.58). However, there it is the two combatants who link fingers. Nonetheless, Ovid later describes Hercules gripping his opponent’s head from behind which causes him to lose breath, stumble so that his face was on the ground (9.27–88). We should probably imagine Perpetua choking the Egyptian in a similar way in this scene.

⁵ For the idea of martyrdom as cosmic contest see Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (LNTS 307; London: T&T Clark, 2006).

which she responds by striking his head, God's curse on the serpent in Gen 3 also focusses on the heel and head:

Because you have done this . . . upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel. (Gen 3:14–15)⁶

In a further allusion to the Genesis curse, while Perpetua is rubbed down with oil before the contest, her opponent rolls around in the dust (10:7). Finally, her victory over her adversary is completed by Perpetua standing on his head (10:11).⁷

While Perpetua's interpretation of her dream makes the connection between the Egyptian and the Devil explicit, the image of standing on his head is found throughout the *Passion*. In the first of Perpetua's prison visions, she sees

a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up at a time. To the sides of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were swords, spears, hooks, daggers, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled and his flesh would adhere to the weapons. At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon (*draco*) of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and to terrify them from doing so. (4:3–4)

This time the adversary appears as a dragon rather than in human form. Despite the dragon's attempt to terrify anyone from climbing the ladder, Perpetua begins her ascent.

⁶ All biblical quotations taken from the NRSV.

⁷ See Rom 16:20 for a similar image of victory over Satan. In the Vulgate, the offspring that will crush the head of the offspring of the serpent is female: *ipsa conteret caput tuum* (Gen. 3:15). Tertullian also speaks of the martyrs engaging in combat with Satan and trampling on his head both in an outside of prison (*Ad Martyrs* 1).

Slowly as if he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from beneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on its head and went up (*calcavi illi caput et ascendi*), (4:7).

Not only does the dragon fail to terrify Perpetua away from the ladder, it is afraid of her. Perpetua's mastery over evil spirits continues, as later in the narrative while she stands in the arena, "the unclean spirit" (*immundo spiritu*) is also said to fear, and appears unable to kill her unless she consents (21:9). Once again, her victory over the satanic figure is illustrated by her "standing on his head" (4:7).

After Perpetua reaches the top of the ladder, she sees a garden in which stands thousands of people clothed in white garments.⁸ An old man gives her milk to drink, and as the people say "Amen" she woke up. When she recounts the dream to her companions she realises they "would have to suffer, and . . . would no longer have any hope in this life" (4:10). Both of Perpetua's visions lead her to conclude that suffering and martyrdom will be the inevitable result of their time in prison. The two dreams are linked by the theme of standing on the head of an antagonist, and while the vision of combat with the Egyptian more obviously resembles the ordeal which was to come in the arena, both visions represent a cosmic conflict with Satan resulting in martyrdom. In order to ascend the ladder, the martyr must defeat the dragon by treading on its head. Therefore, we may conclude that in both visions, martyrdom is interpreted as the means by which the Devil is defeated.

This conclusion is confirmed by the narrator's account of the Christians' martyrdom. In the first instance, the day of execution is described as the "day of their victory" (*dies victoriae illorum*; 18:1). Second, the group of Christians enter the arena "joyfully as if they were going to heaven" (18:1), recalling the scene at the top of the ladder in Perpetua's vision.

⁸ White robes signal martyrdom in Rev 6:11 and 12:10. See Tertullian, *Scorp.* 12.

Third, Perpetua resists the attempt of the authorities to dress the Christians in the robes of Saturn and Ceres, and wins the right to stand in the arena as Christians.⁹ After this confrontation, Perpetua begins to sing a psalm, and is said to be “already treading on the head of the Egyptian” (*caput iam Aegyptii calcans*; 18:7). At this point, the first and fourth visions converge with this account of the arena; the experience of trial is interpreted as an act of triumph represented by trampling on the Devil.

When the narrator turns to the sufferings of the martyrs, the Devil is said to be present and directly involved in the torments inflicted on the Christians. He prepared a wild cow to be pitted against Perpetua and Felicitas, in a rather perverse matching of the sex of the animal and the martyrs (20:1).¹⁰ Even the moment of Perpetua’s death is cast as a contest between the Devil and martyr. As the martyrs are taken off to have their throats cut, the narrator notes “Saturus, who being the first to climb the stairway was the first to die. For once again he was waiting for Perpetua” (21:8). The ladder in the first vision is now specifically equated with martyrdom. However, the young gladiator who is tasked to execute Perpetua botches the job. Perpetua herself had to guide his sword to her throat: “It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing” (21:10). In order to win martyrdom and ascend the ladder, Perpetua had to tread on the dragon’s head. The prison visions all point to the moment of martyrdom, which is interpreted as a victory in which she will trample on the head of the Devil, winning martyrdom by her own hand.¹¹

⁹ For an influential discussion of the phenomenon of forcing criminals to enact classical scenes, see Kathleen M. Coleman, “Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments,” *JRS* 80 (1990): 44–73.

