



Satan: The Early Christian Tradition

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Undeniably, evil exists in our world; we ourselves commit evil acts. How can one account for evil's ageless presence, its attraction, and its fruits? The question is one that Jeffrey Burton Russell addresses in his history of the concept of the Devil the personification of evil itself. In the predecessor to this book, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, Russell traced the idea of the Devil in comparative religions and examined its development in Western thought through ancient Hebrew religion and the New Testament. This volume follows its course over the first five centuries of the Christian era.

Like most theological problems, the question of evil was largely ignored by the primitive Christian community. The later Christian thinkers who wrestled with it for many centuries were faced with a seemingly irreconcilable paradox: If God is benevolent and omnipotent, why does He permit evil? How, on the other hand, can God be all-powerful if one adopts a dualist stance, and posits two divine forces, one good and one evil?

Drawing upon a rich variety of literary sources as well as upon the visual arts, Russell discusses the apostolic fathers, the apologetic fathers, and the Gnostics. He goes on to treat the thought of Irenaeus and Tertullian, and to describe the diabolology of the Alexandrian fathers, Clement and Origen, as well as the dualist tendencies in Lactantius and in the monastic fathers. Finally he addresses the syntheses of the fifth century, especially that of Augustine, whose view of the Devil has been widely accepted in the entire Christian community ever since.

Satan is both a revealing study of the compelling figure of the Devil and an imaginative and persuasive inquiry into the forces that shape a concept and ensure its survival."

Satan: The Early Christian Tradition Details

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From Reader Review Satan: The Early Christian Tradition for online ebook

Joseph F. says

Part 2 of Russell's monumental study of history's baddest dude. The author gives us the many opinions that the early church fathers had of who Satan was, when and why he fell from grace, and the problems of reconciling evil with the existence of a loving God. The book is heavy on philosophy and history as well as theology, so be prepared for a cerebral workout. I did not know so much could be written about Satan in such a small slice of history (1st to 6th Centuries AD).

But he is more complicated than one thinks. The bible does not give a consistent seamless story of his genesis, so it was up to the church fathers to work out the details. Starting with the apostolic writers and ending with Augustine, we are treated with many issues dealing with monism, dualism, heresies, free will vs. predestination, even the theory of the possible redemption of Satan himself! Happy reading.

Mehmet Dönmez says

4 kitapl? bir serinin ikinci kitab?, erken Hristiyanl?k zamanlar?nda ?eytan kavram?na nas?l bak?ld???n? irdeliyor. Konusu ve konsepti son derece cazip olsa da, gerek dilinin a??rl???, gerek Hristiyan ekastolojisine olan göndermeleri itibar?yla benim çok zor okudu?um ve yaz?lanlar?n ço?unu anlamad???m bir eser oldu.

Kitab?n temel tart??ma eksenlerinden baz?lar?n?n, örne?in Hristiyanl?kta kötülü?ün kayna?? (yani kötülük Tanr?n?n bünyesinde mi vard?r, yoksa ondan ba??ms?z olarak m? yarat?lm??t?r), özgür iradenin olup olmad???, ?eytan?n melek mi cin mi oldu?u gibi ihtilaflar kelamda da popüler konular olmas? merak uyand?r?c?yken; do?rudan Hristiyan dogmas?n?n parças? olan ilk apostle'lar?n ?eytan yorumu, Hz. ?sa'n?n ?eytanla çat??mas? gibi konular da ilgi çekiciydi.

Yine de diyorum ki, daha anla??l?r bir tercümeyle ve daha basit bir dille yaz?lsayd? da hem okurken daha çok zevk alsayd?m, hem de bu kitap elimde bu kadar sürünmeseydi

Steven says

Jeffrey Burton Russell is the author of (at least) five books on Satan, mostly biographies, so I think it's safe to say that we need to give the devil his due, he knows his Lucifer. This particular volume is a study of the Christian Devil up to the time of St. Augustine. Your enjoyment of the book depends on how much detail you want to know about what people thought of Satan during that time period. I won't say that you'll have a devil of a good time, but at least there won't be hell to pay.

A bit more seriously, this is an excellent book for those interested in the early Christian views of Satan and an explanation of evil in the early Church.

Steve Wiggins says

The second member of a non-fiction trilogy by Jeffrey Burton Russell, this book picks up where his previous one (*The Devil*) leaves off. As the author states clearly, his purpose is to trace the idea of evil in western culture. Since the Devil is a character with shadowy beginnings, it makes sense to trace the idea chronologically. His first book on the topic was excellent. This one, while good, became very theological in nature and stayed mostly in the fifth century.

There can be no doubt that this time period was formative for Christian beliefs. Early church writers and councils discussed theology endlessly, as if the supernatural can be categorized. The discussions, although they contain the early steps of the scientific method, are tedious and depend on presuppositions. The patristic period was obsessed with getting the theology right and called those who believed differently heretics. Ironically, many of those who were most influential were later labeled heretics as well (Tertullian and Origen come to mind). It is no surprise that Augustine stands out as one of the heavyweights here. He has unduly influenced Christian thought for centuries, partially because he wrote so much.

