

**The Book of Job**  
**Session 9: Scene in Heaven, Part 1**  
**By John Walton**

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 9, Scene in Heaven. Part 1.

**Heavenly Council [00:23-1:36]**

Now the scene in the Book of Job switches to the heavenly court. It's audience day. Yahweh is holding an audience, and his divine council is assembled. The sons of God, who are the council members, come before him to make their reports. When council members make reports, that's not to suggest somehow that God is less than omniscient; it's just that God has chosen to work with the council. We find that picture in the Bible in a number of places 1 Kings 22, here in Job, Isaiah 6, "Whom shall I send, who will go for us?" Psalm 82, and numerous other places. This is the way it presents God's workings.

These are not other gods, like they are in some of the other ancient cultures, as they think about a divine council, yet God has chosen to work through a council. God doesn't need other beings. He doesn't need anyone to counsel him, but if he chooses to work that way, that's his business.

**The Character of hasatan [1:36-5:23]**

So, the sons of God have gathered, and Satan is among them. Now, if we said that way, it confuses us a bit because we're used to thinking of Satan as the bad guy, the devil; who doesn't belong, even in heaven, let alone among the sons of God. So, let's be careful here. This character comes. Who is he? The text is one step away from talking about him as Satan.

I know most translations render Satan with a capital S and immediately make us think about a personal name connected to the devil. But here the Hebrew text is not presented as a personal name. It puts a definite article on it. In Hebrew, that's "ha." So, it's hasatan. Satan is a Hebrew word. You didn't know, and you knew some Hebrew. So, this is hasatan, the satan. Now that means it's not a personal name. And that really means we

shouldn't be capitalizing it, to be fair. I mean, we shouldn't. But it rather describes a role. Satan, as I mentioned, is a Hebrew word. And it's a word that can function as a verb as well as a noun. And we need to look at how that word works.

When it's a verb, it suggests that there's some opposing, being an adversary, challenging someone, all of those kinds of things. It can be carried out by human beings, that is, by other kings who challenge Solomon, for instance. It can be done by people in a court setting, a prosecuting attorney. It can even be done by the angel of the Lord who challenges a Balaam's movement in Numbers. 22, stands in his way as satan. So, there's nothing intrinsically evil about this role. We find human beings in this role. We also find non-human beings like the angel of the Lord that I mentioned, who carries out this function in that particular passage.

And, of course, here in Job is this particular character. But this character, this challenger, and that's the term I will prefer; this challenger is among the sons of God. He's in the divine council. He's not portrayed as the devil.

In fact, in the Old Testament, the use of satan does not suggest the devil. It's only applied to a non-human being, such as in this case in a couple of other instances. One of them is in Zechariah chapter three, in which he opposes, he challenges the right of the high priest to be restored. That's an appropriate challenge. God does rebuke him and offers his own direction as to why that can take place. In 1 Chronicles 21, it refers to Satan, who incites David to take a census. And so, we have just these couple occurrences, hardly enough to build a profile.

### **The Challenger [5:23-6:15]**

But here he is among the heavenly counsel, the sons of God. The idea that it refers to someone who challenges, no matter what the context, whether for good or ill, whether among humans or among the heavenly host, it's someone who challenges, who takes an adversarial position, fits the profile of what we find with the word.

It does not become a personal name for the devil until we're well out of the Old Testament period. In the pseudepigraphal literature, that literature kind of in the second

temple period between the testaments and beyond, it refers to many satans, not just one. It's not a personal name for the devil.

### **The Challenger as God's Agent [6:15-8:36]**

Here in Job the hasatan, the Challenger, is God's agent. He's been sent out with a task. He's coming back to report. He's doing God's will and God's bidding. He is God's agent.

Now, how is he a challenger? Well, here we find that he challenges God's policies. We've already talked about this. He does so appropriately. That is, it's true that if righteous people continue to receive benefits, it may subvert their righteousness and give them an ulterior motive. That's true. That's not some false hyped-up accusation.

And so, we find that this agent of God's is doing the job God has given him to do. Job is not his target. God's the one that brought up Job. The target of his challenge is God's policies. Job is simply a logical test case because he is the ultimate upright person. So, in that sense, we don't have to think of the Challenger as playing a devil type of role. He is not tempting. He's not possessing. He is not lying. There's no diabolical chuckle as he ruins Job. In fact, he only acts on God's behalf. God gives him freedom of hand, and God accepts responsibility for ruining Job. No one in the rest of the story ever imagines that there's some other agent involved in Job's ruin. It's God who has done it. God is being held accountable by Job. God is seen as responsible. God has struck Job as much as the Challenger has.

### **Challenger not Portrayed as Evil [8:36-10:11]**

And it's interesting that sometimes we think about, when we consider the Challenger to be the devil, we think about him as taking great delight and ruining Job. Whereas God, very sadly, experiences it. The text doesn't differentiate in how they each respond. Neither character lacks a particularly or has a particularly sympathetic response. Whatever the Challenger does, he does through the power of God. And God says that. "You have incited me to ruin him," chapter 2. Nothing intrinsically evil emerges in the author's portrayal of the Challenger. He is a neutral character doing what it's his job to do.

Again, no tempting, no corrupting, no depraving. This is not a devil profile. This is an independent profile that we have to derive from the text itself. The fact that the angel of the Lord himself can perform the role of satan suggests that it's not intrinsically evil.

### **Challenger as a Literary Construct [10:11-11:27]**

The Challenger is a character used by the author in ways that correspond to what was known by an Israelite audience. Remember, we've talked about this being a literary construct, and therefore all of the characters are just that, they are literary characters, playing a role, regardless of whether this is truly the being that the New Testament designates as the devil. The book of Job needs to be interpreted based on the profile that was available to the target audience as Israelites, not a later Greco-Roman audience--New Testament.

The Challenger, in actuality, is of very little theological significance in the book. He just helps set the scene as he questions Job's motives and challenges God's policies. He's not offered as the one who can be blamed for Job's suffering. The book certainly is not suggesting that we ought to look for blame in the devil when we are suffering; that is not the teaching of the book.

### **Challenger as Minor Character in the Book [11:27-12:30]**

His role does not provide an explanation for suffering or evil in our experiences or in the world. He's a minor character playing a small part in the unfolding drama. And we give him too much attention at our peril because it distorts the message of the book. This is a heavenly functionary playing his assigned role to bring challenge into the courts of God. That's what he's doing. He does it well. It sets a scene for the book.

And so, we proceed to discover whether Job's righteousness will stand the test. Remember, suffering is the only way to test the mettle of Job's righteousness. And so, suffering is a path that the book is going to take.

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