¹⁰ Hefferman, *Passion of Perpetua*, 344. To be stripped naked and presented to a bull would be the normal means of sexual degradation for women, signalling promiscuity. See Brent D. Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua” (*Past and Present* 139 [1993]: 3–45), 7–9.

¹¹ For the interpretation of Perpetua’s death as a form of “voluntary martyrdom,” see Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, especially 34–6.

B. The Devil and Suffering

The Devil plays a prominent role in other Christian martyr acts.¹² As in *The Passion of Perpetua*, he is the chief enemy of the Christians, causing persecution, planning assaults, and inspiring grotesque tortures. In the *Martyrs of Lyons*, the Devil is like a general marshalling his troops against the Church.

The Adversary swooped down with full force, in this way anticipating his final coming which is sure to come. He went to all lengths to train and prepare his minions against God's servants: the result was that we were not only shut out of our houses, the baths, and the public square, but they forbade any of us to be seen in any place whatsoever. (1:4–5)

Under Satan's inspiration, Christians were subjected to "abuse, blows, dragging, despoiling, stoning, imprisonment, and all that an enraged mob is likely to inflict on their most hated enemies."¹³ The writer implies that the severe bout of persecution that broke out in Lyons was caused by Satan's direct influence over the whole people, causing them to act against the Christians. Later in the narrative, specific mistreatment of Christians, such as "confinement in dark places, the stretching of limbs, and other sorts of indignities," is said to be typical of the kinds of tortures inflicted by sadistic jailors who are "aroused and filled with the Devil."¹⁴

As Satan's activity is described in agonistic or military terms, so too is the Christian response.

¹² For discussion, including the view that Latin texts more enthusiastically incorporate the Devil into their theological worldview than Greek texts, see Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 87–102.

¹³ *Martyrs of Lyons* 1:8. Ignatius also puts "cruel tortures" down to the Devil (*Rom.* 5:3).

¹⁴ *Martyrs of Lyons* 1:27.

Arrayed against him [Satan] was God's grace, which protected the weak, and raised up sturdy pillars that could by their endurance take on themselves all the attacks of the Evil One. These then charged into battle, holding up under every sort of abuse and torment; indeed, they made light of their great burden as they sped on to Christ.¹⁵

In these early Christian texts, the martyrs endure Satan's attacks. In so doing, they charge into battle, winning both martyrdom and Christ.

Satan appears to possess or influence large groups of people in other martyr acts, leading them to persecute Christians. Human players in the persecution, trials, and execution of Christians are reduced to nothing more than agents of Satan. Persecutors are variously described as "Satan's servants" (*ministri diaboli*),¹⁶ "underlings of Satan" (ὕπηρέται τοῦ σατανᾶ),¹⁷ and Satan's own:

It was in the beginning that the Devil fell from his rank of glory because of his own wickedness, and hence makes war upon God's love for mankind; hard pressed by the Christians he struggles with them and prepares his skirmishes beforehand, and then, anticipating, reports it to his own (τοῖς ἰδίος).¹⁸

Satan's role in the martyr acts is significant. The experience of suffering and persecution by Christians is attributed to the activity of Satan, who appears to plan, strategize, and implement particular torments and tortures using human authorities. He inspires mob action against the Christians, and even causes the crowds to desecrate the remains of the martyrs.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Martyrs of Lyons* 1:6.

¹⁶ *Mart. Carpus* (Latin) 4:2.

¹⁷ *Mart. Justin* (recension C) 1:1.

¹⁸ *Mart. Carpus* 17.

¹⁹ *Mart. Poly.* 17:1.

We now consider if this devilish role is a novel development in Christian Satanology. To what extent is the inspiration of persecution and violence against Christians anticipated in Jewish and other early Christian texts?

C. The Devil in Judaism

We now turn to presentations of the Devil or Satan in Jewish tradition, first in the Hebrew Bible, then *I Enoch* and *Jubilees*. I will then turn to the books of the Maccabees, where suffering and martyrdom are prominent themes, to examine the extent to which affliction of God's people is attributed to supernatural agency.

I. The Devil and Evil in the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible does not have a particularly robust Satanology.²⁰ For the most part, שָׂטָן does not refer to anything like the figure who opposes the Christian martyrs; it refers simply to any adversary, human or celestial.²¹ Nonetheless, there are three possible occasions where the Hebrew Bible edges towards the creation of such a figure. In Zechariah, the prophet is shown “Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him” (3:1). The Satan figure plays a similarly judicial role in Job, where he appears to be a member of the divine council and God permits him to test Job's faithfulness to God by inflicting calamities on him. However, as in both cases the noun takes the definite article, שָׂטָן־ does not here appear to be used as a proper name²² but describes the

²⁰ See Antti Laato, “The Devil in the Old Testament” in *Evil and the Devil* (eds. Ida Fröhlich and Erkki Kokkenniemi; LNTS 481; London: T&T Clark, 2013), 1–22; and the recent book-length treatment Judit M. Blair, *De-Demonising the Old Testament: An Investigation of Azazel, Lilith, Deber, Qeteb and Reshef in the Hebrew Bible* (FAT 2.37; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

²¹ Thus, in 1 Sam 29:4; 2 Sam 19:23; 1 Kgs 5:15; 11:14, 23, 25 the noun refers unambiguously to a human adversary.

