



STATEMENT DS-052

BOOK REVIEW

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: The Origin of Satan

by Elaine Pagels

Professor Elaine Pagels, well-known for her contributions to the study of early Christian-era Gnostic movements and documents, has produced a gracefully written study of the development and utilization of one of the prominent figures of Christian literature and theology — "the Adversary," the Diabolos, or Satan. As she indicates in her introduction, her interest in the Prince of Darkness was motivated by a desire to demonstrate how Christians have developed and utilized this mysterious figure to identify their opponents, "whether Jews, pagans, or heretics, with forces of evil, and so with Satan" (p. xxiii).

The chapter headings of her six chapters suggest the trend of her thinking: 1, "The Gospel of Mark and the Jewish War"; 2, "The Social History of Satan: from the Hebrew Bible to the Pharisees"; 3, "Matthew's Campaign against the Pharisees: Deploying the Devil"; 4, "Luke and John Claim Israel's Legacy: The Split Widens"; 5, "Satan's Earthly Kingdom: Christians against Pagans"; 6, "The Enemy Within: Demonizing the Heretics."

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the role of Jewish historian and Roman collaborator Flavius Josephus, who recorded the events of the Jewish Wars of A.D. 66-73.¹ In Pagels's view, the war poisoned the relationship between the Jews and Jewish converts to Christianity and gave those converts the idea of identifying personal human adversaries — in this case, the other Jews — as servants of Satan. For this reason, it is necessary for Pagels to assume that all four Gospels are later than the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), a dating accepted by many but far from all New Testament scholars. The Gospels present the work of the historic Jesus as a conflict between God and Satan, one that came to a preliminary climax on Calvary. If either a Gospel or the putative Q source — which contains many of the references to Satan — is earlier than A.D. 70, it spoils her case.

Pagels looks on the Scriptures as nothing more than human products. She does not explicitly deny the concept of divine inspiration; she simply ignores it. Mark's gospel is not history, but is rather eschatological prophecy. The Evangelists' preoccupation — and indeed that of Jesus Himself — with supernatural beings such as angels and demons, and especially the Devil, is most important. "The subject of cosmic war [between God and Satan] serves primarily to interpret human relationships...For many readers of the gospels ever since the first century, the thematic opposition between God's spirit and Satan has vindicated Jesus' followers and demonized their enemies" (13).

In this way the first chapter previews the thesis of the book. The followers of Jesus, beginning with the Evangelists themselves, adopted the folk traditions that tell of Satan and other personal evil powers to denigrate their opponents and to justify hostility to — and later, mistreatment of — such opponents. In Pagels's view this is the source of Christian anti-Semitism. "The New Testament gospels almost never identify Satan with the Romans [Gentiles], but they consistently associated him with Jesus' Jewish enemies..." (13).

In chapter 2 Pagels notes that Israel and the Jews also deprecated their adversaries. Anthropologists have observed that most of the peoples of the world define two pairs of opposites — human/not human and we/they. The Jews, she maintains, shared this common human failing. Nevertheless, universalistic notes are found "where one might least

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expect it," for example in God's election of Abraham, with the promise, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3, p. 37). She describes Moses, although a Hebrew by birth, as "the quintessential alien" because he was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and raised as an Egyptian. Supposedly Judaism, unlike Christianity, was friendly to outsiders. She can say this only by disregarding Jesus' words in the Great Commission to "make disciples of every nation" (Matt. 28:18).

Satan originally appears in the Jewish Scriptures as one of the *bene elohim* or sons of God, she maintains, not at first an adversary but one of God's agents. Gradually, however, as the Jews suffered from foreign invaders and experienced internal conflicts, the figure of Satan was utilized to justify the animosity of "us" against "them." Thus there arose a religious elitism or exclusivism that went beyond the familiar designation of the Jewish nation as the Chosen People, denigrating those outside as servants or children of Satan. The enthusiastic separatist sect, the Essenes, regarded themselves as "Israel at its best." Luke picked up this theme, seeing Jesus' followers as the only genuine Israelites. John intensified the animosity, labeling the adversaries of Jesus simply "the Jews."

