

Satan, Zeus, Baal, and the Prince of Rome

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Stating the Question

Who is the chief supernatural opponent of Christians in the New Testament? I think most people would say Satan, and this would be correct. But how about the Old Testament? Would you give the same answer? This is tempting, given that the New Testament seems to call that creature in the Garden of Eden “Satan.” “**And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years**” (Rev 20:2). But if you only had an Old Testament, as Jews and the earliest Christians had, it would be more difficult to make this connection since the creature in Eden is only called a “serpent,” and since the word “*satan*” does not seem to appear as a proper noun even a single time.¹ Given such difficulties and other possible candidates, here is my initial answer to the question: Baal. I say “initial answer” because as we will see, things may not be as they seem on the surface.

Most people would probably say that Baal is just a made up god, and would therefore equate him with an idol which has no actual existence. But curiously, when it comes to Satan, most have no problem admitting that he is a real being. At least two significant reasons for this may be 1. We are taught that “gods” are not real entities, except for our God. 2. We think that “gods” and “idols” are equivalent terms.

As for the latter, the ancient idea was that through ritual and incantation, idols were used to “locate” a spiritual entity in space and time. They were thought to have become a place of residence for a truly existing spiritual being (be it angelic or demonic). Augustine (among many others) explains this in the *City of God*. As for the former, a couple of things can be said. The way most people understand the English word “g-o-d” is not exactly identical with the word it translates in the Hebrew: *elohim*. In Hebrew, there are various entities that are all called Elohim: God (Gen 1:1), demons (Deut 32:17); dead people like Samuel (1Sa 28:13-14), heavenly beings called the “sons of God” (see Psalm 82:1, 6; cf. Job 38:7). Now, virtually no one who believes that Satan is real would doubt the existence of demons! Yet, they are called *elohim*. Furthermore, Satan is called a “god” in the NT. He is the “god” of this world (2Co 4:4).²

The point is not that Satan or demons are equivalent with God in every way. Nothing could be more blasphemous than a teaching like that. Yet, they share some communicable attribute(s) with

¹ There are a few instances where many English translations choose to render the word as a proper name (1 Chr 21:1; Job 1:6; 2:1; Zech 3:1-2). While in some or all of these instances it may very well be the being called Satan that is in mind, the word actually appears with the definite article in front of it making it “the satan.” The single exception is 1 Chr 21:1. The problem is, just as in English (with the exception of “The Donald”), proper names never have the definite article in Hebrew. It is better to render it The Adversary, as even a good being like the Angel of the LORD (Num 22:22) or even humans (1Sa 29:4) can be called “the *satan*.”

² While some scholars believe the “god” here is Yahweh and not Satan, there are compelling reasons to stay with the traditional understanding that it is Satan. See Derek R. Brown, “The God of This Age: Satan in the Churches and Letters of the Apostle Paul,” Doctor of Philosophy University of Edinburgh (2011), 149-59.

him. For instance, their proper place of residence is not the physical world, but the realm of spirits, and they are given authority to “rule” in some sense. Hence, Satan is called the “ruler” (*archon*) “of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). But they do not share incommunicable attributes such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, or omnitemporality. Nor are they holy, good, righteous, just, wise, etc. as God is those things. And fallen angels aren’t those things in much of any sense of those words.

I’m going to use this word “ruler” (above) along with the phrase “of this world” to transition into answering our question about why Satan is not very prominent in the Old Testament. Both the word and the phrase are quite important and fascinating to think through in getting a handle on our original question of why Satan does not play a significant role in the Old Testament like he does in the New Testament. The answer I will suggest may both shock and surprise you.

The word “ruler” is often translated as “prince.” Princes are subordinate rulers to the King. We normally think of princes as simply human beings. But ancient people understood that there were also heavenly princes. Hence, Satan is called a prince and a ruler. We see the idea in the Old Testament. For example, an angel comes to Daniel after a three-week delay because the “prince of Persia” fought against him. But Michael, the archangel helped this angel escape the clutches of this other heavenly being (Dan 10:13). Later in the same chapter, this angel leaves to go fight against the prince of Persia while predicting that the prince of Greece was coming (Dan 10:20).