²² Peggy L. Day, and C. Breytenbach, “Satan,” *DDD* (2d ed.) 726–32. See also Peggy L. Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: šātān in the Hebrew Bible* (HSM 43; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). However, for the contrary view, see Laato, “Devil in the Old Testament,” 3–5.

characters' adversarial function.²³ Importantly, the Satan is an adversary of human beings, not of God.²⁴

However, in 1 Chr 21:1, שָׂטָן appears without the article, and here we find the only instance in the Hebrew Bible where a specific named character may be in view. The Chronicler here is rewriting 2 Sam 24 where God, angry with Israel, provokes David to act against them by carrying out a census (24:1). After David conducts the count he realises he has sinned (24:10). As a result, God sends a pestilence on the land, killing seventy thousand (24:15). That God is responsible for inciting David to sin clearly caused the Chronicler theological concern, and he rewrites the narrative in order to distance God from the original act. Instead he has Satan incite David to take the sinful census. While the Chronicler may be developing the idea of the celestial autonomous being which opposes God and his people, it is also possible that שָׂטָן here is the personification of Samuel's "anger of God" (אַף־יְהוָה; 2 Sam 24:1), an aspect of God rather than a separate being.²⁵ Others have argued that the שָׂטָן figure is human rather than celestial, either a courtier,²⁶ or an enemy adversary threatening to stand against David, forcing him to carry out a census of fighting men.²⁷ In all these cases, the indefinite article should be understood. It is *a satan* who incites David. Again we note that the שָׂטָן stands against human beings, either as an accuser, a threat to their safety, or as in the case of Job, a figure which inflicts suffering, calamity, and even the death of one's relatives. However, the Satan remains under the authority of, or is answerable to, God.

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, precursors to "demonic spirits" that afflict humanity are also under God's control. Saul is afflicted by an evil spirit of the Lord (רוּחַ־אֲלֵהִים רָעָה; 1

²³ See Num 22:22, where the angel operates as a שָׂטָן towards Balaam.

²⁴ So Day, "Satan," 727: "He [Satan] is Yahweh's messenger, not his archenemy."

²⁵ Laato, "Devil in the Old Testament," 1–3.

²⁶ Sara Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and its Place in Biblical Thought* (BEATAJ 9; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989), 148.

²⁷ John W. Wright, "The Innocence of David in 1 Chronicles 21," *JSOT* 60 (1993): 87–105.

Sam 16:15). In the same way, enmity between Abimelech and the men of Shechem, which results in multiple deaths, is caused by an evil spirit sent by God (Judg 9:23). Similarly, in a scene with some parallels to the divine council of Job, a lying spirit (רִיחַ שָׁקֶר) volunteers to be sent by God to infect the prophets of Israel (1 Kgs 22:21–23). Therefore, even where apparently independent entities are employed to visit afflictions on individuals and peoples, God remains firmly in control. Within the largely monotheistic framework of the Hebrew Bible, evil and calamity are generally held to be the sole responsibility of God.

II. *The Devil and Evil in 1 Enoch and Jubilees*

However, in later Jewish apocalyptic thought, alternative explanations for the origin and cause of evil began to emerge.²⁸ The world was thought to be inhabited by semi-autonomous malevolent spirits whose origins could be traced to the *Nephilim* of Gen 6:1–4. In two rewritings of this tradition, the *Book of the Watchers* (*1 En.* 1–36), and then later *Jubilees*, sin and evil enter the world as a result of the giant offspring of the angels and humans (*1 En.* 6; *Jub.* 5).²⁹ In *1 Enoch*, one of the angels, Azazel revealed secrets of heaven, such as metallurgy and cosmetics, which led to immorality and fornication. Eventually, the wickedness on earth causes God to instruct Raphael to bind Azazel, and to destroy humanity through the flood (*1 En.* 10). However, the spirits of these giants survive and become the evil

²⁸ Philip S. Alexander, “The Demonology of the Dead Sea Scrolls” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years: Volume II: A Comprehensive Assessment* (eds. Peter W. Flint and James C. VanderKam; Leiden: Brill, 1990), 331–53; Archie Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits* (WUNT 2.198; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); Hermann Lichtenberger, “Spirits and Demons in the Dead Sea Scrolls” in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins: Essays in Honor of James D. G. Dunn* (eds. Graham N. Stanton, Bruce W. Longenecker, and Stephen C. Barton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 14–21.

²⁹ Versions of the story are also found in the *Damascus Document* 4Q266 (CD II, 17–21) and the *Book of the Giants* 4Q203; 4Q206 frags 2–3; 4Q530–33 (4QGiants).

spirits that oppress humanity (*1 En.* 15).³⁰ In the *Jubilees* rewriting,³¹ the unclean spirits begin to lead astray and kill Noah’s grandchildren (*Jub.* 10:1–2). In response to Noah’s intercession, God orders that all the spirits be bound (10:7). However, the chief of the spirits, Mastema, pleads that some spirits be allowed to remain, so that he may more effectively exercise power over those destined for corruption (10:8). God then agrees that ten percent of the demons might remain active (10:9).

