

Who are the bad guys? The sword cuts both ways: The sword cuts both ways

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

Listening to news of the war with Iraq, I have never been more aware how much depends on people's view of reality. Support for the present conflict has been built on the rhetoric of good versus evil, which rises so naturally from the worldview of the West that many people I know accept it as reality instead of one view of reality. In this worldview, which seems to work equally well with or without a god, the forces of light are engaged in a battle with the forces of darkness. The fate of the earth and all its inhabitants depends on the willingness of good people to do things they would not ordinarily do—including violence—in order to keep evil people from taking over. Enemies are essential to this worldview. Without enemies, good people stand to lose both their identity and their mission in this world.

As a Christian, I am wrecked by the violence of war but sadly at home with the cosmic dualism behind it. For as long as I can remember, opposition has been the main theme of my Christian education: spirit versus flesh, sacred versus secular, church versus world, Christ versus culture. The sermons I have heard with the most memorable spittle in them have been sermons against the various enemies of God, whether their names are Mammon, Caesar, Judas or Satan.

A few years ago, when I was corresponding with a learned Jew about the culpability of "the Jews" in Jesus' death, he asked me a stunning question. "Does Jesus need to have deadly Jewish enemies," he wrote, "or any deadly religious enemies, to still be Jesus?"

The answer rose in me at once—no, he doesn't—although it took much longer to think my way through it. Jesus' death is such a central feature of the Christian story, and the urge to blame those responsible such a fixture of human nature, that Christians often miss the irony of their preoccupation with his enemies. Unless I have

misread the Gospels, Jesus died for love of them too, and it was God, not the devil, who raised the cup of suffering to his lips. With legions of angels at his command, Jesus left them in their barracks. His vision of redemption did not include deadly violence, not even as last resort.

One way to track the growth of dualism in the Bible is to chart the evolution of Satan. Minus one cryptic reference in 1 Chronicles, Satan first appears in the Book of Job, where he works as God's prosecuting attorney. Satan cannot do anything to Job that God will not let him do. When Job's children are killed, they are killed with God's permission. When sores erupt on Job's body, they erupt with God's permission. As hard as this is for Job or his readers to swallow, it is one of the occupational hazards of monotheism. There is only one God in this story—the God who forms light and creates darkness, according to Isaiah 45—the God who makes weal and creates woe.

Around the same time that the books of Job and Second Isaiah were being written, a less problematic worldview was emerging in Persia, where a prophet named Zarathustra was born. Near the age of 30, he experienced a vision of divine reality in which Spenta Mainyu ("Holy Spirit") and Angra Mainyu ("Wicked Spirit") were forever at odds with one another. While both were lower spirits than Ahura Mazda ("Wise Lord"), each recruited human beings for the cosmic struggle between good and evil, which will culminate in the end of the world, the resurrection of the dead and a final judgment in which the good go to paradise and the wicked to hell.

This supremely dualistic worldview shows up in the writings of the Essenes as well as late Jewish and early Christian writings. By the time of the Second Temple's destruction in the year 70 and the subsequent composition of the Gospels, Satan no longer works for but against God, and the enemies of Christ are everywhere—or at least that is one way to view it. It is also possible to view Peter and Judas—both associated with Satan in the New Testament—as human beings with wretched roles to play in the one God's mysterious vision for the healing of the world.

I realize that I am swimming upstream here, against ancient teachings about evil and atonement that I am not competent to address, but it is Jesus' own story that impels me to ask questions about how it is possible to confess faith in one God, maker and redeemer of all that is, and at the same time to declare war on the enemies of God as if they emanated from some other source. All myths of fallen angels and war in heaven aside, the fiercest warriors in any battle between good

and evil are those who believe themselves to be on the good side, and in recent years we have had ample opportunity to see how that sword cuts both ways.

In this Easter season, fresh from the annual reenactment of Jesus' death and resurrection, I have never been more aware how he resisted the division of the world into good people and evil people. If anything, he challenged the assumption of those around him that they could tell the difference, while he dealt with the evil that *all* people do by suffering it, so that no one who looked upon his ruined body could fail to see where deadly violence leads. I am not a pacifist, but if his followers sometimes find it necessary to take up arms, then they can at least do so with sorrow and not with triumph, praying that he will go on forgiving those who know not what they do.