The worldview of the Old Testament (along with every other Ancient Near Eastern religion, along with most every other ancient religion, including the Greeks) believed that at some point in time, heavenly beings called the “sons of God” (translated as “angels” by the Greek Old Testament Septuagint) were given to the nations as allotted beings to rule over them (Deut 32:7-8; cf. Deut 4:19; 29:26; etc.). Deuteronomy 32:7-9 says, “Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you. When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.”

Plato in his *Critias*, using language that sounds like it was lifted straight out of this text says:

In the days of old the gods had the whole earth distributed among them by allotment. There was no quarrelling; for you cannot rightly suppose that the gods did not know what was proper for each of them to have, or, knowing this, that they would seek to procure for themselves by contention that which more properly belonged to others. They all of them by just apportionment obtained what they wanted, and peopled their own districts; and when they had peopled them they tended us, their nurselings and possessions, as shepherds tend their flocks, excepting only that they did not use blows or bodily force, as shepherds do, but governed us like pilots from the stern of the vessel, which is an easy way of guiding animals, holding our souls by the rudder of persuasion according to their own pleasure;- thus did they guide all mortal creatures. Now different gods had their allotments in different places which they set in order. Hephaestus and Athene, who were brother and sister, and sprang from the same father, having a common nature, and being united also in the love of philosophy and art, both obtained as their common portion this land, which was naturally adapted for wisdom and virtue; and there they implanted brave children of the soil, and put into their minds the order of government; their names are preserved, but their actions have

disappeared by reason of the destruction of those who received the tradition, and the lapse of ages.

This is a good example of how all the ancient people's thought, and it is from this worldview that the origin of Satan as a proper name for some evil supernatural entity may have come.

Prince/Ruler of this World

This takes us to the second part of Jesus' comments. Satan is the ruler "of this world." Most of us today would take this phrase quite literally and globally. This is because we live in a "world" where communication, travel, commerce, and just about everything else is literally global. This is how we think. But in the time of the New Testament, the "world" was not understood to be North or South America, Australia, China, Antarctica, etc. The world was the Roman world. Israel was a vassal state of and subservient to Rome. Rome was the "world," even though its official territory only went from western Europe to northern Africa to the Middle East. This is really quite important to wrap your mind around in what I'm about to explain.

Jupiter

Like almost all ancient religions, Roman religion had a pantheon. Its origin myths are interesting and elaborate, but by the time of the NT, it was well established that there were twelve gods in its pantheon and that Jupiter was the most powerful of them all. He was the "fount of the auspices upon which the relationship of the city with the gods rested."³ Jupiter is the god of sky and thunder. He is identified by his lightning bolt. According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "Jupiter" means "god-father." It is a combination of the Latin *deiw-os* ("god") + *peter* ("father").

Zeus

This can be compared with the "Greek *Zeus pater*, vocative of *Zeus pater* "Father Zeus." Hence, Jupiter is simply the same deity as Zeus. In Greek mythology, Zeus was also the high God of the pantheon. Consider Plato in a section just a little after the one previously quoted. This is the very last thing said in the *Critias* before it abruptly ends without answering the puzzle posed. "Zeus, the god of gods, who rules according to law, and is able to see into such things, perceiving that an honourable race was in a woeful plight, and wanting to inflict punishment on them, that they might be chastened and improve, collected all the gods into their most holy habitation, which, being placed in the centre of the world, beholds all created things. And when he had called them together, he spake as follows..."

The Greeks and Romans used to put statues of the "god of gods" in all of the main temples of other lands that they had taken over. It was a sign of their superiority and to the utter humiliation of those conquered peoples. The book of 2 Maccabees recalls one such instance. "Not long after this, the king sent an Athenian senator to compel the Jews to forsake the laws of their fathers and cease to live by the laws of God, and also to pollute the temple in Jerusalem and call it the temple of Olympian Zeus, and to call the one in Gerizim the temple of Zeus the Friend of Strangers, as did

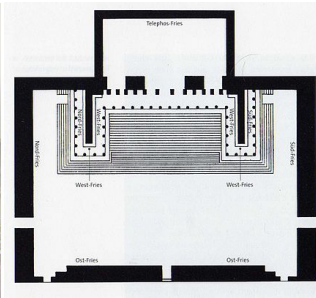
³ Mary Beard, John North, S. R. F. Price, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 59.

the people who dwelt in that place” (2Ma 6:1-2 RSV).

