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The downfalls of Satan in the book of Revelation

The cosmic conflict is the primary background against which the book of Revelation must be understood. John, the author of this book, brings together this significant theme through numerous symbols and creative ways in Revelation. At the heart of this conflict is a struggle for universal supremacy between God and Satan.¹ John scans the whole of history, from pre-creation to the new creation, and outlines all the twists and turns in this cosmic saga between good and evil. In fact, John is deeply indebted to the traditions of the Old Testament and hence, the author fills the book of Revelation with its ideas and language.

According to Gregory Beale, “the Old Testament in general plays such a major role that a proper understanding of its use is necessary for an adequate view of the Apocalypse as a whole.”² The book of Revelation, studied in conjunction with the Old Testament, provides fertile soil for the pastor to dig carefully and uncover new facets of meaning on the cosmic conflict. By drawing on the Old Testament, an interesting tapestry of thought emerges that chronicles the initial fall and eventual demise of Satan. John identifies four downfalls of Satan in Revelation 12 and 20, each one more decisive than the previous one, resulting in the devil’s further curtailment and final destruction.

The first downfall — kicked out of heaven

The first downfall is the primeval fall of Satan indirectly alluded to in Revelation 12:3, 4: “Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. *His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.* The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born” (NIV; italics added). The tail is a “symbol of deception by means of the persuasion that Satan has used to mislead” the angels (stars) “to rebel against God and follow him.”³ The scene of Satan deceiving the angels and flinging them to earth “denotes an earlier stage in the adversarial relationship” portrayed in Revelation 12:7–9.⁴ Isaiah 14:12–14 and Ezekiel 28:12–19 infer this initial expulsion of Satan described in Revelation 12:4. The biblical narrative reveals that Satan later tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3).

However, John does not draw on all the implications and issues involved in Satan flinging a third of the stars to earth. We need to tap into the larger biblical story. While Job 1 and 2 provide helpful information on the cosmic conflict, Satan’s expulsion from heaven is not fully explained in

the Old Testament. However, those studying their Bibles find God often depicted as engaging in battle with hostile forces. Psalm 74:13, 14 reads: “It was you who split open the sea by your power; you broke the heads of the monster in the waters. It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan and gave him as food to the creatures of the desert” (NIV).⁵ The Old Testament depicts God as “the Lord of Hosts,” literally translated as the “Lord of Armies.” The concept that Israel believed that behind their earthly armies on the ground were the angelic armies of heaven is noteworthy. In fact, King David got into trouble for conducting a census of his fighting forces because he assumed his human army was all he had and underplayed the importance of the armies he could not count (1 Chron. 21:1). God’s heavenly armies, not David’s, brought victory to Israel in their battles with pagan nations (2 Chron. 20:18–30).

We find the concept very interesting that the outworking of this cosmic conflict is evident on a personal level as well. Psalm 69:14, 15 reads: “Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters. Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the pit close its mouth over me” (NIV; see also Pss. 144:7; 93:3, 4). According to

Gregory Boyd, in his book *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict*, David compares the rebellious cosmic sea that threatens to engulf him to the unruly chaotic forces at the time of creation.⁶ Furthermore, during this first stage, God seems to take responsibility for the wrong that takes place in the Old Testament. Satan is only explicitly mentioned five times in the Old Testament (Zech. 3:1, 2; 1 Chron. 21:1; 2 Sam. 24:1; Job 1; 2) to protect Israel from the dangers of polytheism.

The cosmic conflict intensifies in this first stage especially when Jesus came to earth as a baby. John records that “The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born” (Rev. 12:4, NIV), which most scholars recognize as a symbolic reference to Herod the Great’s attempt to kill every male child two years old and younger. There are numerous references in the Gospels where the devil, working through human agents, tries to kill Jesus prematurely (see Luke 4:13, 28–30; John 7:30; 8:59).

The second downfall — banished from heaven

The second, and, in fact, decisive downfall of Satan occurs at the Cross where Satan was legally defeated and expelled as earth’s representative. Revelation 12:7–10 reads:

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and *they lost their place in heaven*. The great dragon was *hurled down*—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was *hurled* to the earth, and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and

the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been *hurled down*” (NIV; italics added).

At the Cross, where salvation occurs by the blood of the Lamb, Satan loses his place in heaven. Prior to the Cross, Satan still had limited access to heaven, but the Cross finalized his “no-access card” into heaven. In fact, the phrase “hurled down” refers to excommunication (cf. John 9:34, 35) and legal punishment (cf. Matt. 3:10; John 15:6; Rev. 2:10). This action

The conflict that began in Genesis is finally resolved in Revelation.

of “hurling down” denotes Satan’s expulsion from heaven because of the victory achieved by Jesus on the cross.⁷ The Cross reveals God’s character of love and exposes Satan’s hatred of all that is good and just. Since the character of God is seen perfectly in Jesus, the Cross also provides the deepest revelation of Jesus as the Son of God and our Redeemer.

In John 12:31, 32, Jesus states, “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (NIV). Jesus understands His death, resurrection, and ascension as the turning point in the conflict between God and the forces of evil: “The hour has come” and “Now is the time for judgment” (vv. 23, 31, NIV).⁸ On the cosmic level, this moment brings the decisive victory over the evil ruler of this world. Therefore, the fall of Satan at the Cross replaces him, the accuser

of humankind, with humankind’s Advocate, Jesus Christ the Righteous (1 John 2:1). Moses describes an important Old Testament background for Revelation 12:9 in Genesis 3:1–6, 13. In both texts, Satan, portrayed as “the ancient serpent” with his key attribute of deception, is mentioned in both Revelation 12:9 and Genesis 3:13. The Genesis text reads: “Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate’” (NIV). By alluding to Genesis 3:13, John draws on the Creation story in Genesis 3 in which Satan deceives Adam and Eve and brings about the fall of humankind.