In chapter 3, Pagels draws on her extensive knowledge of extracanonical, apocryphal, and frequently heretical early Christian-era literature to argue that there was considerable disagreement among the early Christians about what Jesus actually taught. Even though orthodox Christians believed there was a "faith once committed to the saints" (Jude 3) and rejected divergent views, Pagels saw the early Christian movement as richly diverse. From her perspective, the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas preceded even "the earliest [canonical] Gospel," Mark, by 10 years (69) and is thus by implication a better source than Mark or any of the other Evangelists. Her late dating of the canonical Gospels, beginning with Mark in A.D. 70 and ending with John in about A.D. 100, permits the inference that the Christian faith is entirely explicable in terms of social and cultural dynamics — war, the Roman conquest, Christian-Jewish tensions, and other factors.

The fact is that the early church was well aware of the variant traditions Pagels refers to and rejected them, excluding them from the *kanon tes alethias* — the "rule of truth." While Pagels contends that the charge of demonic influences was trumped up so that the church could reject them, the church claimed that it rejected them because they *actually were* demonic fabrications. Of course, one can only accept this ecclesiastical logic if one is willing to believe, like Jesus and the apostles, that demonic powers exist. But Pagels's interpretation begs the question. She explains the whole tradition of Satan, his wives, works, and coworkers as the product of the religious imagination, pressed into service for polemical ends. There is no doubt that it was used for polemical ends, but what she completely fails to ask is whether there was and is any such thing as a personal evil Power behind the tradition.

Pagel's affirms that Matthew's gospel represents the stage of early Christianity when congregations still included many Jews; the satanic imagery helped to distinguish the new messianic fellowships from the Jewish followers of the Pharisees. She regards Luke and John — which she dates quite late — as intensifying the "demonization" of adversaries. John makes "the Jews" into a symbol of "all evil," a practice we would find quite horrid "if an influential author today made women, or for that matter Muslims or homosexuals, the 'symbol of all evil'" (104-105). That John actually "demonizes" the Jews as such is asserted but not demonstrated.

In the fourth chapter, Pagels presses the argument that the Gospel writers sought to incriminate the Jews and exonerate the Romans for the judicial murder of their Lord. They depict the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, as a weak, vacillating figure who allowed himself to be manipulated by Jewish agitators. Contemporary Roman and Jewish sources describe a different kind of man — cruel, arbitrary, and contemptuous of the Jews and their sensitivities. He was not likely to have scruples about killing a potential Jewish troublemaker, or in any case to yield to Jewish pressure. Of course, it is impossible to affirm or deny the report that Pilate succumbed to the pressure of the Jewish hierarchy and the mob that it stirred up if one rejects the historical accuracy of the Gospels, since there are no other detailed records of the event. A fact that Pagels fails to mention is that Pilate's position was insecure because his patron — Sejanus, the commander of the Praetorian Guard — was implicated in a conspiracy and executed. Pilate certainly did not want it reported back to Rome that he was "no friend of Caesar." Additionally, describing a high Roman official as weak and indecisive would have hardly endeared the Gospel writers to the Roman authorities.

After the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Christian movement came under increasing pressure from the Roman government. (As long as the Christians were regarded as a Jewish sect, they enjoyed official toleration.) According to Pagels, growing opposition from Roman officialdom caused the early Christians to shift their identification of Satan from the Jews to the Romans.

In chapter 5 Pagels describes two noted second-century thinkers — Justin Martyr, the first philosopher to become a Christian, and Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher-emperor under whom Justin became a martyr. Abandoning the "beauty" of traditional pagan piety, Justin came to perceive the various gods, including Apollo, Aphrodite, and Zeus, "as allies of Satan — despite the brilliant panoply of their public processions, their thousands of temples and glittering priesthoods, despite the fact that they were worshipped by the emperor himself, who served in person as their *pontifex maximus*. Born again, Justin saw the universe of spiritual energies, which pious pagan philosophers called *daimones*, as, in his words, 'foul daimones'" (120).

Justin was naturally shocked at the criminalization of Christians by the two "most enlightened emperors," Antoninus Pius and his "son," Marcus Aurelius. (The Christians "demonized" their adversaries, but for some centuries were not in a position to persecute and execute them. To Pagels this demonization appears more reprehensible than the kind of criminalization the emperors followed up with execution.)

