

## **“Can Satan Read Your Mind?”**

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One of the most provocative questions Christians ask concerns the extent and power in which Satan and his demons can operate. Unsurprisingly, Scripture places an emphasis on Christians being savvy to the schemes of these demonic oppressors (e.g., 2 Corinthians 2:11; Ephesians 6:11). Why? Because we know that Satan and his demons interact with us via the mind (1 Chronicles 21:1; Mark 4:15; Acts 5:3-4; these are but a few), which is to say that inner center of consciousness that is the seat of our thoughts and emotions. One need not be a substance dualist to appreciate how the *brain* could possibly function in this way since our own spirits are, per the dualist, in intimate communication with those same brains paired with those spirits. So, even the anthropological materialist could appreciate that an external soul could communicate with a physical mind if so endowed with this capability. The dualist, of course, already has no such problem with the precedent – finding humankind to be a walking and talking example of this process. I myself am a substance dualist, but nothing hinges on this metaphysic as it applies to theological anthropology.

But if Satan and his demons are said to interact with our minds, do they then possess the ability to “read our minds”? All too common, Christians (ranging from the laity to the scholarly) are quick to say that demons lack this capability – usually over concerns that this ability is relegated to God exclusively. I recently read one blogger comment:

I personally do not believe that Satan can hear your thoughts or read

your mind. ... I have not seen any direct verse that says a spirit like Satan can know what you are thinking.<sup>1</sup>

And this sentiment is not relegated to one strand of interpretations over spiritual warfare. This view seems to be held across the board. For example, a popular proponent of the so-called *deliverance* model of spiritual warfare, Neil Anderson, writes:

Your unspoken communion with God is your private sanctuary; Satan cannot, eavesdrop on you. ... [I]f you only tell Satan to leave with your thoughts, he won't leave because he can't hear you. You must defeat Satan by speaking out.<sup>2</sup>

One of Anderson's ardent critics, Hank Hanegraaff,<sup>3</sup> equally admits this:

He can't read our minds, but he can influence our thoughts.<sup>4</sup>

B. J. Oropeza had written a rather provocative book some years ago ambitiously titled, *99 Answers to Questions About Angels, Demons & Spiritual Warfare*, where he also admits that there "is no biblical evidence that Satan can read our thoughts."<sup>5</sup>

However, there exist Christians who think otherwise. Theologian and apologist Robert Morey, as an example, makes the following affirmation:

Satan can “read” our minds and even put ideas into our minds. ...

The implantation of thoughts is a very vigorous form of telepathy and is never a one-way street.<sup>6</sup>

Most Christians who distance themselves from the supposition that Satan and his demons have mind-reading ability simply think that this is the prerogative of God. *But why should we think that?* As far as I can tell, there are three reasons typically advanced in support of the idea that Satan and his demons lack the capability of such a feat. Let’s explore each of them to see if the conclusion follows from these suggestions:

(i) *Satan/demons are not omniscient.* Arguers contend that since demons lack the capability of knowing all things, this would include their ability to pry into the intimate thoughts of each person. But this is a misapplication of God’s exclusive attribute of omniscience. To be omniscient – or all-knowing – means that one knows all true propositions and does not believe any false ones. This says nothing about how exclusive God’s cognitive intimacy is for it confuses the *extent* of God’s knowledge with the *means*. If I could somehow read other people’s minds through telepathy, this would not make me any more omniscient than Mel Gibson’s character, Nick Marshall, in *What Women Want* (2000). In the movie, Marshall comes to hear the thoughts of women, but certainly does not acquire “all propositional truths” through such a means.

(ii) *Only God is said to have privileged and intimate access to our thoughts.* This is partly true but misleading. What Scripture tends to confirm is that God *has this access* but it says nothing about God having this as *exclusive* access. For example, the King David says that “the

LORD--knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath" (Psalm 94:11; ESV). But it doesn't mean that *only* God knows the thoughts of man. The same could be said about passages like Proverbs 15:26 and similar ones, and pertain also to Jesus' cognitive access to the same (as noted in Matthew 9:4).

(iii) *Satan relied on external information (Herod) in order to find baby Jesus (Matt 2:13-18)*. Now this is a very specific argument, but it is very presumptuous as it stands. The crucial piece of information that is not communicated in Matthew 2 is that Satan is *in fact* using Herod to find out where Jesus is. But the passage says nothing about Satan's involvement here.

