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The Fall of Satan

"And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" –
Luke 10:18

Summary: Milton's poem – explanation of Isaiah 14:12 – Satan, the chief prosecutor – Satan's fall, not in the past, but because of Jesus's ministry – the disciples sent out – the campaign against Satan – imagery from Psalm 91:13 – Genesis 3:15 also – a final caution.

Prof. F.F. Bruce

When we think of the fall of Satan, we tend to be more influenced by John Milton's famous poem than by the Bible. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes Satan and his angels being thrown out of heaven and falling down to hell before the creation of the human race.

It would be difficult to find biblical authority for Milton's picture. The reader of the AV (KJV) may think of Isaiah 14:12, "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!" Here, the poetic imagery of Lucifer's fall draws on the traditional concept of Satan's fall. But Lucifer, son of the morning, is Day Star, son of Dawn' (RSV). The prophet proclaims the downfall of the king of Babylon, who held such a high place in the firmament of imperial power that his overthrow can be compared to the morning star being cast from heaven.

In the Old Testament, Satan, or rather "the satan" (the adversary), is the chief prosecutor in the heavenly court, and when he fulfils this role, he does so in the presence of God and his angels (Job 1:6-2:7; Zech. 3:1-5). So, when Jesus speaks of seeing Satan's fall from heaven, he is not thinking of an event in the remote past. He is thinking of the effect of his ministry at the time.

Jesus had sent out seventy of his disciples to spread the announcement that the kingdom of God had drawn near, and now they had come back from their mission in great excitement. "Why," they said, "even the demons are subject to us in your

name!" Jesus replied, "I watched how Satan fell, like lightning, out of the sky" (NEB). It is implied that he was watching for this when, suddenly, like a flash of lightning, it happened; Satan plummeted - whether to earth or down to the abyss is not said.

Jesus may be describing an actual vision which he experienced during the mission of the seventy - not unlike the vision seen by John of Patmos, when, as he says, "war broke out in heaven and the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (Revelation 12:9).

When the disciples went out on their mission, they encountered demons who had taken up residence in men and women and held them in bondage. When the disciples found that the demons obeyed them and came out of the people in Jesus's name, it was a sign that the kingdom of God was conquering the kingdom of evil.

Many of the rabbis held that at the end of the age God or the Messiah would overthrow Satan; the report of the seventy showed that Satan's overthrow had already occurred; and Jesus's vision of his fall from heaven confirmed this. John's Patmos account of Satan's ejection similarly indicates that his downfall was the direct result of Jesus's ministry. So too, when Jesus says in John 12:31, "Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out," the adverb "now" refers to his impending passion, which crowned his ministry.

The downfall of Satan may be regarded as the decisive victory in the campaign, even as the campaign itself continues. Jesus said to his disciples, "I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you" (Luke 10:19). The serpents and scorpions represent the forces of evil. Because of the work of Christ, his people can trample these evil forces underfoot and gain the victory over them.

The imagery of serpents and scorpions may be drawn from Psalm 91:13, which promises that those who trust in God will tread on the lion and the adder. Paul uses a similar expression when he tells the Christians in Rome that, if they are wise as to what is good and guileless as to what is evil, then the God of

peace will soon crush Satan under their feet (Romans 16:19-20). The wording here harks back not so much to Psalm 91 as to the story of man's first disobedience, in which the serpent of Eden is told that its offspring will have its head crushed by the offspring of the woman (Genesis 3:15).

Finally, the seventy are directed not to glory in their spiritual achievements (for that way lies pride and catastrophe) but to glory rather in what God has done for them.