My blog post on the book—*Sects and Violence in the Ancient World*—summarizes my thoughts on the religious angle, but the real disappointment here is not the fault of the author. The concept itself went from being mythological and mystical to being one where certain views of orthodoxy came to overshadow the thinking of the average person. Religion got into the hands of experts and subsequently suffered the consequences.

In the history of religions approach, emphasis has turned toward what the average person believed. This is difficult to trace in ancient times since the average person did not read or write. Their ideas, however, more easily crept into written accounts. By Late Antiquity the theological experts had in some sense become snobs. They write with an authority and assurance that modern theologians (except those on the extremes) would eschew. A great deal of effort was spent on explaining God so that Satan might be contrasted with him.

This is a good book, but it requires the reader to wade through a deep puddle of theological thinking. It won't stop me from reading the last book in the series, but I will take a good break between them.

Nick says

Jeffery Burton Russell's "Satan: The Early Christian Tradition" is, like Elaine Pagels' later "The Origin of Satan", in part a meditation on the nature of evil, using the various early Christian schools as a framework. While Pagels focused largely but not exclusively on the Gospels, Russell concerns himself with the early writers, famous and forgotten, concluding with Augustine. These writers faced the problem of developing the intellectual framework of their still-developing faith, and they laid hands on whatever tradition was available to them, the old Jewish stories--the serpent in the garden, the "adversary" of Job, the stories of rebellious and falling angels, and other less well-known tales--along with the eternal opposition of good and evil inherited from Zoroastrianism by way of Mani and even the fantastic cosmologies of the Neo-Platonists. The essential problem that Russell examines is how to explain the existence of evil in a world created by a just deity--especially if one believes, as many of the early Christian writers did, that the deity is omniscient and omnipotent. Their efforts to resolve that issue, along with the chronological problems presented by the identification of Satan with the serpent in the garden (just exactly when did that rebellion of the angels take place, and what is its implication for Adam and Eve's expulsion?), led them to some amazing contortions. Then there is the question of what free will is the presence of a deity who knows what will happen. (Note the solution proposed by many denominations, which is that God intends the faithful of a particular church to

either obtain money and health). Augustine himself, in Russell's view seems to have taken a variety of positions on these issues at different times in his career; no doubt consistency was difficult for a highly productive writer to achieve in an age when books were written and copied by hand. But in the end, the problem, as Russell freely admits, is not solvable (at least by humans) given the assumptions made by these writers. Implicit in all of this is the very human tendency to think of one's own group as virtuous and its opponents as evil; Russell himself mentions the endless nastiness caused by the association of evil with dark colors and ugliness. Perhaps it is the concept of evil that needs some serious thought; certainly, we can do better than those who expended so much energy and intellect on transforming some old Jewish tales into the winged, horned, foul-smelling beast who, for example, eternally chews on Cassius, Brutus and Judas in Dante's *Commedia*. Certainly, we must question any tradition capable of turning a Jewish concept into something that, in the Middle Ages, was used to persecute them.

Paul says

In this second book in the series that began with *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, Jeffrey Burton Russell picks up the story of the Devil where the New Testament left it and carries it on to the time of St. Augustine in the 5th century.

The "story" he's telling is actually that of the development of the "concept" of the Devil, a term that he is at pains to distinguish from that of "idea". For Russell, while an idea "is intellectual and closely defined, a concept includes the affective as well as the analytical and has hazier boundaries". He thinks that a concept changes over time, remaining current and valid only so long as people find it useful. A concept may or may not correspond to something in objective reality.

I'm not sure that I accept Russell's distinction between ideas and concepts, but he does make clear how he uses these terms, so I was fine with it in reading the book. One interesting point is that Russell himself believes in the Devil, in Satan, as a really existing person who is responsible for the evil in the universe. This means that the author has some serious skin in the game of this subject, and it more than explains why he has devoted at least four volumes to examining the history of Satan. For if there really *is* such a being as Satan, surely there could be few facts as important in all our lives—and our post-lives.

But Russell doesn't spend time trying to convince the reader of Satan's existence. He merely leaves us with the question of why people are gassed to death in concentration camps and why children are napalmed. If we believe in God even hypothetically, then we've got a problem explaining those things. Instead, Russell traces those historical figures who have been the most influential in fleshing out our image of Satan, sketching in their diabolology and examining the logical and doctrinal problems raised by their positions. For any picture of Satan creates logical problems. As God came to be seen as all-good, then the cause of cosmic evil had to be outsourced. That role went to Satan. But, as Russell observes, blaming Satan for the existence of evil doesn't really work, because God created Satan, and presumably Satan cannot operate without God's permission or acquiescence. If the universe is truly run by God, then the buck stops with him, no matter how many intermediaries there may be in the cosmic bureaucracy.