Among the places where this was done was a glorious mountainous city called Pergamum, located in far western Asia Minor (today’s Turkey). “In the 2nd cent. BC came one of the greatest centres of art and culture in the ancient world, reaching the height of its glory in the reign of Eumenes II (197–159). This Eumenes erected the great altar of Zeus the Saviour [*Zeus Soter*] (now in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin).”⁴ The altar was stolen and put into the Pergamon Museum in Berlin where it resides to this day. As can be seen in the pictures below, “It is built on three sides of a square, to make a giant chair or throne,”⁵ with “the temple dominating the city.”⁶



The Great Altar of Zeus
Pergamon Museum, Berlin



Ground plan of the altar
Pergamon Museum



The altar foundation in Pergamon,
2005

Now let’s add a new element to what I’ll call the Zeus mystery. Revelation tells the Christians in this very city, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is” (Rev 2:13). One author writes of “Satan’s destructive power in persecuting God’s people. Christians who refused to acknowledge Caesar as Lord and God (*dominus et deus*) faced confiscation of their property, exile, or death.” He adds that this was “a center of pagan religion.”⁷ Hence, it is often noticed in commentaries that “the monument archaeology identifies as ‘Satan’s throne’”⁸ is what is today called “The Great Altar of Zeus.”

There is a thought of progression here among scholars. First, the throne of Satan and the throne-altar of Zeus in the same city is fairly obvious imagery to connect. But then, connecting the dots we read things like this, “To the extent that the ascendancy of Christianity prompted the ancient religions ... to be regarded as pagan, ... the gods came to be associated with the devil, especially within the monastic-ascetic controversy with paganism, or became concentrated in paganism, beginning with the altar of Zeus at Pergamum being called ‘Satan’s throne’ (Rev. 2:13).”⁹ Or even this, “The Book of Revelation designates pagan gods as *δαίμονια* (9:20), just as Zeus is equated

⁴ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1264.

⁵ Andrew Knowles, *The Bible Guide*, 1st Augsburg books ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 698.

⁶ Walter C. Kaiser Jr. et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 758.

⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, vol. 20, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 129.

⁸ *Bible and Spade* (1977) 6, no. 4 (1977): 115. See also Robert G. Bratcher and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on the Revelation to John*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 52; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 246.

⁹ Carsten Colpe, “Devil,” *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leiden, Netherlands: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 1999–2003), 823.

with Satan (2:13).”¹⁰

Samael

So there is biblical evidence that Revelation actually identifies Zeus with Satan. But if this were true, then Satan would also be identified as Jupiter, the high God of Rome. Curiously, there is an ancient belief among Jews and Christians that the “prince of Rome” was actually Satan. He is given the name Samael. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* begins its entry by calling Samael, “Prince of the demons.”¹¹ We can compare this with Matthew 9:34’s identical title “prince of demons” which becomes the proper name Beelzebub in 12:24. Samael means “venom [think **serpent**] of God.” Curiously, he is called in some places the “chief of the Satans”¹² (where “the *satan*” is a title or a job description of a heavenly court-room “accuser” as discussed above). We can see this line of thinking for example in the Martyrdom of Isaiah 2:2 which says that Manasseh abandoned the service of the LORD of his father, and he served “**Satan, and his angels, and his powers.**” But later in the same book this becomes “**Sammael and his hosts**” and because of “**the words of Satan**” the angels were envying one another (7:9). Or again, “**Because of these visions and prophecies Sammael Satan sawed Isaiah the son of Amoz, the prophet, in half by the hand of Manasseh**” (11:41).¹³

He is then identified as the prince of Rome:

SAMAEL AS PRINCE OF ROME. We have already seen instances where the belief in the heavenly patrons of the Gentiles is combined with the belief in Satan as the arch-fiend. Satan-Samael thus becomes the patron angel of Edom, that is, Rome.¹⁴ Just as the Armilus legend suggests that the Roman power is the Antichrist, so this other fusion of originally independent myths makes Rome the earthly representative of all the powers of evil, and her *sar* [prince] their heavenly

¹⁰ Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990–), 273.

¹¹ Isidore Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day, 12 Volumes* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–1906), 665.

