

What the Devil? Prince of Darkness Is Misunderstood, Says UCLA Professor

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He's not the enemy of God, his name really isn't Lucifer and he isn't even evil. And as far as leading Adam and Eve astray, that was a bad rap stemming from a case of mistaken identity.

"There's little or no evidence in the Bible for most of the characteristics and deeds commonly attributed to Satan," insists a UCLA professor with four decades in what he describes as "the devil business."

In "Satan: A Biography" (Cambridge Press), Henry Ansgar Kelly puts forth the most comprehensive case ever made for sympathy for the devil, arguing that the Bible actually provides a kinder, gentler version of the infamous antagonist than typically thought.

"A strict reading of the Bible shows Satan to be less like Darth Vader and more and more like an overzealous prosecutor," said Kelly, a UCLA professor emeritus of English and the former director of the university's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. "He's not so much the proud and angry figure who turns away from God as [he is] a Joseph McCarthy or J. Edgar Hoover. Satan's basic intention is to uncover wrongdoing and treachery, however overzealous and unscrupulous the means. But he's still part of God's administration."

The view runs in opposition to the beliefs held by many Christians and others about key religious concepts like original sin and the nature of good and evil.

"If Satan isn't really in opposition to God and he isn't really evil, then that means the fight between good and evil isn't an authentic part of Christianity," Kelly said. "What I'm saying will be scandalous to some people."

But what would you expect of someone's whose 72nd birthday fell this year on June 6 (06-06-06) and who felt disappointed when nothing momentous occurred that day? Actually, Kelly is no stranger to bubble-bursting. After digging deep into the history of Valentine's Day, he pronounced 20 years ago that he had not only uncovered the holiday's origins but that it should be celebrated in May, not February.

Still, if Kelly could be considered scandalous, it's not because he doesn't know any better. Kelly started his academic career at a Jesuit seminary and was ordained in four of the seven holy orders on the way to the priesthood, including the order of exorcist.

"It was at that time that I started my campaign to rehabilitate the devil — to deliver him from evil, as it were," Kelly said.

"Satan: A Biography" is the culmination of more than 40 years of research into the devil and religious and cultural traditions that have grown up around him. The book is Kelly's third on the topic.

When it comes to the Old Testament, Kelly insists that Satan's profile is considerably lower than commonly thought and significantly less menacing. By Kelly's count, Satan only appears three times in the 45 books that make up the pre-Christian scriptures, the best known being in the Book of Job. On each occasion, Satan is still firmly part of what Kelly calls "God's administration," and his activities are done at the behest of "the Big Guy." But his actions aren't evil so much as consistent with the translation of "devil" and "satan," which literally mean "adversary" in Greek and Hebrew, respectively.

"His job is to test people's virtue and to report their failures," Kelly said.

Perhaps most surprising is not the figure Satan cuts, but his notable absences in the Old Testament. In the Bible's first reference to Lucifer, for instance, Satan doesn't appear — even by implication, Kelly points out. "'Lucifer' is Latin for light-bearer," he said, and was the name given to the morning star, or the planet Venus. Originally written in ancient Hebrew, the passage, on face value, refers to the tyrannical Babylonian king who boasts of his conquests but who is "about to be cast to the ground." Kelly insists there's nothing more to the reference than an apt use of metaphor, but the third-century Christian philosopher Origen of Alexandria argued in his best known work, "On First Things," that the reference applied to Satan.

"Origen says, 'Lucifer is said to have fallen from Heaven,'" Kelly explained. "'This can't refer to a human being, so it must refer to Satan.' Subsequent church fathers found this reasoning persuasive, and so did everyone who followed them."

Ironically, the only mentions of Lucifer in the New Testament — and there are three of them — refer to Jesus, Kelly said. "Jesus is called 'Lucifer' or 'the morning star' because he represents a new beginning."

Another prominent omission in the Old Testament, Kelly said, can be found in Genesis. "Nobody in the Old Testament — or, for that matter, in the New Testament either — ever identifies the serpent of Eden with Satan," Kelly said. "The serpent is just the smartest animal, and he's motivated by envy after being jilted by Adam for Eve."

Kelly traces the correlation of Satan and the serpent to not long after the New Testament was completed. In his "Dialogue With Trypho," the second-century Christian martyr Justin of Samaria first argued that Satan appeared as a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve to disobey God, according

to Kelly.

"This is what I call 'The New Biography,'" Kelly said. "It starts with Justin Martyr, who implicates Satan in the fall of Adam and Eve. By causing Adam and Eve to fall, Satan caused his own fall.

"The second step in this new and phony biography comes with Origen, who said, 'No, Satan's first sin was not deceiving Adam and Eve or refusing to go along with God's plan of creating Adam in his own image,'" Kelly said. "It was to sin out of pride like the morning star, like Lucifer in the passage from Isaiah.' Turning Satan into God's enemy is a two-step process."

Meanwhile, in passages in Luke, Matthew, Corinthians and elsewhere in the New Testament, Satan continues to act as a tester, enforcer and prosecutor but not as God's enemy, Kelly points out.

"Everyone else has said that by the time Satan gets to the New Testament, he is evil, he's an enemy of God, but that's not so," Kelly said. "The whole biblical picture of Satan is that of a bad cop to Yaweh's good cop in the Old Testament, and to Jesus' good cop in the New Testament. Throughout, Satan is someone who works for God."

A scene in the New Testament's Book of Revelation is often cited today as evidence that Satan was the deceiver of Adam and Eve, but the interpretation stems from a fundamental misunderstanding, Kelly argues.

"'That ancient serpent' refers to the giant sea serpent Leviathan, not the garden snake of Eden," he said. "In Revelation, Leviathan has morphed into a dragon, or large serpent, with the seven heads and 10 horns, which is still further removed from the seductive serpent who deceived Eve."

In addition to linking Satan with the Garden of Eden, the passage from Revelation also has been used to prove that Satan fell early on in the Bible, but Kelly insists that is not accurate.

"Satan's ouster from heaven in Revelation is explained as taking place in the future," Kelly said. "In Revelation 12:10, a voice says that 'the accuser of our brothers is cast out, overcome by the testimony of martyrs.' Since there were no martyrs until Christ died, that has to be in the future."

Similarly, a passage in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus reports having seen "Satan fall like lightning," has been misinterpreted, according to Kelly. "Jesus saw the fall in the past because he had the vision the day before he describes it to the apostles," Kelly said. "But Jesus is referring to a future fall [of Satan] from his position as God's attorney general."

This is not to say, however, that Kelly contends that Satan is likeable.

"Jesus doesn't like him, and Paul doesn't like him," Kelly explained. "He represents the old guard in the heavenly bureaucracy, and everyone longs for him to be disbarred as the chief accuser of humankind."

Source: UCLA

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