

The Devil's Rejects: Unveiling the Mythology of Radical Evil

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In the quiet and lonesome countryside of the Midwest, along the outskirts of Collinsville, IL, are a series of bridges and tunnels known by the locals as the Seven Gates of Hell. Would-be explorers and paranormal researchers have confessed some difficulty in locating all seven, but that's probably for the best. Because according to local legends, if you drive through all of the gates in the proper order, passing through the seventh and final gate at the stroke of midnight, you will find yourself plummeting into the depths of Hell, a fate from which there can be no escape—supposing your car even survives the fall.

The problem of evil is a troubling problem indeed, made more troubling still by the fantastic legends that haunt the subject matter. For some, outlandish stories like the Seven Gates of Hell seem childish, and do a disservice to the real tragedy of life, wrought by fire, flood, and murderous rampages. The question of how an all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing God could allow evil to enter into the universe is the question we've gathered here to ask this week, and for some, ruminations on the Devil may seem like a step backward into the dark ages.

But the truth is an elusive target. And I am convinced that it can never be perceived from a single perspective. I therefore believe that any answer to the problem of evil—evil, which takes many forms—must be prepared to answer for its every dark manifestation. Only by combining history's answers to the problem of evil will the truth ever be glimpsed; and even then it will be glimpsed through a glass darkly.

The focus of this talk will be on one of humanity's most timeless responses to evil, that being the case for the existence of a sentient, independent evil—a Dark Lord, if you will—that lies at the root of all chaos, somewhere far beyond the gates of oblivion.

But first, I want to briefly examine two other pieces of the puzzle.

In the seventh book of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine argues for what some call a “Swiss-cheese Theory,” or evil as a gaping hole in the good. Anselm made a similar argument in his attempt to prove the existence of God. He asserted that existence is good, and indeed existence *makes* a thing good. Therefore the greatest being of all—God—must have existence as one of its qualities, and therefore must exist. In a similar fashion, Augustine argues that “whatever is, is good; and evil, the origin of which I was trying to find, is not a substance, because if it were a substance, it would be good.”¹ In other words, what we call evil is no more than a corruption of God's creation—a kind of natural decay, if you will—and has no independent existence of its own.

Others have put forth a different argument, that being the case for human free will. Evil happens, not because God wills it—but because *we* do. And for God to take away our free will, to strip us of our humanity and turn us into robotic automatons, is perhaps the greatest evil of all.

I think we're getting warmer here. We can't deny the potential for evil that lies within us. But for some, this theory is also insufficient. It fails to take into account disease, natural disasters, and other horrors that are beyond our control. Actually, Augustine's argument comes in handy here, for he says that a disease is not a thing in itself, but rather a defect of the flesh—a corruption of the good—and purely accidental.

In other words, disease is an inevitable accident of biology, and not the will of God—or the Devil. And everything else is our fault. And that seems to wrap up the problem of evil pretty nicely.

¹ St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Book VII, Chapter 12

And yet the Devil remains in our imagination, as he always has in some manifestation or other—lurking in the shadows in his red designer suit and angel-skin boots, stroking his nefarious goatee and looking for another soul to steal.

It's important to realize that when we examine such portraits of evil, we're always working in the realm of mythology. And here I use Joseph Campbell's definition of myth—not something that isn't real or true, but rather an attempt to explain the inexplicable, an attempt to understand that which lies beyond human understanding, an attempt to drape the otherworldly in human language. While myths may or may not be "true" in the literal sense, they often express a deeper truth about the universe, or the human condition, or both; which is one argument for why mythologies that arise independently of one another are often so similar.

One final thing to understand before we delve into these myths is the ambivalence of the divine, which will be a recurring theme. In the first volume of his extensive history of the Devil, Jeffery Burton Russell asserts that

*"Seldom in myth is anything seen as wholly evil, for myth is very close to the unconscious, and the unconscious is ambivalent. What comes from the unconscious is basically perception of self, and the self is perceived as both good and evil."*²

It's just as well-said in the Gnostic Gospel of Philip, which states that "In the beginning God created man and woman. Now they create God."³ And if our image of the divine is a projection of ourselves, then it is only natural that it be, to some extent, both good and evil. This ambivalence can be seen in deities like Shiva, Zeus, Ishtar, and even YHWH, all of whom exhibit characteristics of both creation and destruction, embracing life and death with the same arms.

So without further adieu, our first demon today comes from the burning sands of Egypt; I give you the Dark Lord Set.

According to popular legend, Set's brother Osiris—the god of life and death—was living happily with his consort, Isis. Isis was unbearably beautiful, and this made Set unbearably jealous. So one day, long before Cain ever slew Abel, Set murdered and dismembered his brother and scattered his remains along the banks of the Nile, where they were retrieved—and to a limited extent, resurrected—by Isis. Isis then gave birth to the sky god Horus. Now, as you can imagine, Horus grew up with a fierce hatred for his dear uncle Set, who mutilated his father.

