

Review of: *The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* by Elaine Pagels

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Satan is one of the most prevalent religious figures in the mind of many Christians. How Satan came into being, and how he has been personified and utilized by the early Christian church is unknown to many Christians today. Elaine Pagels, in her book *The Origin of Satan*, demonstrated that Christians were one of the first groups to use the concept of a singular evil-being who stood in opposition to God. Since Christians naturally identified themselves with God and Jesus, they began to associate their enemies more closely with Satan's influence and the forces of evil. Pagels's main thesis was that from the first century to present-day, it has been an unfortunate characteristic of Christians to demonize their religious or social opponents, demonstrated by Christian interactions with Jews, Pagans, and Gnostic Christians.

The first chapter, titled "The Gospel of Mark and the Jewish War," is where Pagels argued that the Christian Movement was born into a time of political turmoil with the Jewish War as the flashpoint. At this point in history, Judea was politically subjugated by the Roman Empire, and guerilla leaders were trying to cite rebellion for "liberty in the name of God."⁶⁹⁵ Judea was extremely resistant to Roman subjugation since Jewish people believed they were God's chosen people, and it wasn't right for them to be under subjugation to pagan heathens. When suppressing rebellion, the Roman Empire was exceptionally cruel and barbaric, which instigated the Jewish people into further rebellion. Due to the Roman imperial rule, the Jewish religion began to become splintered on how to respond to the military rule. Some radicals wanted to physically attack the Roman Empire, believing God would be on their side. More moderate Jews, realizing the might of the Roman Empire, wanted to cooperate with the Romans to avoid total annihilation. This led to conflict within the Jewish community, one instance being when the radical John of Gischala captured Jewish leader Antipas and killed him for conspiring with the Romans.⁶⁹⁶

The Jewish Revolt is so significant to Christian history because it signifies the distinct and permanent break between Jews and Jewish-Christians, because the Christians refused to fight in the Jewish War. They abstained from fighting because they believed the end of the world was near, and Jesus's second coming would make more fighting pointless.⁶⁹⁷ Also, the gospel of Mark was written during or immediately following the Jewish War, so it is written to be relatable to people who suffered through a horrible war. For Mark, Satan was such a significant figure in the gospel because without Satan, the passion of Jesus Christ would be seen as pointless or even a failure. The death of Jesus at the hand of the Jews and Romans would appear to be a failure, unless Jesus's passion was simply a part of a bigger spiritual battle between good and evil.⁶⁹⁸ However, if it follows that Jesus was on the side of good, then it made sense to assume those who opposed him were on the side of evil. This became a common theme throughout the growth of Christianity.

In the second chapter, "The Social History of Satan: From the Hebrew Bible to the Gospels," Pagels looked at how the portrayal of Satan has evolved from the Old Testament to what

⁶⁹⁵ Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* (New York: Random House, 1995), 4. John of Gischala is an example of one of these guerilla leaders.

⁶⁹⁶ Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, 4.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

is found in the gospels. Interesting enough, in the Old Testament Satan did not occur as an evil angel who directs an army of fallen angels. This “satan” is an obedient servant of God in the book of Numbers and Job.⁶⁹⁹ The Hebrew term satan describes an “adversarial role. It does not describe a particular character.”⁷⁰⁰ Satan can lead to unexpected outcomes to stories, but this isn’t always a bad thing. Sometimes, Satan actually does the will of God. One example of this is in the book of Numbers when Balaam has decided to go where God has forbid him from going; if he ends up defying God, Balaam is risking eternal damnation. However, an angel of God got in the way of the road, and Balaam’s donkey refused to go further. Balaam tries to urge the donkey on, but “Satan” keeps Balaam from breaking God’s commandment.⁷⁰¹

Another example of Satan not being the Prince of Evil is found in the book of Job. Here Satan takes on a dissenting role, but still is an angel of God. He is a special kind of reconnaissance angel, keeping tabs on who remains faithful to God and who becomes unfaithful. God boasts that Job is a righteous and faithful servant. Satan takes on an adversarial role; reminding God that Job lives a blessed life and hasn’t been put to the test. God agrees to have Satan test Job to see if he was truly faithful; but, Job persevered in his faith when tested, and Satan was forced to retreat.⁷⁰² Though Satan takes on the role of an opponent and brings hardship on Job, Satan remains an angel of God.

Many wonder where the first occurrence of the singular Satan occurred and many believe it was with the Essenes of the Jewish community. The Essenes were a monastic group of Jews who believed the vast majority of Jews had lost their original faith.⁷⁰³ For this reason, Essenes isolated themselves from the rest of the Jewish community. The Essenes went so far as to stop attacking the pagans as evil-doers, but focused most of their criticism on their fellow Jews. Since the majority of Jews were in God’s favor, but fell from grace, they wanted a figure that personified this. The ideal figure for this was Satan: one of God’s angels who fell from grace and now is overwhelmed by evil.⁷⁰⁴ Christians would incorporate and expand on the Essenes’ tradition of demonizing their opponents.

The third chapter, “Matthew’s Campaign Against The Pharisees: Deploying the Devil,” looks at the Gospel of Matthew and how it was the most anti-Jewish of the gospels. Between 70 and 100 C.E, Jews and Christians continued to grow apart. Christians evangelized to both Jews and Gentiles, but the Jews were resistant to the message. Jews began to dispel Christians from synagogues and other places of worship.⁷⁰⁵ As the gap between Jews and Christians grew, Christians began to demonize the Jews to prove their legitimacy. In his gospel, Matthew illustrated how misguided the Jews were by showing them rejecting and crucifying their own Messiah. Matthew employs the good vs. evil concept to show the life and passion of Jesus was part of a bigger struggle. If Jesus is the Son of God, then it implies that his opponents, the Jews, are the agents of “Satan.”