The church fathers and their theological successors all grappled with the problem in various ways. Russell outlines the teachings on Satan of the apostolic fathers, the so-called apologetic fathers who succeeded them, Irenaeus, Tertullian, the scholars of Alexandria, the monks of the desert, and finally the great theologian Augustine. These thinkers shifted back and forth with questions about whether Satan was the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and if not what their relationship was; whether Satan was involved with the story of the

Watchers, an early account of angels falling to Earth; whether demons are in fact fallen angels; when Satan fell; what sin caused him to fall; and so on. As orthodoxy was gradually defined, some of these thinkers would find themselves anathematized, the upstanding Christian of today becoming the heretic of tomorrow.

Augustine, fighting off educated pagans and heretics, developed the most comprehensive and systematic theology, including an account of Satan. As Neil Forsyth says in his book *The Old Enemy*, Augustine finally created a coherent Christian theology that was able to withstand the attacks of critics from all sides, and it was built around the ancient myth of the enemy of the king of the gods. But Augustine was still not able to make it entirely consistent, and he wavered between a free-will and a predestinarian view of the human spirit. The question remains unresolved today.

Even though I'm very interested in this topic material, I find Russell's style dry and lacking in humor. Evil is a grim topic, but that doesn't mean the prose needs to be grim. But he doesn't flinch from the difficulties and contradictions in the idea, and lays out the various logical issues clearly and comprehensively. Even though I found the reading a bit tough my copy of the book is now heavily highlighted.

Evil acts occur all the time; we perpetrate them ourselves. Why? It's a really good, important question, and for millions of people right up to the present day the answer has a name: Satan. And if he isn't real, then he's doing a damn good job for someone who doesn't exist.

Walt says

Focusing largely on late Medieval European interpretations, this is a good book describing the literary development of Satan from obscure Zoroastrian Persia to the present day.

Äsruþr Cyneapsson says

As a more focussed work, the second part of Russell's four-part series on the history of the concept known as 'the Devil' lacks the impressive breath of the first-part. Here, Russell presents an in-depth study into the development of ideas of evil within the early Christian church. The analysis of the developments between monist and dualist theologies is impressive. There is a large inflection of Russell's own views on the nature of evil that detract from an otherwise excellent work and cost it one-star in the rating.

Burcu says

Kitabindeğerlendirmesi icin, bkz.
<https://wanderlustpress.net/2015/06/0...>

Adam Marquez says

I just picked this book up again after years. I have read excerpts in the past. I decided to sit down with it and plow through. I really appreciate what Jeffrey Burton Russell contributes to theology and philosophy. He is

really good about taking a survey of the historical development of a concept and giving it to his readers in a way that is thorough, and yet approachable, deep, but not daunting. *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition*, is no exception. An invaluable perspective.

Jeff McCormack says

In Russell's first volume, *The Devil: Personifications of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, he dealt with an era of time that was much more diverse, covering ancient history of all kinds of religious views. This time around, he sticks with Christian history, and focuses on only the first few hundred years of church history. A much easier read than the first volume, and covering an era already somewhat familiar to me, this volume was easier to digest overall.

I found it very interesting to read some of the understandings held by the early monks, and the ways they believed and dealt with evil, demons and possession. It revealed a glimpse into where some of the traditions of the Roman Catholic church started from (i.e. sign of the cross, views on baptism).

This volume ultimately comes out to be a large discussion on the problem of evil, and how they sought to explain it. It seems the most common explanation they have used to explain the existence of it was that it was tied to man's free will. It was not until Augustine comes on the scene that this view changes to more of a mix between free will and predestination. but the struggle in understanding has never really been exhausted or satisfactorily answered for some. Good stuff.

Dan Bee says

An interesting and informative look at the concept of Evil from a purely historiographical perspective. Good read.

Asiye Dilara Han says

tek kusuru kitabin hemen hemen ilk otuz sayfasinda serinin ilk kitabinda sorgulanan kisimlarin genis bir ozetinin gecilmesi. yine de bilgi acisindan oldukca doyurucuydu elbette. kotulugu insanin adalet terazisinde bir nevi mesrulastiran -seytan tarafından kandirilma aciklamasi vicdani oldukca rahatlatan bir seydir insan icin- seytan mitlerinin farkli dinler ve kulturlerde sayisiz sekilde ele alinmasi ne kadar mide bulandirici yaratiklar oldugumuzu bir kez daha hatırlatsa da, bu kadar zengin bir tarih yaratilmasina neden oldugu icin dogamiza mutesekkirim de aslinda. tabii dogamiz degil yalnızca bu mitlere gerek duyan, tanri'nin "iyiligin" koruma gudusu de dahil bu sebeplere, daha baskin olarak ustelik. bir seytan, yok seytan, ve binlerce mit. muhtesem bir hayal gucu, muhtesem bir signak ve muhtesem bir birikim. kotulugun hayatimizdaki ve icimizdeki yerine, ayni zamanda da bu rengarenk -hmm, kirmizi ve siyah agirlikli- seytan mitlerine merak duyan herkes eminim bu seriyi cok sevecektir. uzun zamandir serinin kabalci baskisi yoktu ancak panama yayincilik tekrar basiyor -ve emin degilim ama sanirim cevirisi yeniden yapiliyor- ilk uc kitap basilmis durumda. meraklilarina da mujdeler olsun buradan. en kisa zamanda devam edecegim serkiye. 9/10