¹² Ibid. Cf. Deut. R. 11:9; Jellinek, “B. H.” 1:125. As Ginzberg says, “On the twenty angels enumerated in Hekalot 175, (Sammael, the head of all the Satans, is described as ‘the greatest of all the angels’; ... comp., however, *Seder Rubot*, 179 [also 3En 26:12], where Satan is distinguished from Sammael, ‘the prince of Rome’; see also DR 11.9, which reads: Sammael, the head of all the Satans.” Louis Ginzberg, Henrietta Szold, and Paul Radin, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 130, n. 61.

¹³ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Expansions of the “Old Testament” and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, vol. 2 (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1985), 166. A note on 2:2 reads, “The very common name for the devil; in the Ascension used synonymously with Beliar and Sammael and mentioned elsewhere in 2:7; 5:16; 7:9; 11:23, 41, 43.”

¹⁴ How does “Edom” become identified with “Rome?” First, Samael was said by some to have been the patron angel of Esau, brother of Jacob (Bamberger, 139). From here Mark Reasoner explains, “While Jews of the first century might think of Idumaeans [Edomites] such as the Herod family as Esau or Edom, from at least the second century CE on, they also called the Roman Empire ‘Edom,’ the nation descended from Esau, because of Isaac’s words to Esau in Gen 27:40: ‘By your sword you shall live.’ ... In the rabbinic literature of the Tannaitic period, Esau or Edom is routinely used to designate Rome ... The connection between Edom, who lives by the sword, and Rome in Jewish thinking is significant for readers of the New Testament because Paul describes the sword as a threat in his Letter to the Romans (Rom 8:35; 13:4).” Mark Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 179-80.

embodiment.¹⁵

Another says, “As the incarnation of evil he is the celestial patron of the sinful empire of Rome, with which Edom and Esau are identified (Tan. on Gen. 32:33; Jellinek, *l.c.* 6:31, 109, etc.)”¹⁶ Of course, it is not until around 27 B.C. that Rome was truly thought of as the Empire of the world. And so it is into this context that the Satan “prince of the world,” and Samael/Satan “prince of Rome” would thus be considered as synonyms. “His identification with the Prince of Rome, the great earthly adversary of Israel, is [thus] natural.”¹⁷

Finally, it is also probably worth mentioning here that Satanael (the name of Satan before he lost his “el” [son of “god”] title in the Garden and hence became simply “Satan”) is the Slavonic equivalent of Samael in Greek.¹⁸ But this Satanael/Samael becomes the name of the person who tempted our parents in some Jewish literature (cf. 3Bar 4:8).

I find it utterly fascinating that we have a scholarly trail connecting Jupiter/Zeus back to Satan through the lines of Scripture (for example Revelation 2:13) and the popular idea that Samael was the prince of Rome. It is also very curious that Samael and Satan are said to be the creature that tempted our parents in the Garden in both Jewish and Christian traditions. But how might this help us answer our original question about why Satan would be so prevalent in the New Testament, but not the Old?

Baal

We have already seen the answer for the NT. As prince of Rome, Satan would become the great adversary of both Jews and Christians via his heavenly rule that mirrored that of his glorious city which became the Roman Empire. But what about the OT? What I propose now is that Satan is not actually missing at all from the OT. Rather, he is simply known by another well known name. That name is Baal.

To understand this, we must go back to Zeus and Jupiter. When the Romans conquered Greece, they simply took the Greek pantheon and Romanized it. From the Romans’ point of view, this was as effective as the Greeks putting Zeus in the temple at Jerusalem. It was utterly humiliating to the conquered nation to have their gods now be known by their conqueror’s names. Yet, the gods

¹⁵ Bernard J. Bamberger, *Fallen Angels: Soldiers of Satan’s Realm* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 139.

Tan. Tanhuma

l.c. in the place cited

¹⁶ Isidore Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day, 12 Volumes* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–1906), 665.

¹⁷ P. Alexander, “3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1983), n. b of 3En 14:2.