A major problem Matthew had to address though was the fact that Jesus was crucified on charges of sedition. This was a common Roman method of execution during a time when Rome was executing any political dissenters or claimed “messiahs.” Matthew was also trying to spread his message throughout the Roman Empire, but his message lost much of its appeal if the Empire

⁶⁹⁹ Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, 39.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., 40-41.

⁷⁰² Ibid., 42.

⁷⁰³ The Essenes often called their fellow Jews “Children of the Dark.”

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid., 63.

was responsible for killing the son of God. For this reason, Matthew gave a very unlikely portrayal of how things were in first-century Israel. An example of this was the gospels portrayal of Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect over Judea during the time of Jesus. Historical accounts from Jewish writers such as Josephus and Philo record that Pilate was a very harsh ruler, quick to impose death sentences at whispers of rebellion and even antagonizing to the Jewish people by imposing pagan images of gods in front of the Jewish people.⁷⁰⁶

The Pontius Pilate of the gospels, however, appears to be a respectful and fair ruler over Judea. He sensed Jesus is innocent and tried on several occasions to have him released. Pilate was reluctant to have him executed, but when the huge masses of the Jewish people demand Pilate to execute Jesus or commit an act of betrayal to Caesar, Pilate handed Jesus over to be executed. However, the Pontius Pilate from the historical accounts was very different. He would not have cringed at the thought of executing a poor Jewish peasant and he certainly would not have been intimidated by the Jewish leaders and Pharisees from the gospel, who he openly defied and insulted for entertainment and humiliation on other occasions.

The next chapter, “Luke and John Claim Israel’s Legacy: The Split Widens,” showed how these gospels portrayed the further division between the Jews and the Christians. Luke, who was the sole Gentile author of the gospel writers, hoped to show that the Jews had lost their covenant with God, and that Gentiles who accept Jesus could become God’s chosen people.⁷⁰⁷ Pagels brought attention to the fact that in Luke “the scribes and Pharisees begin to plot against Jesus, eyeing him suspiciously, looking for an opportunity to make an accusation against him.”⁷⁰⁸ Then Satan “enters” Judas, who later personifies the Jewish people as a whole and initiates the betrayal of Jesus by his own people.⁷⁰⁹

John’s Gospel was the last one to be written, and thus depicts the split between Judaism and Christianity as permanent and accepted. John went as far as to show the devil working in the form of Judas, Jewish authorities, and the Jewish people in general. There was not a singular “Satan” working alone in John’s portrayal of the passion. In essence, Satan had “diminished” in John’s gospel, and the Jewish people had assumed his adversarial role.

The next chapter is called “Satan’s Earthly Kingdom: Christians Against Pagans.” Though Christianity’s most oppressive opponents early on were the Jewish authorities, the pagan Roman Empire took the place of the Jews in turns of leading the persecution. The Roman Empire was actually moderately tolerant of other religions, as long as they continued to sacrifice to the Roman gods and the emperor. Jews were exempt from having to sacrifice to the emperor because they were an ancient religion, and they could instead sacrifice to their God for the benefit of the emperor. Christians were no longer Jews at this point, but they still refused to sacrifice to the emperor; for this reason, the empire saw them as seditious, and sporadically persecuted them. To consolidate from the heavy persecution, Christians claimed that the pagans waging war against them were agents of Satan. Justin Martyr, one of the first Romans to become Christian, explained how this occurred. “[For Justin], Every god and spirit he had ever known, including Apollo, Aphrodite, and Zeus, whom he had worshiped since childhood, he now perceived as allies of Satan...”⁷¹⁰ Since the pagan people were worshiping these demons, they themselves were becoming demonic, and that is why they were so quick to strike at the followers of the true God.

⁷⁰⁶ Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, 30.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 91

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

Justin also criticized the Roman love for philosophy in a search for truth about the world because they are were being held by demons and would never find the truth until they found God.⁷¹¹

The next chapter, “The Demon Within: Demonizing the Heretics,” showed how proto-orthodox Christians attacked heretics, and the main reason for this was a need for uniformity. At this time, Christians still faced persecution. For this reason, many people felt the Christian community should try to stay together, and if they began to become splintered they would not survive persecution. To stay united they would need some kind of hierarchy and apostolic succession to emerge. However, many Gnostic Christians opposed this because they felt they were more spiritually enlightened than the bishops were.⁷¹² Because of this, many gnostics began distancing themselves from the main congregation and having their own meetings. The bishops realized this weakened the collective strength of the Church and condemned it as the work of Satan. Irenaeus of Lyons heavily attacked gnostics, saying Gnostic Christians “use the name of Christ Jesus only as a kind of lure in order to teach doctrines inspired by Satan.”⁷¹³ Much like how Jesus’s most dangerous enemies were those closest to him, the Church Fathers claimed the biggest threat to Christianity were the Gnostic Christians who seemed to be so similar.

Overall, this book was very well written and Pagels stuck to her thesis throughout. More importantly, she was able to find writing from early Church Fathers and converts to the faith that displayed their mentality on pagans, heretics, and Jews. One thing Pagels could have expanded upon was her comment in the conclusion on how Muslims are currently being demonized by the Christian population. She threw it out there but did not elaborate fully and her thesis would have been greatly strengthened if she could have illustrated evidence of a Christian denouncement of Muslims as “Agents of Satan.” However, this is just a minor complaint, and the book as a whole was a well-researched and extremely informative work.

⁷¹¹ Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, 130.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*, 152.

⁷¹³ *Ibid.*, 155.