Long years passed, until the day had finally come when Horus was old enough, and mad enough, and strong enough to challenge Set for the throne of Egyptian divinity. Their battle was epic, and took a fierce toll on both of them—in my estimation, Set fared worse. He was castrated. But even that couldn't stop him from turning into a violent pig-like animal and tearing out one of Horus's eyes with his teeth. In the end, neither was really victorious.

² Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*. Cornell University Press, London, 1977. Pg. 56.

³ Ed. Barnstone, Willis & Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Bible*. New Seeds Books, Boston, 2003. Pg. 283.

Now, in the earliest periods of Egyptian history, Set was regarded as an ambivalent deity. He was the patron of Lower Egypt, and god of the desert—powerful and fierce, but hardly evil. It was believed that Set and Horus—god of Northern Egypt— balanced one another and lent a sense of harmony to the universe.

But political events upset that harmony, as they so often do. When the Semitic *Hyksos* tribe seized power in Egypt during the 17th century BCE, they nominated Set as chief of their pantheon. But when the balance of power shifted once more, the Egyptians came to revile both the Hyksos and Set, and all that he stood for.

Often, we find that the history of demonology closely parallels political change. When one group of people is in power, their gods reign supreme. But when they are deposed, the new rulers add those gods to their own pantheon of demons. Perhaps the most well-known instance of this is the demonization of Canaanite deities like Asherah and Baal in the Old Testament. The same might be said of Christians twisting pagan symbols of fertility and nature into demonic goat-horns and pentagrams.

If people create God in their own image, then they surely create demons in the image of people they don't like very much.

Around 600 BCE, the prophet Zarathustra began a theological revolution in Persia, taking the first real steps towards radical dualism—and, consequently, radical evil. There is no ambivalence here, but rather two opposite principles: Ahura Mazda, the god of light, and Angra Mainyu, the lord of darkness and evil. Whereas in Egypt Horus and Set are originally two sides of the same coin, Zarathustra's gods are completely independent of one another. This dichotomy is a crucial influence in the history of Western dualism.

In the beginning, Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu—more commonly known as Arhiman—were floating in the Void. Discerning the light that is Ahura Mazda off in the distance, Arhiman wanted to possess it for himself. And in his jealousy he attacked the god of light, who then bound Arhiman in absolute darkness for three-thousand years.

While the dark lord slumbered, Ahura Mazda created the heavens and the Earth. He also emanated seven angels called *Amabraspands*, as well as the prototype human being, the perfect man— a man named Gayomart.

But after three-thousand years catastrophe strikes. Arhiman is awakened by the attentions of the whore-goddess Jeh, and in awakening he regains his terrible power. Gathering that power, he attempts to destroy what Ahura Mazda has made. He crashes through the sky like a missile, and plummets himself deep into the earth, corrupting the soil. Arhiman goes about forging his own creations: scorpions, spiders, rats, a host of demons, and Seven Archfiends to lead them in combat against Ahura Mazda's seven angels. And to draw out the god of light, he kills Gayomart. It's Ahura Mazda's move.

According to his divine wisdom, Ahura Mazda forges the souls of humans yet to be born. Harnessing their collective energies they bind Arhiman in time and space, that he might take physical form and therefore be subject to death. If any of you have ever seen the 80's horror classic *Evil Dead II*, it's basically the same principle.

Meanwhile Gayomart's seed—absorbed by the earth—gives birth to the progenitors of the human race—who, incidentally, bear a striking resemblance to Adam and Eve—and who dwell in a fallen age, an age to be redeemed at the end of time by the final destruction of Arhiman. No ambiguity, no ambivalence. This is good versus evil in its purest form.

While our own ambivalence may give rise to ambivalent gods, as Russell claims, we also want to reject the dark fact of our own potential for evil. So too do we crave a god of pure light, this all-powerful, all-loving, and all-intelligent and unstained God that we worship. But someone has to stand for the evil that's been

done. And so—ironically—it is our lust for absolute purity that gives birth to scapegoat gods like Arhiman, and arms them with black wings and hate.

As I mentioned earlier, Jewish theology and demonology was heavily influenced by other near Eastern cultures. The ancient Israelite YHWH, for instance—the god of the Old Testament—is a portrait of ambivalence, giver of life and death. We may be tempted to imagine YHWH as the almighty and all-loving God that Christianity has embraced, but that isn't quite right. One could argue a strong case that the Christian duality between God and the Devil has more in common with Persian Zoroastrianism than with ancient Judaism.