Despite no clear indication that Satan cannot read minds, nor any principled objection to the possibility of such a feat, before anyone can confidently or probabilistically conclude that Satan *does* read minds, we would have to have some positive reasons in support of this. Though Scripture appears to be silent on this issue, here are some things to consider in making an informed inference on the matter:

(1) *If Satan already has cognitive access to our minds to tempt us and implant thoughts, it would be equally likely that such thoughts could be mutually received from those minds (by analogy, most pieces of communication equipment that have transmitters also potentially possess receivers)*. It is certainly conceivable that such communicability is, *contra* Morey, a one-way street, but it seems to make the "privileged access" argument defunct on grounds that such intimate access (even if unidirectional) already obtains. As Hanegraaff himself acknowledges:

While we would greatly overestimate Satan's power by supposing

that he can interact directly with us in a physical sense, an equal and opposite error would be to suppose that he does not have access to our minds.<sup>7</sup>

Hanegraaff doesn't refer to mind-reading by Satan here, but the level of intimacy is already acknowledged even if in the opposite direction. Remember, such angelic beings are said to be more powerful than human beings (cf. Hebrews 2:6-7), so it would be odd indeed that we should have the ability to read the thoughts of Satan when delivered (cf. Acts 5:3) but not vice versa.

As an aside, there is nothing particularly scandalous about such "privileged access." Besides, just what would Satan come to learn this way that would be particularly intimate and shocking? If Satan is a student of human nature (which seems reasonable given the hundreds of thousands of years of human observation, so to speak), then just as a learned human being can pick up on "body language," Satan could surely be quite insightful when it comes to the thoughts of people. Moreover, there are plenty of publicized sins that are extraordinarily egregious (like child sex trafficking or mothers killing their 6-year-olds) that could not possibly be above and beyond what some of the worst persons have entertained merely with their thoughts.

(2) *Satan and his demons already communicate cognitively with one another, with angels, and with God Himself.* In a strictly philosophical sense, immaterial souls are just subsisting rational minds (*inter alia*). If Satan and his demons can communicate (bi-directionally) with other minds, what would prevent this from being the case for embodied

human persons? When you consider that immaterial beings do not have vocal chords or eardrums, their means of communication will not be in the conventional manner in which human beings talk to each other. Here are two examples of this interactionism explicitly involving an unembodied Satan:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.<sup>8</sup>

But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."<sup>9</sup>

(3) *Theologically, we may have a clue in the episode of the demons possessing a man and being exorcised by the seven sons of Sceva.* In Acts 19, we have the following account remembered:

[S]ome of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"<sup>10</sup>

It is important to understand that demons lack physical sensory input capability because they are not physical beings. Thus, they do not have retinas or eardrums and cannot acquire any sensations wrought by light or audio wavelengths from human people. Yet the passage indicates that the demon *did not recognize* the exorcists. If this was not an audible or visual recognition (since this would have been metaphysically impossible), then the recognition must have been *cognitive*. By analogy, it might be the same sort of recognition that we get when reading our favorite author and then an unknown passage said to be written by him or her. We might say, "I do not recognize this as the writing of so-and-so." Verse 15 uses *ἐπίσταμαι*

("recognize") in describing the ignorance of the demon. This is the same word used in passages like Mark 14:68:

But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand ["ἐπίσταμαι"] what you mean." And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed.

The term is not necessarily used in the context of a visual or audible recognition, it's often used as a term for *intellectual acquaintance* and *comprehension*. When the Greek wants to communicate a visual or sensory recognition, it tends to add the prefix ἐπέ-, as in ἐπέγνωσαν (see LXX Genesis 27:23, Matthew 17:12, and Luke 24:16 for examples).

But if the demon who encountered the Jewish exorcists did not "recognize" them cosmetically, on what basis would this recognition be? It seems to me that this is the point of the story – that the Jewish exorcists were hijacking the power of Christ though they themselves were not believers, that they were instead "itinerant" (i.e., wandering) and "Jewish." And, as a result:

... this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled (Acts 19:17).

Demons would come to know and understand those who are promoting the Gospel and depleting the extent of the evil principalities and powers. Any run-of-the-mill unbeliever would himself be nothing but “white noise” amidst a world population of unbelievers. They would be nothing special and simply par for the course – an easily unrecognized person! Satan and his demons would only be “attuned” to those persons of interest. While this is not in any sense an argument for demonic mind-reading, I cannot think of another way a demon would have such specific recognition of persons.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps it is through their recurring *possessions* of human beings that allow for them to have direct, physical acquaintance with certain people. This just shows the deficits of using the Sceva example. But worthy of note is that the demons recognize Jesus and Paul, not *necessarily* by having seen them, but by coming to know their works mentioned through a succession of possessed hosts. The ignorance of the demon assures us that they are not omniscient, but the demon’s knowledge of both Jesus and Paul does assure us that this evil spirit in particular is aware of both of them despite their earthly lives not occurring at the same time (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:8). It is unlikely that this is because the spirit possessed a man, or multiple men, in order to have visual acquaintance with both since possessions were neither frequent nor enduring, much less by the same spirit. *But why does the evil spirit inquire as to who this itinerant exorcist is?* The point obviously is to convey that the exorcist is himself powerless in relegating Jesus and Paul to mere mantras in the hands of an incompetent novice. But if the spirit has knowledge of Jesus and Paul, and it did not acquire such knowledge through sensory contact, then the only remaining source would be spirit-spirit interaction.