The figures of Azazel and Mastema in these texts point to the emergence of something like a lead evil spirit.³² In the Dead Sea Scrolls, this development may also be reflected in several figures, such as Satan,³³ and the Angel of Wickedness (מלכי רשע), which battles with another angel for control of Amram.³⁴ Especially important is Belial, whose dominion (ממשלת בליעל) ushers in an era of sinfulness, 13)1but whose armies (1QM I, ³⁵, will be subdued by God and the sons of light.³⁶ Even where demonic forces act in a semi-autonomous fashion, their power is always subject to God’s will. Indeed, Mastema recognises God as Lord (*Jub.* 10:8), and his task of leading astray the corrupt appears to be his divinely

³⁰ Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “The Demonic World of the Dead Sea Scrolls” (in *Evil and the Devil*, 51–70), 54 infers the disembodied spirits, jealous of humanity’s survival in bodily form, attack as a means of regaining corporeal existence. For a very useful discussion of spirit possession in the ancient world, see Amanda Witmer, *Jesus, the Galilean Exorcist: His Exorcisms in Social and Political Context* (LNTS 459/LHJS 10; London: T&T Clark, 2012), 22–60.

³¹ See James C. VanderKam, “The Demons in the *Book of Jubilees*” in *Die Dämonen: Die Dämonologie der israelitisch-jüdischen und frühchristlichen Literatur im Kontext ihrer Umwelt* (eds. Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberger, and K. F. Diethard Römheld; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 339–64.

³² This development in thought may account for the Septuagint’s rendering $\mu\psi\psi$ as $\delta\iota\alpha\beta\omicron\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ in Job 1–2; 1 Chr 21:1; and Zech 3:1–2.

³³ “Let not $\eta\tau\tau$ rule over me or any evil spirit” (11Q5 XIX, 15). All Dead Sea scrolls texts and translations are from Florentino G. Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition* (2 vols; Leiden: Brill, 1999).

³⁴ *Visions of Amram* 4Q544 2, 1–5. A similar function role is taken by the “Angel of Darkness (מלאך חושך)” (1QS III, 20–21) and the “Spirit of Deceit (רוח עולה)” (1QS IV, 9–14).

³⁵ For example: 1QS I, 18; I, 23–24; II, 19.

³⁶ 1QM II, 14–16. Stuckenbruck suggests Belial marks the beginnings of the idea of an autonomous single evil figure who exercises dominion in a way that anticipates the Satan of the Gospels. Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “Satan and Demons” (in *Jesus among Friends and Enemies: A Historical and Literary Introduction to Jesus in the Gospels* [eds. Chris Keith and Larry W. Hurtado; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 173–97), 180.

appointed task.³⁷ Elsewhere in *Jubilees*'s rewriting of biblical tradition, Mastema becomes responsible for some of what was God's initiative in the earlier narratives: the testing of Abraham (*Jub.* 17:6; cf. Gen 22:1–2); the attempt on Moses's life (*Jub.* 48:2–3; cf. Exod 4:24); and slaying the first-born of Egypt (*Jub.* 49:2 cf. Exod 12:12). At most, what we see in world-view of late Second Temple Judaism is a "system of relative dualism."³⁸

"Demonic forces," therefore, exert a negative influence on humanity. This influence is on the whole moral; they are held to be responsible for unfaithfulness and unbelief. However, what is of interest here is the extent to which they are able to cause or incite physical harm. In the Hebrew Bible, the evil spirit that torments Saul is sent from God, while the Satan's actions in visiting calamities on Job are always constrained by what God will permit. It is worth noting that part of this "constrained" action includes the massacre of Job's children. It may be that the transference of the slaying of the first-born to the demon Mastema represents a desire to shift moral responsibility from this action away from God, and that the Satan figure in Job fulfils a similar function. Demons are able to inflict suffering in the Qumran texts. The *Songs of the Sage* (4Q510; 4Q511) asks for protection against "all the spirits of the ravaging angels and the bastard spirits, demons, [and] Lilith" (4Q510 1, 5) while the *Prayer of Nabonidus* (4Q242) suggests fevers and chills were caused by demons.³⁹ There is evidence that evil spirits could be held responsible for death. As well as those who killed Noah's grandchildren in *Jubilees*, we encounter in Tobit the serial-killing demon Asmodeus. This πονηρὸν δαιμόνιον was responsible for killing the seven bridegrooms of Sarah (Tob

³⁷ See Stuckenbruck, "Satan and Demons," 178–9.

³⁸ Ida Fröhlich, "Evil in Second Temple Texts" (in *Evil and the Devil*, 23–50), 38. Contra G. W. Lorein, *The Antichrist Theme in the Intertestamental Period* (JSPSup 44; London: T&T Clark, 2003), who finds the presence of an Antichrist already developed in the Hebrew Bible.