What that means is that there *is no equivalent* in ancient Judaism to the Christian Devil. There is no dark god responsible for the ills of the world, no single unified force opposed to the God of Abraham and Moses.

But that doesn't mean that Judaism doesn't acknowledge the existence of personified evil.

In fact, the Jewish tradition is rich with demonic mythology, and much of it is hinted at in the Old Testament. Of course Satan appears a couple of times in the Hebrew Bible, notably in the Book of Job, but he's hardly worth mentioning yet. For now, Satan is no more than a mischievous angel—he's occasionally bothersome, but it's always understood that he's in the employ of YHWH. There are worse things than Satan in the shadows of Jewish lore—including YHWH himself. A recent translation of the Kabbalistic *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the Book of Brightness, says this:

*God has an attribute whose name is evil, or the Satan, or Samael. The form of this attribute is a hand. It has numerous messengers, all named evil. Lilith is one—the hand grasping for Adam in his sleep.*⁴

The legend of the succubus Lilith is a disturbing rabbinic tradition, born out of an early medieval text called the *Alphabet of Ben-Sira* and elaborated upon in the Kabbalah, about the Garden of Eden. Before Eve was even a twinkle in God's eye, Adam was living in Eden with another woman—a woman named Lilith. Now, you might say that Adam and Lilith didn't really get along so well. You see, Adam was the kind of guy who thought he could tell his wife what to do. If there were any such thing as pants in Eden, he'd want to be the one wearing them. But that didn't work for Lilith, who was just as headstrong as Adam, and it wasn't long before they got into a particularly nasty fight—a fight over dominance in the bedroom, of all things—and Lilith leaves him for another man.

Well, not a man, exactly. Actually, he's a demon named Asmodeous. Lilith takes up residence in his cave, and nine months later she gives birth to an army of demon-children.

Meanwhile, back at the garden, Adam is understandably upset; his brutish mannerisms and misogynistic tendencies have pushed away the first—and last—woman on earth. So he does what any self-respecting man would—he begs God to get her back. So God dispatches three angels—*Senoy*, *Sansenoy*, and *Semangelof*—to retrieve Lilith. But she'll have none of it. And when the angels threaten to kill one-thousand of her demon-children for every day that she stays away, Lilith vows to stalk the night for all eternity, feasting on the children of Adam.

For centuries, it was believed that nocturnal emissions were in fact the result of Lilith seducing men in their sleep in an attempt to conceive more demons. And women defended their children against her by arming them with amulets inscribed with the names of the three angels who hunted her. You might call Lillith the

⁴ Rosenberg, David. *Dreams of Being Eaten Alive: The Literary Core of the Kabbalah*. Three Rivers Press, New York, 2000. Pg. 131.

original *succubus*, although her origins can be traced to the ancient Mesopotamian *Lilitu* who served much the same function.

She isn't mentioned in the book of Genesis, but she is briefly referenced in Isaiah 34:14: "*Wildcats shall meet with Hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith shall repose, and find a place to rest.*"

The apocryphal *Book of Enoch* also speaks of monsters. It recounts a legend of angels who became enamored with the beauty of human women. One day, about two-hundred of these so-called *Watchers* decided that they were no longer content to watch. They descended to the earth, seducing the daughters of men and teaching them a variety of forbidden arts, ranging from the application of eye-liner to the forging of weapons. But that wasn't the worst of it. The women also got pregnant, and conceived the *Nephilim*—inhuman giants who ate their families out of house and home. When the food ran out, they began devouring humans to sate their unholy appetite. The authors of Genesis reference these creatures in chapter 6:4: "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went into the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown."

In spite of their "renown," many believe that God's true purpose in flooding the earth was to rid the planet of these hungry abominations. As for the Watchers themselves, Enoch tells us that God condemned these fallen angels to a realm of everlasting darkness.

With this tale of fallen angels, we're getting closer to the Devil we all know and hate.

But in the cultural consciousness, Satan's transition from an angel to demon is very gradual and terribly complex. Perhaps rather than trying to explain the organic process, it would be more productive to have a look at the ingredients in this Devil's brew, the numerous influences that gave rise to the horned demon of the Christian tradition, the angel who fell from God's grace.

First, there's the question of blame. Over time, as civilization has become more civilized, people have become increasingly unwilling to bow down before an ambivalent God who commits murder and destroys cities and instigates war. To this day, many Christians have a hard time coming to terms with the bulk of the Old Testament. Some of the Gnostics got rid of it altogether, insisting that YHWH was not God at all, but rather a wicked demiurge named *Yaldaboath* that created this fallen world out of ignorance.