John draws on this cosmic conflict theme from the earliest days of human history.

The concept of the cosmic conflict is developed into a full-fledged teaching in the New Testament. Satan is called the god of this world, the ruler of the power of the air, the ruler of this world (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; John 12:31; 16:11), and portrayed as possessing the kingdom of this world (Luke 4:6; 1 John 5:19), and the source of murder, theft, lying, sickness, and disease (John 8:44; 1 John 3:2; Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38). During the period of the second downfall, Paul urges the Christians in Ephesus to put on the full armor of God.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph. 6:10–12, NIV).

As Christians, we are in a very dangerous battle with demonic forces.⁹ The good news is that the armor of Ephesians 6 is a gift, won for us by



Jesus on the cross, and given to us by faith through the Holy Spirit. We fight, not to gain victory, but from a position of victory. As pastors, we need to encourage our members to stand firm in the victory Jesus has gained for us.

The third downfall—into the abyss

Revelation 20:1–3 depicts the third downfall of Satan into the abyss:

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

At this stage, an angel with the key to the bottomless pit binds Satan with a great chain, throws him into the pit and locks him in it so that he can no longer deceive the nations.¹⁰ The Old Testament describes the *abyss* as the abode of the enemy of God—the cosmic sea-dragon (Ps. 77:16; Job 40:12, 20); and is synonymous with the concept of *hades* (Job 38:16; Ezek. 31:15) and the realm of suffering (Ps. 71:20).¹¹ The New Testament refers to a place of suffering for demons (Luke 8:31). The strongest Old Testament connection is to Isaiah, where he portrays the host of heaven and the kings of the earth gathered together and confined in a prison (Isa. 24:21, 22). John understands that behind the activities of the kings of the earth and the host of heaven is actually Satan. The depiction of the abyss here in Revelation 20 points to the earth being a desolate wasteland with no living person in it. This third fall introduces the millennium, which begins after

the second coming of Christ, when the living and resurrected saints are taken to heaven and all the wicked on the earth lay dead until after the millennium when Christ returns again for the final disposal of Satan and all his minions and followers. During the millennium, God’s saints are in heaven, sitting in judgment on the course of sin and sinners including the archsinner Satan and his cohorts, while Satan remains on earth with his minions, to contemplate the misery they have wreaked on humankind.¹²

The final fall —into the lake of fire

John describes the final fall of Satan in Revelation 20:10: “And the devil, who *deceived* them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (NIV; italics added). The beast and the false prophet have already been thrown into the lake of fire (19:10) while Satan faces the music all by himself. Strikingly, Revelation 20:11 introduces the great white throne. Lucifer wanted the throne of God (Isa. 14:14). Now God is portrayed as unchallenged and unrivaled. Mentioned once more, the notion of deception (20:10) again points to the Creation story. The issues that were first brought to the fore in Genesis are now finally going to be resolved in Revelation. The Genesis story hence forms a significant backdrop against which to understand Revelation.¹³

The conflict that began in Genesis is finally resolved in Revelation. Sinners, who have rejected the Lamb, will be eternally separated from God at the final judgment. Sin, which has caused such misery, pain, and grief on this planet, will forever be no more, and Satan, the chief architect of sin and the cosmic conflict, will finally be destroyed (Nah. 1:9).

The good news for God’s children: the progressive downfalls of Satan reveal the love of God for humankind.

1 According to Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Book of Revelation,” in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, eds. Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen J. Stein (New York: Continuum, 2003), 205, “John’s thinking was dualistic in the sense that he perceived the situation in which he lived as characterized by a cosmic struggle between two diametrically opposed powers and their allies. God and Satan, along with their agents and spokespeople, were engaged in a struggle for the allegiance of the inhabitants of the earth.” In a similar vein, Warren Carter, “Vulnerable Power: The Roman Empire Challenged by the Early Christians,” in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, eds. Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime, and Paul-André Turcotte (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2002), 484, writes, “Revelation discerns its much larger context in a cosmic struggle between God and Satan.”

2 G. K. Beale, “John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* Sup 166 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 61.

3 Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 382.

4 Sigve Tonstad, *Saving God’s Reputation: The Theological Function of Pisticlesou in the Cosmic Narratives of the Apocalypse*, Library of New Testament Studies 337 (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 67.

5 See also Isa. 30:7; 51:9, 10; Job 7:12; Prov. 8:27–29; Ezek. 29:3–6; 32:2–8; Amos 9:2, 3. Yahweh is also seen in battle with Leviathan (see Ps. 74:14; Isa. 27:1) and Behemoth (Job 40:15–24).

6 Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 91.

7 Stefanovic, 388.

8 Judith L. Kovacs, “Now Shall the Ruler of This World Be Driven Out: Jesus’ Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20–36,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 227–47.

9 Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 443–445.

10 Strikingly, all three occurrences of the phrase “coming down out of heaven” are connected with an angel in Revelation (Rev. 10:1; 18:1; 20:1) and describe a major event: the completion of God’s mystery and the end of time in chapter 10, the end of Babylon in chapter 18, and the ultimate end of Satan in chapter 20.

11 G. K. Beale, *Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 493.

12 See Stefanovic, 561–72 and references there.

13 Tonstad, 59.

| Genesis 3 | Revelation 21; 22 |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| God portrayed as arbitrary (3:1) | Glory of God restored (21:23) |
| God’s presence evoking fear (3:8) | Seeing God’s face without fear (22:4) |
| Curse on the earth (3:17) | No more curse (22:3) |
| Cut off from the tree (3:24) | Access to the tree of life (22:2) |
| Returned to dust (3:19) | No more death (21:4) |

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