³⁹ A similar idea is found in 4Q560 1 I.1–6. Fröhlich, "Evil in Second Temple Texts," 27, notes Lilith posed a particular danger to young children and pregnant women. See also M. Hutter, "Lilith," *DDD* (2d ed.) 520–21.

3:8). Tobit, due to become Sarah's eighth husband, is told how to save his life by performing a rite of exorcism by the angel Raphael, who binds Asmodeus (8:2–3).⁴⁰

In Jewish texts, then, evil spirits represent a moral threat to human beings, and in some limited cases inflict suffering and even death on individuals. However, in general there is little evidence that demons operate with independent agency; their activity is either at the behest of God, or at the very least under God's authority. At most, they oppose the righteous and cause limited suffering to befall them as a means of temptation, and in some cases begin to remove responsibility for the cause of suffering away from God. However, this concern with theodicy is resisted in the Jewish texts most influential for Christian martyrology—the Maccabean tradition.⁴¹

III. The Devil and Evil in the Maccabees

Persecution and martyrdom play an important role in Maccabean tradition. Under the reign of Antiochus IV, Jewish observance of the law was banned, and those who remained faithful were executed.⁴² In 2 and 4 Maccabees, the elderly Eleazar and a family of a mother and seven brothers are portrayed as paradigmatic martyrs. They are all subjected to horrific and

⁴⁰ Compare Raphael's similar "binding" of Azazel (*1 En* 10) referenced above.

⁴¹ The influence of Judaism on Christian martyrdom is a controversial issue. Traditionally, it was thought that the roots of Christian martyrdom were planted firmly within the soil of Judaism, so William H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 31–103; Theodore Baumeister *Die Anfänge der Theologie des Martyriums* (MBT 45; Münster: Aschendorff, 1979). However, this view was challenged by Glen W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–22 who argued that Christian martyrdom developed from the Roman world and in turn influenced Judaism. Meanwhile, Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 93–126 argues that it was only through martyrdom that Christians and Jews began to develop competing identities. Moderating positions that highlight similarities but important differences are held by Jan Willem van Henten *The Maccabean Martyrs as the Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 & 4 Maccabees* (SJSJ 57; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1–14, and Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 103–34.

⁴² "But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die." (1 Macc 1:62–63)

graphic torture in order to force them to abandon their ancestral laws, which they refuse to do.

While this attempt to move the faithful from their confession mirrors the treatment of Christian martyrs, unlike later Christian narratives and other Jewish texts, suffering and persecution is never attributed to demonic forces. Instead, persecution, suffering, martyrdom, and military disaster are explained as God's disciplinary measure on his people.

Now I urge those who read this book not to be depressed by such calamities, but to recognise that these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people. In fact, it is a sign of great kindness not to let the impious alone for long, but to punish them immediately. For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins; but does not deal in this way with us, in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Although he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people. (2 Macc 6:12–16).

The author stresses that Antiochus's repression, including even the defilement of the Temple, is caused by God's intolerance of apostasy (2 Macc 4:16–17; 7:18, 32),

Antiochus was elated in spirit, and did not perceive that the Lord was angered for a little while because of the sins of those who lived in the city, and that this was the reason he was disregarding the holy place. (2 Macc 5:17)

However, just as suffering is the sign of God's anger, so when reconciliation occurs, the persecution will end.

But you, who have contrived all sorts of evil against the Hebrews, will certainly not escape the hands of God. For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our

living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. (2 Macc 7:31–33)⁴³

The means of reconciliation is martyrdom. When the seventh brother dies, he explicitly links his suffering with the sins of the people, and suggests that the collective deaths sufficiently deal with God's anger.

I, like my brothers give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation . . . and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation. (2 Macc 7:37–38)

The martyrs' obedience to the law brings about a turn in fortune for the Jews. In the following chapter, Judas Maccabeus assembles an army of the faithful. The editor clearly links the martyrs' deaths with the successful military campaign that follows: "the Gentiles could not withstand him, for the wrath of the Lord had turned to mercy" (2 Macc 8:5). The martyrs' deaths are the trigger which satisfies God's anger and causes God to turn back to the people, which will result in a successful military campaign and the restoration of the Temple. Thus, in late Second Temple Judaism we encounter a significant tradition in which suffering and its removal is effected without recourse to evil spirits.

D. The Devil in the New Testament

The Jewish apocalyptic framework of relative dualism undergoes a significant development in the writings of the New Testament. Perhaps most significantly, Satan becomes the character that some Jewish texts only ambiguously suggest. While there is little doubt that

⁴³ Another brother also notes that they suffer for their own sins (7:18), which should be interpreted as the people's corporate sin rather than the brothers' own.