This unwillingness to attribute the violence of the universe to God requires a scapegoat. The Gnostics chose the Demiurge, and orthodox Christians—inspired by a New Testament focus on exorcism and demonic principalities—chose the Devil. And God was forever vindicated. The very notion of this radical dualism—the idea of an independent evil force with enough power to attack God directly—almost definitely owes its origins to the influence of Persian Zoroastrianism. After Persia gained control of Israel in 539 BCE under Cyrus the Great, some exposure to Persian theology was inevitable.

And then there's the character himself, who already existed in a variety of forms. There's Semyaza, one of the leaders of the rebel Watcher angels in the Book of Enoch. There's Baal, the Canaanite fertility god who came to symbolize the infernal worship of alien gods in Israel. There's the snake in the Garden of Eden, and of course there's Satan—"the adversary"—who plagued Job with boils and murdered his family. While originally different entities, they eventually coalesced into a single persona.

All that was left was to give him a face, and there were plenty to choose from. The pagan fertility gods gave him horns; the ancient deities of the sky gave him wings; the early Christian emphasis on hellfire burned his skin red; and the pagans of Greece gave him a pitchfork—a shameless rip-off of Poseidon's trident.

It took more than a few years, but in time the brew came to a boil. And the modern image of the Devil was born. The work of Dante and Milton only fed the fire.

But why should it matter? The idea of the Devil has probably wrought more tragedy than the Devil himself, if indeed he exists at all. Between the persecution of so-called heretics, the slaughter of so-called infidels, and the burning of so-called witches, the damage has been incalculable. And if that's true, then maybe we shouldn't even be discussing this. Maybe any attempt to resurrect the Devil in a rational information age is pure madness.

But I've got a feeling that it isn't.

Yes, we could settle for the two arguments made earlier; Augustine's theory of privation accounts for our unfortunate but inevitable biological decay, and the case for human free will accounts for murder, theft, greed, rape, genocide, and every other conceivable wickedness on God's green earth. Problem solved. But I still feel like something is missing.

Perhaps it isn't the Devil himself that I miss, but rather the idea of him. Joseph Campbell once remarked that if you want to see a world without myth, take a look in the newspaper. If the world somehow seems to have lost its magic, it's because it has lost its mythology. Since the advent of biblical criticism, even our religion isn't safe from the cutting board. And while I'm the first one to encourage my congregation in a metaphorical reading of scripture, I often lament the loss of the magical stories that I learned in Sunday school.

Campbell believed that embracing mythology has given human beings a sense of purpose for thousands of years. Myths give voice to our innermost hopes and fears, and he seemed to think them vital to the human condition. There will always be things in this world that cannot be explained. But mythology can bring us just a little bit closer to understanding, in its own strange way. Myths don't require that we take everything literally—but they do require just a bit of child-like faith.

One could argue for cinema as the mythology of the modern world, and I would agree. Even Campbell acknowledged the mythological significance of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. But in the case of the Devil himself—who, incidentally, directed the *Star Wars* prequels—well, I think that the media has damaged his reputation. He's become the fodder of a hundred bad horror movies that turn the Prince of Darkness into a poorly-rendered, CG-animated monster who is more laughable than frightening. Perhaps that's giving the Devil his due, but personally I think this phenomenon has gone a long way in destroying the credibility of mythological evil in the modern world.

And perhaps that's the whole point of mythological demons: to inspire in us a sense of dread and awe, to remind us that evil—whether in ourselves or in some otherworldly monster—is not a thing to be underestimated; to remind us to take evil seriously. Fans of the *Harry Potter* series will remember that it is considered taboo—even dangerous—to utter the name of the Dark Lord Voldemort aloud. This echoes Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, wherein it is forbidden to recite the language of Mordor, lest the very words draw the gaze of Sauron's evil eye.

This particular brand of fearful awe is alien to us in the modern world. But it keeps us humble in the face of evil, and only mythology can give it back to us. But more importantly, such myths also exist to inspire in us a sense of hope, because they create a scenario in which this darkness might one day be defeated.

I don't know if the Devil is real. But I do know that he is *true*—or at the very least represents an unpleasant truth about the universe, and about ourselves. Furthermore, even if we are prepared to accept that disease is a consequence of biology and that genocide is a consequence of free will, and not the result of demonic machinations, that doesn't mean that demons don't exist. There is sufficient evidence of demonic possession in certain well-documented cases to believe that demons could be real. Indeed, they may dwell among us,

subject to the same corruption—if not of the body, than at least of the soul. Yes, the Devil may be like one of us—not the progenitor of temptation nor the root of all evil, but just another victim of it.

Insofar as evil is concerned, we lack understanding. But evil is the damned offspring of madness, a toxic poison. Mythology allows us to explore it from a safe distance. But if we should get too close—if we ever truly make sense of what is senseless...

...then God help us.