¹⁸ “The name Satanael in the Slavonic is probably secondary to the name Samael in the Greek version. Samael became a centralizing figure in the later rabbinic literature, incorporating the functions of several angels. Yet Diabolos, or Satan, functioned in the same manner among Christians, and we find little record of Samael in Christian literature. The first four archangels in the two lists are each paralleled in early Jewish and Christian sources (see n. to 4:7[S]). The name Samael is very common as the chief of evil angels in rabbinic literature and some apocryphal works.” H. E. JR. Gaylord, “3 Baruch: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1983), 658.

remained. And this is the key. Jupiter *is* Zeus.

This practice was well known to the Greeks who did something similar, though not as an act of conquest. The practice was called *interpretatio graeca*. This is where deities and myths from one's own religious background are used to understand those of other cultures. One of the main enemies of Israel in the Old Testament were the Canaanites. These people lived north of Israel along the coast of the Mediterranean. About a century ago, archeologists were digging around in an ancient site called Ugarit, where they uncovered one of the great discoveries of the 20th century. It was a whole series of texts written on clay tablets that had been buried for 3,000 years.

One of these has become known as the *Baal Cycle*. This ancient story tells of the ascendancy of Baal, one of 70 sons of El who defeated the sea god Yam to become lord. He then made his palace on top of the spectacular Mt. Zaphon, which rises nearly a mile straight out of the Sea. Thus, he became known as Baal Zaphon (lit. "the Lord of Mt. Zaphon"). Baal was also known as the sky god or the storm god and was often called the "cloud-rider." His weapon was a spear that flashes lightning.

The Greeks knew well about gods living on mountains, as Zeus was the head of the pantheon on Mt. Olympus. Through *interpretatio graeca*, these Greeks would later rename Mt. Zaphon as Kasios. And guess who became the god of Kasios? Zeus.

"Zeus" is "derived from the root **diwu-*, 'day (as opposed to night)' (Lat *dies*), 'clear' sky'. He is identified with local weather gods of Asia Minor, with great sky gods (Zeus Beelsêmên, →Baalshamem)."¹⁹ Not only was his weapon lightning, but the animal always attached to him is the eagle—for flight. The equivalent at Ugarit may have been "Baal of the wing" (*b'l knp*)."²⁰ Thus, "The Greek name for the Olympian Zeus when rendered into Semitic language becomes 'baal shamem' (2 Macc. 6:2). Literally, this means 'Lord of Heaven.'"²¹ Thus, we find that "a temple at Umm el-Amed is dedicated to Baal-Shamem (KAI 18). In Greek inscriptions from this region he is called *Zeus hypsistos*, 'Highest →Zeus', *Zeus megistos keraunios*, 'Magnificent lightning Zeus.'"²² The Baal who was worshiped on Mount Carmel in the Elijah vs. the prophets of Baal story, was probably the Phoenician deity Baal Shamem ("Lord of Heaven").²³

We may have already seen a hint of the relationship between Satan and Baal in the name Beelzebub. This word can mean "Lord" (from Ba'al) "of the House" or "Lord of Flies." Curiously,

Lat Latin

¹⁹ F. Graf, "Zeus," ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 934.

²⁰ W. C. Kaiser Jr., "Desolating Sacrilege," ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 931.

²¹ Paul M. Lederach, *Daniel*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994), 276.

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²² W. Röllig, "Baal-Shamem," ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 149.

²³ Jeremy D. Otten, "Mount Carmel," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015).

the high God of Greece was called “Zeus Averter of Flies.”²⁴



If this is all true, then suddenly, we have an explanation for the absence of Satan in the OT and the wide-spread presence of Baal in the same place. The reality may very well be that Satan is Baal. Baal is no mere idol. He is a person who resides in heavenly places and is the ultimate usurper of all things that are said of Christ. Jesus, not Baal, is the Cloud-Rider (Dan 7:13; Matt 24:30).²⁵ To him belongs the power of the weather. His is the throne of heaven. He is the Christ. Baal-Zeus-Jupiter, he who wishes to punish the nations (paraphrasing Plato), is the true antichrist who sits as prince over Rome pretending to be God until he is finally and thoroughly thrown into the lake of fire at the end of days.

²⁴ Clemens Alexandrinus, *Protrepticus* II,38, 4; Pausanias, *Graeciae Descriptio* V 14, 1. See W. Herrmann, “Baal Zebub,” ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 154.

²⁵ See Michael S. Heiser, , <https://www.logos.com/ugaritic>.