If Satan and his demons can participate in spirit-spirit interaction (e.g. reading the minds of embodied human beings) to what extent is this accomplished? Of course all I can do is speculate here; However, it seems to me that some parameters can be ascertained. First, as already noted in my discussion of Acts 19, it seems true enough that mind-reading is not the same thing as omniscience (lest we stumble upon an easy refutation of human telepathy!). Secondly, it seems that there is nothing scandalous in the idea that demons could have such intimate access. There is nothing they could learn, it appears, that would be unique or “shocking” by accessing our thoughts. One imagines a private prayer episode to be sheltered from would-be eavesdroppers since one’s prayer is thought private and confidential. I don’t know if God shelters individual prayers or not, but this would not preclude other non-prayer-related occasions of eavesdropping. Thirdly, it seems like a metaphysically *necessary* sort of communicability since Satan and demons lack the requisite *physical* properties of information gathering. As such, it seems reasonable to surmise that Satan and his demons can “pick up” on our conversations when they *deliberately* and *specifically* “tune in” – but that they do so literally and exclusively as a cognitive act. It might be analogous to focusing in on one TV station where several (but not necessarily all) are within proximity. Any other channels feeding an agent a broadcast would just be “white noise” unless the agent made an active effort to concentrate and focus in on a specific transmission. This portrait would avoid the obviously incorrect view that Satan and his demons are omniscient. And it would serve to show by analogy how one can have this kind of cognitive access without being made omniscient.

The practical fruits of this supposition also become evident. If Satan can read our minds, then all the more so do we need to “take every thought captive to obey Christ”<sup>12</sup> and “be on

guard”<sup>13</sup> at every moment, lest we be “outwitted by Satan.”<sup>14</sup> If our words in the public arena “can and will be used against us in a court of law,” then we should also make sure that our thoughts as well as our speech are appropriately subdued on pain of giving Satan an entry point to temptation, hypocrisy, and apostasy.<sup>15</sup>

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The Agapegeek Blog (January 21, 2012), <<http://agapegeek.com/2011/01/21/understanding-satan%E2%80%99s-abilities-can-satan-readyour-mind/>>>).

<sup>2</sup> Neil T. Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1990), pp. 84-85

<sup>3</sup> I admire Hanegraaff’s approach to this subject. In fact, he comes pretty close the view I’ve defended both professionally and publicly. Of particular interest is his suggestion that

“We cannot explain how such [demonic] communication takes place any more than we can explain how our immaterial minds can cause the physical synapses of the brain to fire; but that such mind-to-mind communication takes place is indisputable. If it were not so, the Devil could not have tempted Judas to betray his Master, seduced Ananias and Sapphira to deceive Peter, or incited David to take a census. ... [F]allen angels are not material beings and thus cannot interact with us directly in the physical sense” (“Does Satan Have Access to Our Minds?”, *Christian Research Journal*, volume 27, number 5 (2004), <<http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAS450.pdf>>).

<sup>4</sup> from Hank Hanegraaff’s interview by Lee Strobel on his 2002 book *The Covering*, originally published in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 25, number 3 (2003), <<http://www.equip.org/PDF/DC665.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> *99 Answers to Questions About Angels, Demons & Spiritual Warfare* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> *Satan’s Devices* (Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1993), p. 74

<sup>7</sup> Hank Hanegraaff, *Christian Research Journal*, volume 27, number 5 (2004), p. XX

<sup>8</sup> Job 1:6-12; ESV.

<sup>9</sup> Jude 9; ESV.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 19:13-15; ESV.

<sup>11</sup> I have argued in my doctoral dissertation (forthcoming) that such communicability may have occurred as bidirectional mind-mind interaction in the specific occurrences where Satan interacts with human beings without the intervention of demon-possession, so I could easily invoke those other references in order to build a more cumulative case for my conclusion here.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:5.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 13:23, 33.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:11.

<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 4:27.