Justin Martyr is presented as admirable for the strength of his convictions and his willingness to suffer for them, but nevertheless he suffers by comparison with the sympathetically portrayed Marcus Aurelius, who "probably would have detested Justin's 'Christian philosophy' as obscenely grandiose — the opposite of what Marcus regarded as the hard-won truths he himself had gained from philosophy" (126). Marcus was a "conservative," whereas Christians "did teach converts not only that the bonds of family, society, and nation are not sacred, but that they are diabolic encumbrances designed to enslave people to 'Roman customs,' that is, to demons" (143). Christians, in other words, deserved to be criminalized as radical troublemakers.

In the next century, the great Christian thinker Origen "undermined religious sanction for the state" and suffered for his faith (146), while the Roman historian Celsus warned of the "insanity" that caused Christians to offend the emperor and potentially to ruin the empire. Additionally, Christians were so otherworldly that they often renounced commercial transactions and sexual activity, even — in the case of Origen — resorting to self-castration.

In chapter 6 we read of Christians gradually acquiring power as Christianity became the religion of the empire and its European successor-states. These Christians used the concept of Satan to demonize their adversaries and to treat them with the utmost severity.

Pagels cites a variety of extracanonical and heretical sources as evidence that Christianity was extremely diverse, not to say incoherent, before it ultimately settled down into the conformity of orthodoxy. During this period, those ultimately regarded as heretics were moderate by comparison with the orthodox, not creating a radical dichotomy between good and evil; the orthodox regularly saw themselves as representing radical goodness and their opponents as the spawn of Satan.

There were, of course, exceptions. Even Matthew recorded the words "Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:34), which were "attributed to Jesus." After this concession, Pagels concludes: "For the most part, however, Christians have taught — and acted upon — the belief that their enemies are evil and beyond redemption" (184).

Even a relatively evenhanded presentation of the contents of *The Origin of Satan* reveals that Pagels, although an Episcopalian, treats Jesus — whom she does not designate with His messianic title, Christ — and His movement as simply a sociological phenomenon. She never uses any language suggestive of personal faith: Jesus' death was "ignominious" (it was); that it was intended and perceived as a vicarious atoning sacrifice is never mentioned. Historical events, such as the Jewish War, play a decisive role in her analysis, not least because she simply presupposes the unfounded dating of the Gospels as essentially postwar. The Evangelists had to blame the death of Jesus — a conflict with Satan — on the Jews rather than on the Romans, and to identify them with Satan. The Romans subsequently also suffered this identification. The Resurrection — arguably a supremely important historical event — goes unmentioned, as though it had not happened.

Despite Pagels's well-known academic eminence, there are great gaps in her scholarship. Her discussion of the sociological origins of the Satan figure makes no mention of Persian dualism and apocalypticism, which most scholars think made a far larger contribution than the Jewish materials she cites. There are several remarkable historical inaccuracies. The Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem is misdated by a century (43: ca. 687 instead of ca. 586 B.C.). St. Francis of Assisi is misdated by two centuries (184: 15th century instead of the 13th). Marcus Aurelius is frequently described as the son of Antoninus Pius, as though he were the elder emperor's offspring, trained by his "father" for the imperial role (126), whereas actually Marcus was *adopted* by Antoninus for that purpose.

Since the thesis of *The Origin of Satan* is plausible only if it is historically reliable, such identifiable errors do arouse a measure of skepticism. More serious, however, is Pagels's evident total suspension of belief, if not actual unbelief, and her disregard of fundamental factors in the rise of Christianity. To discuss the rise of Christianity without reference to the apostles' faith inevitably gives a distorted picture. Most significant is her tacit denial that a supernatural power of evil exists; it is only a sociological construction. Inasmuch as she thinks Jesus and His disciples conceived His ministry and mission precisely as a battle with such a power, one must conclude that she thinks Him and them misguided.

This book is a remarkable *tour de force*. In view of its unexpressed and highly debatable presuppositions, its substantial omissions, its occasional surprising errors, and its effective unbelief in the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, it seems rather like a *tour de farce*.

— *Reviewed by Harold O. J. Brown*

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NOTES

¹Like many other contemporary scholars, Pagels uses the politically correct designations C.E. and B.C.E. (Common Era and Before the Common Era) and the term "the Hebrew Bible" instead of A.D., B.C., and the Old Testament. She does this perhaps only as a concession to current trends, or perhaps this is indicative of a conviction that the origin of the Christian religion is fully explicable in terms of social dynamics and was not influenced by any supernatural influence, whether divine or demonic.