Satan is subordinate to and will ultimately be defeated by God,⁴⁴ the character operates autonomously. He is the chief demon, and exercises dominion over the world. Space does not permit a full discussion of the Satan figure in the New Testament.⁴⁵ For our present purpose, what is of particular interest is whether the Devil is able to inflict harm or control hordes. It is sufficient to note that many of the functions of the evil spirits in the Qumran texts are developed in the New Testament depiction of Satan. He is responsible for temptation (Matt 4:1–11//Luke 4:1–13; cf. Mark 1:13;⁴⁶ 1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 2:11; 11:3, 14; 1 Thess 3:5); he is the author of deceit and spiritual blindness (Acts 5:3; 13:20; 2 Cor 2:11; 4:4; 11:14; 1 Tim 5:15), and so directly opposes or hinders the spread of the Gospel (Mark 4:15//Luke 8:12; 1 Thess 2:18). Significantly, he now exercises control over a kingdom (βασίλεια; Matt 12:26//Luke 11:17–18), including other evil spirits or demons which in turn afflict humanity.⁴⁷

While Satan is acknowledged to be a strong man in the Gospels, Jesus is presented as the one who is stronger. His activity as an exorcist is deeply embedded in the tradition.⁴⁸ Exorcism is closely linked with healing, implying that at least some illness is caused by demonic forces. Satan is certainly held to be explicitly responsible for infirmity (Luke 13:16), while other demons are associated with particular ailments, such as the spirit that made a boy

⁴⁴ For example, Rom 16:20.

⁴⁵ See the excellent survey by Derek R. Brown, “The Devil in the Details: A Survey of Research on Satan in Biblical Studies,” *CBR* 9 (2011): 200–227.

⁴⁶ As well as Σατανᾶς (4:10), Matthew’s temptation narrative also calls this figure ὁ διάβολος (4:1, 5, 8, 11) and ὁ πειράζων (4:3).

⁴⁷ See Mark 3:22: “He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons (ἄρχων τῶν δαιμονίων) he casts out the demons.” Furthermore, Satan is designated ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου in John 12:31; 14:30 (ὁ τοῦ κόσμου ἄρχων), and 16:11; cf. 2 Cor 4:4 where the enemy is ὁ θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου.

⁴⁸ See Witmer, *Jesus, The Galilean Exorcist*; Graham H. Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

deaf and unable to speak (Mark 9:17–27).⁴⁹ Similarly, Paul claims to be afflicted by an ἄγγελος σατανᾶ (2 Cor 12:7), although he interprets that positively.

In the New Testament, we begin to see the emergence of an idea of cosmic battle between the forces of God and Satan, with humanity in the middle. The Devil is a danger to the Christian (Eph 4:27; 1 Tim 3:6–7; 2 Tim 3:26), and has to be resisted (Eph 6:11; Jas 4:7). However, while the Satan figure poses some danger to individuals, this is still a long way from the role he plays in the Martyr Acts in organising persecution against the church. Indeed, while Satan triggers the Passion in John by entering Judas (13:27),⁵⁰ in Mark, Satan, using Peter as a mouthpiece, attempts to *prevent* Jesus from taking the road of suffering (8:31–33).⁵¹

However, Satan’s role in orchestrating Christian suffering develops in the Book of Revelation, where he appears to be originator of persecution.⁵² In at least two of the opening letters, Satan has a role in the persecution and martyrdom of the faithful. At Smyrna, the Devil will be responsible for throwing a number of the community into prison for testing (πειράζω). In response, the Christians are to be faithful to death (2:10). Opposition to the Christians in Smyrna may come from the Jewish community, for John speaks of slander coming from the Synagogue of Satan (συναγωγή τοῦ σατανᾶ) located there (2:9). The church in Philadelphia also appears to be facing Jewish opposition, but have not denied

⁴⁹ See also Luke 11:14//Matt. 12:22–23 for a mute spirit. Mark’s first summary statement links healing and exorcism (1:34). However, it is important to note that healing is not necessarily linked to demonic oppression even in the Gospel of Mark.

⁵⁰ Although, Jesus appears to control this action of Satan by handing the bread to Judas.

⁵¹ After Jesus declares for the first time that the Son of Man must suffer, Peter/Satan begins to “rebuke” Jesus (Mark 8:32), the word most associated with exorcistic activity. Jesus, however, issues a stronger counter-rebuke (8:33). Significantly this is the first direct confrontation between Jesus and Satan since the Temptation. The decision whether to embrace suffering and martyrdom is placed in a cosmic context. See Paul Middleton, “Suffering and the Creation of Christian Identity in the Gospel of Mark” in *The T & T Clark Handbook of Social Identity in the New Testament* (eds. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman M. Baker; London: T&T Clark, 2014), 173–89, especially 179–80.

⁵² The idea may also lie behind 1 Pet 5:8–9, where “resisting the Devil” requires Christians to be firm in their faith during experiences of suffering.

Jesus's name (3:8–9). Antipas, the only named martyr in the Apocalypse, was killed in Pergamum, where Satan has his throne (ὁ θρόνος τοῦ σατανᾶ; 2:13).

