

HOW THE SCRIPTURES SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

by Inos Biffi, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City, May 4, 2013

After the appearance of man, the work of the sixth day of creation, there is felt the presence of something mysterious and disquieting, that of the serpent. That which he undertakes with regard to our first parents [Adam and Eve] and sets out to obtain from them is astonishing and disturbing: he intends to plant within them suspicion about God; that is, to persuade them that the prohibitions that he has established arise from jealousy, from fear of being equaled by them. The serpent embodies, precisely at the beginning of the world and its history, the presence of an envious being: "Through the envy of the devil death entered the world" (Wisdom 2:24).

In the New Testament there are frequent references to that serpent. Jesus refers to him declaring that the devil is "a murderer from the beginning"; in him "there is no truth"; "when he speaks falsehood, he speaks from what is his own, because he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). And again Jesus calls him "the prince of this world" (John 12:31; 16:11).

Paul affirms that "with his cunning the serpent seduced Eve" (2 Corinthians 11:3); and he refers to those who become lost "following Satan" (1 Timothy 5:14). The same apostle speaks of the worldly way of life by which one follows "the prince of the powers of the air, that spirit who works in rebellious men" (Ephesians 2:2); he makes mention of the "snares of the devil" and of our battle "against the principalities and powers, against the rulers of this world of darkness, against the spirits of evil" (Ephesians 6:12).

The first letter of Peter names the "enemy," "the devil," or "the accuser," who "like a roaring lion prowls around seeking someone to devour" (5:8). And in the letters of John is recalled "the antichrist" who must come (1 John 2:18); the "liar" who denies that Jesus is the Christ; the "antichrist" who "denies the Father and the Son" (2:22). In Revelation it is written: "A great war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon fought together with his angels, but he did not prevail and there was no place for them in heaven. And the great dragon, the ancient serpent, the one who is called devil and Satan and who seduces all of the inhabited earth, was thrown to earth and together with him his angels" (12:7-9).

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Between these texts and the exegesis of Jesus on the devil, murderer and liar from the beginning, the agreement is perfect: this is a matter of a being hostile to God, whose Word he aims to throw into confusion, and at the same time hostile to man, whom he intends to seduce and induce to rebel against the divine plan. He is the evil one. In particular, the exegetical agreement concerns the one for whom the devil reserves his aversion, Jesus Christ.

This creates an antithesis between two kingdoms: that of Jesus and that of the prince of this world. The devil cannot tolerate Jesus Christ and seeks in every way to disrupt the divine plan conceived concerning him, as he tried to do in the desert.

But Jesus proclaims himself victor over this prince: "The prince of this world is coming," he says, "against me he can do nothing" (John 14:30); specifically, it is at the arrival of the hour of Jesus, that of his being lifted up on the cross and at the right hand of the Father, that that prince is struck down: "Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world will be cast down." With the pouring out of the Spirit by the glorified Lord, that prince meets his condemnation (John 16:11). Paul in particular remarks upon the lordship of the Risen One: in him the Father "has freed us from the power of darkness" (Colossians 1:13) and "has deprived of their strength the principalities and powers," and "has made them a public spectacle, triumphing over them in Christ" (2:15).

The Christian has become a sharer in the lordship of Jesus over the devil: "when we were dead through our faults, he brought us back to life with Christ. With him he also raised us and made us sit in heaven, in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:5-6).

Although definitively defeated by the Lord, the devil still tries to ensnare and bring down redeemed man. Peter spoke of his roaring and of his unspent will to harm; Paul urges the taking up of the shield of faith, in order to quench the "fiery arrows of the evil one" (Ephesians 6:16). And Jesus himself had taught his followers to pray by asking the Father to deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 5:13).

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The multiple exegeses on the serpent that appears at the beginning lead us to a few considerations.

The first is on the "history" consummated and decided before the creation of man, and consisting in the outbreak of the "great war in heaven" (Revelation 12:7), or rather in an agreement or rebellion that took place in the angelic world: not a generic agreement or rebellion, but aimed at the concrete and internal divine plan, which in personal terms is Jesus Christ.

The prideful refusal to obey of the rebel angels has as its object Jesus, "preeminent over all things," and therefore preeminent over them as well. This explains why the life of Jesus was never hindered by the presence and machinations of the devil; and on the contrary - from the announcement of his birth until the ascension - was accompanied, served, and consoled by the presence of the angels, who rejoice in him and with him are victors over the great dragon and his satellites, cast out of heaven and thrown down, as Revelation states. Jesus himself affirmed that he had seen "Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (Luke 10:18) and spoke of the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

We have spoken of the history that precedes the visible one of man: that which we know is what emerges as from a hidden panorama, which exceeds and eludes us and which now we can only presume and intuit.

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The second consideration concerns the stunning power of Satan: this is so strong and tenacious that only the power of the Son of God can defeat and overcome it; moreover, the power of the Son of God nailed to the cross, and therefore in a condition of extreme human weakness, which paradoxically becomes, without strain, absolute power. The devil is able to draw in everything and everyone, but before Jesus he becomes completely yielding. The crucified and risen one re-creates a victorious humanity, removed from the perverse influence of the evil one. The attraction of the devil is replaced by the attraction of Christ, who declares: "When I am raised up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself" (John 12:32). Only by sharing in the vigor of the slain and glorified Christ are we able to resist the flattery of the serpent from the beginning.

There could still remain one question: without a doubt the fall of angel and of man depends solely on the free will of the creature; not only that, but the forgiveness of man was included in the merciful love of the Father, who predestined his Son Jesus to be the redeemer; but why does the concrete order chosen by God include that fall and therefore the reality of sin? To this we are not able to reply: it belongs to the "mind of the Lord," to his unfathomable judgments" and to his "inscrutable ways" (Romans 11:32-34).

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A third consideration is to manifest surprise in the face of the absence in preaching and catechesis of the truth concerning the devil. Not to speak of those theologians who, on the one hand, applaud the fact that Vatican II declared Scripture to be the "soul of sacred theology" (Dei Verbum, 24), and, on the other, do not hesitate - if not to decide on his nonexistence (as they do for the angels) - in any case to overlook as marginal a fact that is so clear and widely attested to in Scripture itself as is that concerning the devil, maintaining him to be the personification of an obscure and primordial idea of evil, now demystified and unacceptable.

Such a conception is a masterpiece of ideology, and above all is equivalent to trivializing the very work of Christ and his redemption.

This is why those references to the devil which we find in the discourses of Pope Francis seem to us anything but secondary.