



Review of T. J. Wray and Gregory Mobley's *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots*
Oakhurst Baptist Church Library Committee
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When my daughter, Kathleen St. John, was four she visited a playmate who was digging a hole in her backyard. Kathy vigorously joined in until the little girl screamed in terror, "Stop. Stop. The Devil's down there." The young girl wasn't kidding. She believed that under a few more shovels of dirt crouched a huge red, horned, hairy, goat footed, pitchfork-trident toting demon who was waiting to spear little girls and drag them into a sulfurous Hell. That was Kathy's first introduction to the Devil a.k.a. Satan. The co-authors begin this book with their own youthful terror stories. They, like Kathy, and the rest of us at Oakhurst, grew up with the scary image of Satan permeating our language, symbols, movies, literature, history books, comic books, religious traditions, and world views. These two writers explain how this all came about.

The Two Authors

T. (Tina) J. Wray, a Catholic, is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Salve Regina University, a Catholic university in Rhode Island. Dr. Wray received her D.Min. from Andover-Newton Theological School at Newton Centre, MA. Gregory Mobley, an American Baptist minister, is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Andover Newton Theological School. He holds the following degrees: a M.Div., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; a Th.M., Harvard Divinity School; and a Ph.D., Harvard University. These are scholars indeed.

The Book

This is not a philosophical study of the nature of evil in case that's what you're seeking. This short book will also disappoint any reader seeking the dense (perhaps dry) scholarship of, say, Elaine Pagels' *The Origin of Satan*, one of the authors' many outstanding sources. *The Birth of Satan* is a survey course, written at the level of Religion 101, aimed at Christian and Jew alike, and with the underlying assumption that we readers don't know much about the history of the New Testament and probably even less about the Hebrew Bible. That assumption maps with my own small boundaries of biblical knowledge—and I admit gasping in astonishment at page after page. You may thrill at the new information, too, providing that you are a neophyte in the subject and that you are not a fundamentalist opposed to historical criticism. Wray and Mobley show us, verse by verse, how Satan began as the Hebrew "hassatan," a "low-level angelic figure doing the bidding of God and how this lackey evolved over the centuries into Mega-Satan. The survey goes on to briefly explore "The World of the Ancient Near East," "The Authorship of the Bible," "Differences between the Jewish and Christian Bibles," "The Nature of God in the Hebrew Bible," "Repellent Aspects of Yhwh," "Satan

in the Hebrew Bible,” “Satan between the Testaments,” “Satan in the New Testament,” and, finally, “Hell.” Dozens of other short topics are subsumed under these headings. Here’s a few items of current scholarship to ponder:

- The serpent in the Garden of Eden was not Satan, but rather, a cunning animal.
- Isaiah 14: 12-15 refers not to Satan at all—but to a Babylonian king.
- The development of the Hebrew Satan was influenced by Zoroastrian dualism.
- The God of the Bible is “a moving target and impossible to pin down.”
- Yhwh, the God of the Hebrew Bible, “confounds and surprises, and repels and attracts.”
- The Devil is not “fully formed” until the New Testament, and especially in Revelations.

In summary, the authors teach us, with the help with an explosion of recent scholarship, how the Hebrews, over many hundreds of years, wrestled with the problem of an Almighty God dishing out pain and death along with love and protection; what solutions these prophets formulated to deal with such a schizophrenic god; how those solutions changed with time and events including exiles and wars; and, finally, how early Christians raised the terror-meter by giving us a Mega-Satan who daily combats God and His People. For some Christians this Mega-Satan is a reality--not a mythic or symbolic entity--living in a hole beneath Kathy’s little playmate’s shovel. This Satan of Revelations, Elaine Pagels laments, delivered “troubling aftershocks”--especially tragic for the Jews--for the next two thousand years, and they’re still rumbling around us with seismic force.

The Critics

This book receives high praise from Harvard Theologian Harvey Cox, retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, Publishers Weekly, and the Times Literary Supplement. Strong praise with a couple of caveats came from a reviewer in The National Catholic Reporter who declared the authors’ style “flippant.” My word choice would be “humorous.” I admit the authors are a little off the funny mark a couple of times in terms of tone, but they have written a splendidly-researched and readable book. In 2005, in an impressive and rare mass marketing event, *The Birth of Satan* was the Main Selection for the Literary Guild, Book-of-the-Month Club, and Quality Paperback Book Club. How many academic theologians, with the exception of Pagels, Karen Armstrong, and Bart Ehrman, can boast of reaching such a wide, diverse, (and probably uninformed) audience?

During recent times, Jerry Falwell compared Hillary Clinton to Lucifer. Hugo Chavez, during a UN speech, called our sitting president a devil. Bush, himself rolled out the phrase “axis of evil.” Iran blusters that the US is Satan. And on and on. So, does *Satan*, used all too fruitfully to label one’s enemies, matter in our post-modern world? “Yes, indeed”, answer Wray and Mobley:

When we dismiss the biblical Satan as a primitive or outdated concept...we run the risk of missing the great lessons the biblical writers were trying to impart. They did not try to explain away evil, for evil was then, and is now, a reality that cannot be denied. And yet, in the final analysis, the Bible reassures us that God is on our side, that the Devil can be resisted, that love wins out in the end.

Borrow this fine book from the Oakhurst Library. Put aside some free time to allow yourself to be entertained, educated, and maybe--just maybe--astonished as well.



By layperson Carolyn Copenhaver. Although approved by the Library Committee, this review does not necessarily reflect the opinions of any other committee member.

Notes

“Fire, Brimstone and Bush’s Religious Rhetoric. Aired on wbor.org (Boston NPR) on March 5, 2003. Guests included Harvey Cox, Harvard Divinity School Professor.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Origin of Satan*. New York:Vintage Books, 2005. Available in paperback.

Wray, T.J. and Mobley, Gregory. *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil’s Biblical Roots*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Available on Amazon in hardback and paperback.