Later in the Apocalypse, Satanic forces are responsible for killing the faithful. In Rev 11, the two witnesses are killed by the beast (11:7). In the following chapter, the great Dragon (ὁ δράκον ὁ μέγας; 12:9)—which is also called the ancient Serpent (ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος), the Devil (διάβολος), and Satan (σατανᾶς)—makes war on the church (12:17), but the faithful conquer him by the blood of the Lamb and their testimony leading to their martyrdom (12:11). Next, the Beast is allowed to make war and conquer the saints (13:7), causing all those who refuse to worship the image of the beast to be slain (13:15). The deaths of the saints are clearly attributed to Satanic agency. While it is not explicitly stated that Satan inspires humans to act against the church, it may be inferred, as elsewhere the deaths of the saints are also blamed on human agents: the inhabitants of the earth (6:10);⁵³ people in general (16:6); and Babylon (17:6). In the Apocalypse then, we see Satan's role develop in the direction of that found in the *Acts of the Martyrs*. As in these texts, the means of conquering demonic forces is martyrdom. Christians conquer the dragon through the blood of the Lamb and the world of their testimony, loving not their lives even unto death (12:11).⁵⁴

E. Overcoming Satan in the Acts of the Martyrs

Within the Apocalypse, we see moves toward the full-scale Devil-inspired mob violence against Christians. However, within the *Acts of the Martyrs*, there is a sudden and significant development in Satanology. The Devil's responsibility for persecution, arrest, imprisonment, and torture of Christians is anticipated in, and indeed is a clear development from Jewish

⁵³ The phrase οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς is used nine times in the Apocalypse and is always negative. See David. E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (WBC 52B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 410.

⁵⁴ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 158–70.

texts. The theme is also found in the New Testament, especially Revelation, where demonic forces can be responsible for, and indeed desire, the deaths of the faithful. However, although in the Martyr Acts it is Devil-inspired torture that leads to death, paradoxically, in this group of texts, it is not Satan's goal to cause the death of Christians. In a significant and surprising theological development, in Christian martyr texts, the Devil is anti-martyrdom—he desires the Christians' survival!⁵⁵

In Perpetua's first prison vision, the dragon at the foot of the ladder would "attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them from doing so" (4:4). Additionally, the spears and hooks on the way up were impediments to a successful climb. As climbing the ladder represents death in the dream, the dragon's role is to prevent martyrdom. Those who successfully climb must conquer Satan and trample on his head. The aim of the dragon, although not specifically stated in the *Passion*, is to force the Christian to deny Christ and live rather than confess and die.⁵⁶

The character who does most to attempt to persuade Perpetua from going through with her martyrdom is her father. However, his efforts are dismissed as devilish:

While we were still under arrest my father out of love for me was trying to persuade me and shake my resolution.

"Father" said I, "do you see this vase here? . . . Could it be called by any other name than what it is? . . . Well so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian" (*Christiana*).

⁵⁵ So Ignatius warns his readers not to aid the Devil by preventing his martyrdom (*Rom* 7:1).

⁵⁶ This is a common theme in the *Acts of the Martyrs*, but also may lie behind New Testament texts such as Mark 8:35–36; Heb 6:4–6; 2 Tim 2:11–12; 1 John 2:22–24; and Rev 3:8 among others.

At this my father was so angered by the word “Christian” that he moved towards me as though he would pluck my eyes out. But he left it at that and departed, vanquished along with his diabolic arguments (*argumentis diaboli*).⁵⁷

Perpetua’s father’s paternal desire for his daughter to live is obviously well-meaning.⁵⁸

However, in the logic of the narrative, the only way Perpetua could live would be to deny her Christian identity by offering sacrifice to the emperor (6:3).⁵⁹ Once a martyr act has begun, “to fail to be martyred is to fail to be Christian.”⁶⁰

That the Devil desires Christians to survive is more explicit in other martyr acts. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, for example, the Devil’s intentions are made clear:

Those who were condemned to the beasts endured terrifying torments, being laid out on trumpet shells, and bruised by other different kinds of tortures. *The purpose was that, if possible, the tyrant might persuade them to deny the faith by constant torment.* For many were the stratagems the Devil devised against them. But thanks be to God, he did not prevail against all of them.⁶¹

Throughout the narrative, those in authority consistently attempt to persuade the Christians to deny Christ, offer sacrifice to the emperor, and live, either on the grounds of youth—as in the case of Germanicus, who responds by forcing a beast on top of him (*Mart. Poly.* 3:1)—or

⁵⁷ *Pass. Perp.* 3:1–3. Later Perpetua’s father throws himself at her feet (5:5), which Castelli intriguingly suggests may mirror the dragon, which would reinforce the diabolical nature of his pleas (“Make Mary Male,” 37).

⁵⁸ Perpetua has further confrontations with her father in 5:1–6 and 6:2. See Cobb, *Dying*, 97–102, for a good discussion on Perpetua’s relationship with her father.

⁵⁹ Perpetua’s refusal to sacrifice to the emperor leads to the governor asking if Perpetua is a Christian. Christian identity is therefore placed in direct competition with loyalty to the emperor. On the importance of Christian confession on identity formation, see Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 2002); Judith M. Lieu, “‘I am a Christian’: Martyrdom and the Beginning of Christian Identity,” in her *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 211–31. Cobb, *Dying*, 11, rightly notes, however, that Christian confession must contain an “embodied element.”

⁶⁰ Middleton, “Suffering,” 175.

⁶¹ *Mart. Poly.* 2:4–3:1 (emphasis added).

old-age as with Polycarp. As with Perpetua's father, the human motivation may be well-intentioned, and indeed, the authorities tend to be confused by the resolution of the Christians:

Now what harm is there for you to say "Caesar is Lord," to perform the sacrifices . . . and thus save your life? (*Mart. Poly.* 8:2)

Have respect for your age . . . swear by the Genius of the emperor. Recant. Say "Away with the atheists". . . Swear and I will let you go. Curse Christ! (9:2)

However well intentioned, the confrontation between the Christian and governor represents the fulcrum of the cosmic contest where Christians can endure, win martyrdom, and overcome the Devil. The alternative is to deny Christ and remain alive, which would signal a victory for Satan.⁶²

The theme of cosmic contest is perhaps most fully worked out in the *Martyrs of Lyons*. Satan's goal is again clearly stated: "The blessed martyrs underwent torments beyond all description; and Satan strove to have some work of blasphemy escape their lips" (1.16). In Lyons, Satan enjoys some success as a number of the community deny Christ under torture.

Some were clearly ready to become our first martyrs, making a full confession of their faith with greatest enthusiasm. Yet others were shown to be still untrained, unprepared, and weak, unable to bear the strain of a great conflict. Of these about ten in all were stillborn (*Mart. Lyons* 1:11).

Those who denied or spoke against the Christians are said to be "ensnared by Satan" (1:14). Moreover, not only are those who deny said to be stillborn, they are devoured by the Devil (1:25) and totally defeated. Therefore, in the acts of the martyrs, saving one's life through

⁶² This is precisely the outcome when Quintus turns cowardly upon seeing the beasts and offering sacrifice to the emperor (*Mart. Poly.* 4).

denial is regarded as death. On the contrary, resisting torture to the point of execution is to win martyrdom, victory, and life.

The martyr acts repeatedly insist that martyrdom is the means by which Satan is overcome. In the *Martyrs of Lyons*, those who endure to the end render the instruments of torture useless (καταργῶν; 1:27). The Devil is even said to be repressed (καταπιέζω) and overwhelmed (καταργῶν) by the martyrs (1:23, 42). So total is the martyrs' victory over Satan that they even snatch back some of the souls he thought he had conquered. In Lyons, those who had previously denied, when they saw examples of successful martyrdom, rushed back to make confession and win martyrdom; the "dead [that is those who had denied and remained alive] were restored to life [martyrdom] through the living [those who had been martyred]" (1:45). Earlier in the narrative, a woman named Biblis had denied Christ, so the "Devil thought he had already devoured her." Nonetheless, he (i.e. the Devil) brought her back to the rack in an attempt to accuse the Christians of atrocities, such as cannibalism (1:25). However, his plan backfires, as

once on the rack she came to her senses and awoke as it were from a deep sleep, reminded by that temporal torment of the eternal punishment in Gehenna And from then on she insisted she was a Christian, and so was counted among the number of the martyrs (*Mart. Lyons* 1:26).

So long as she continued in her denial, Satan was victorious over Biblis. However, his defeat is so total that he cannot hold those whom he had ensnared. Satan is humiliated by the martyrs and forced to disgorge his prey.

Because of the sincerity of their love this became the greatest of all contests which they waged against the Demon, to the end that the throttled Beast might be forced to disgorge alive all those whom he at first thought he had devoured (2:6).

In the martyr acts, victory over Satan is achieved by death. As Tertullian puts it, “The Christian is snatched by faith from the jaws of the Devil, but by martyrdom he falls to the ground the enemy of his salvation.”⁶³

F. Conclusion

In the *Acts of the Martyrs*, there is a significant development in Christian Satanology. Satan is held to be directly responsible for mob violence against the Church. He devises and implements a battle strategy in order to inflict suffering upon the faithful. In many ways, this is a natural development of the rudimentary demonology first found in the Hebrew Bible and continues through the texts of late Second Temple Judaism, where notions of a “chief demon” emerge. The role of Satan as an autonomous malevolent figure with independent agency dramatically evolves in the New Testament. In the New Testament, demons continue to oppress and inflict limited suffering on individuals, and also oppose the spread of the gospel. In the Apocalypse, Satan’s role becomes more significant as he is held to be responsible for persecution, imprisonment, and even death. One might infer that human attacks on the Christians are Satan-inspired. Yet it is only in the martyr texts where this becomes explicit.

At the same time that this Christian belief in the Satanic origins of suffering and persecution was developing, a theology of martyrdom was evolving. Martyrdom became an important element of forging Christian identity, and also the means by which one overcame Satan. When these two tributaries merged in the martyr acts, they created a theology of cosmic conflict in which Satan inspired the very persecution, violence, and torture that enabled the Christians to defeat him by embracing martyrdom. Satan is suddenly forced to become anti-martyrdom. It is perhaps ironic that in inflicting torture on the Christians, in a

⁶³ Tertullian, *Scorp.* 6.

futile attempt to force them to deny Christ and save their lives, he provided them with the very means of defeating him; the martyrs trample on his head by dying. Satan, in effect, sows the seeds of his own destruction.