

Satan Chats with Jesus

by: Douglas Lockhart

The abduction of Jesus in the wilderness by Satan, the Church's tendency to demonise what it did not understand, and the curious fact that it was the very best of the Christian communities who deserted the ship of faith for the ship of understanding

The supposition behind all exorcisms is that Satan is at large in the world, that he has the power to visit us, and tempt us. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke Jesus is led into the wilderness by the spirit to fast and be tempted by the devil. He holds to his fast for an amazing forty days, and during this period undergoes the hallucinatory experience of being simultaneously in other locations, such as Jerusalem, and on top of a very high mountain from which he can see all the kingdoms of the world. Afterwards, as one would expect, he is very hungry, and we are told that "angels" minister to his needs.

Now forty days may be a bit of an exaggeration, but there is no good reason to reject this story out of hand, at least not entirely. Fasting was after all part of Nazarene-cum-Nazarite practice, and Jesus, like his brother James, was a Nazarene - James being an ultra strict Nazarene with strong Nazarite-Ebionite affiliations. In fact when referred to as "Jesus of Nazareth", we ought really to read Nazarene; for outside of the New Testament there is no actual record of there ever having been such place as "Nazareth" in Palestine during Jesus' life time. And like anyone who fasts for a long period, perhaps *too* long a period, Jesus seems to have undergone that change of consciousness which attends such rigour. Many others have attested to this change of consciousness which comes through lack of food, and the description given by the Gospel writers accurately reflects the state of mind Jesus could eventually have experienced. The facts as recorded speak for themselves: Jesus was apparently seeing, hearing and experiencing on a quite different level of reality.

Mark's Gospel contains the same wilderness temptation story, but Mark's version is thought to have been written ten or twenty years before that of Matthew's and Luke's, and is therefore considered the source document for this story. So it is interesting to note that Mark ties the whole episode up in a two verses; whereas Matthew and Luke expand Mark's cameo statement into 11 and 13 verses respectively. According to Mark, Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the "spirit" and tempted for 40 days by Satan. When the ordeal is over, he is ministered to by angels. Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, seem to know what Satan actually said to Jesus, and what Jesus' replies were.

How is this possible? Is there another written source we don't know about? Or did Matthew and Luke merely elaborate imaginatively on a theme? Or could it be that what seems to be going on isn't in fact going on at all, and that these extended versions carry another quite different story thinly disguised as a supernatural interaction? Yes, Jesus is in the wilderness, and he has probably fasted, perhaps quite rigorously; but something else could be happening here - Mark makes no mention of a fast. Which allows us to conjecture that Jesus' hallucinatory state may not have been as hallucinatory as later recorded. For he is holding a conversation with someone described initially as "the tempter", then as "the devil", then finally as "Satan", and this conversation, in spite of the detail given, and in spite of the ever expanding view of the original "tempter", is too much in line with later developments in Christian theology to be taken at face value. The conversation between Jesus and this "tempter" is so force, theologically, that we in turn are forced to seek a more conventional explanation for this remarkable wilderness incident.

But before getting to this more conventional approach, certain curious elements of this story should be highlighted, for amidst all the theology certain blunders have been committed worthy of comment. As Marcello Craveri observes in his excellent study *The Life of Jesus*, the dignity of Christianity's founder is compromised by Satan's magical powers - he is whisked here and there without as much as a by-your-leave. Is this really the *Son of God* Satan is dealing with? Is this really God himself somehow extended into matter? Craveri speculates that the temptation

might represent a spiritual conflict in Jesus' life at a critical moment; and then wonders if it may have been delirium due to prolonged fasting; or ecstatic suggestion or hallucination. These are quite valid approaches. But it is an earlier thought on the matter that might be the more accurate, for on considering the temptation story a possible invention of the Evangelists, he says "or whether the name of Satan was employed to represent a human agent under orders to corrupt Jesus."¹ I warm to Craveri's reasoning at this point; the story could indeed reflect a conversation between Jesus and some human agent, a commander of the Zealot forces, for instance, trying to get this wayward Messiah on side. Tempter indeed. But only "diabolical" in his purpose and cunning. In this sense, the idea of spiritual conflict, of a critical moment in Jesus' life, collapses effortlessly into a sensible context.

The give-away, to my way of thinking, is Satan's claim to have the "authority" to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he will worship him - this is much the same as saying that he will make him into a great and powerful king for the simple act of recognition. The promise might of course have been much more circumspect, not the *whole* world, but the whole *known* world. All he has to do is give up his pacifist ways and accept the speaker's view of things - recognise him and join with the militants. For that is what this passage comes down to; how else can Jesus end up as ruler of the known world unless he becomes Israel's new warrior Messiah and king? Israel is the context; we must never forget that. And how else can this actually happen unless Jesus changes into the Warrior Messiah the sectarians are at that precise moment waiting for? The "tempter" is quite explicit: "All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: *for that is delivered unto me*; and to whomsoever I will give it."² [emphasis added] This is not Lucifer speaking, it is not the devil; it is someone acting like a devil, someone speaking with Lucifarian intent and Zealot-like authority; it is, quite probably, a prominent sectarian leader carrying an invitation to Jesus as man of the moment. And it's interesting that Jesus is driven out into the wilderness to hear such demands; whether he likes it or not, this "Satan" has to be listened to.

Apart from anything else, it should be pointed out that the Temple in Jerusalem did not have a pinnacle for Jesus to stand on; and there were no mountains in either Palestine or Judea high enough for even a major portion of the world to be viewed from. And on the theological front, it should be noted that Satan does not use the term "Son of God" at all; to be precise, he addresses Jesus not as *ho hyos Theou*, but as *hyos Theou*, which means only "protected by God."³

Professor Elaine Pagels has a quite different approach. She also notes that Matthew changes Mark's wordless contest with Satan into a dialogue, and she too posits another source for this particular incident; but with dexterity she sets out to prove that Matthew, writing after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the whole Jewish infrastructure as a result of sectarian madness, caricatures Satan as a scribe, a "skilled debater adept in quoting Scripture for diabolical purposes"⁴ - it is the scribes and Pharisees who are being attacked in the guise of Satan. Pagels gives many excellent reasons for thinking this, and I for one have no problem with her theoretical workings. But I still think the scenario I have presented has merit for the very reason that it reflects a probable historical event of much earlier vintage. And as Carsten Peter Thiede and Matthew D'Ancona have recently contested the dating of Matthew's gospel, pushing it much further back, a political rather than a scribal scenario for this incident is perhaps more feasible. For me, Matthew's adding of words to the story glosses over a conversation had by Jesus in a quite different context; either that, or it is simply presumed that the reader will understand what is going on here.

The Nazarenes, along with other sectaries (including so-called Jewish Christians), would later be singled out for punishment by Jewish orthodoxy; for they had dramatically miscalculated and failed to beat the Romans. And so they were classified as heretics, Jesus the Messiah figure being viewed by the sectaries in particular not just as a failure, but as a spiritual coward: he had after all refused to join them in what they believed to be the final battle against the Children of the Darkness. I think these Nazarenes were linked with the militants in the minds of the orthodox, and this suggests the existence of a militant branch of

the Nazarenes, a branch which probably tried to enlist Jesus' help. Prayers against the heretical sectaries were later offered in the synagogues, and the Nazarenes were specifically identified alongside Christians and Zealots as responsible for the debacle. Named the *birkat ha-minim* ("benediction of heretics"), this prayer was designed to catch out secret Nazarene and Christian followers of Jesus mixing with fellow Jews. This, of course, put the Nazarenes where they had always belonged, close to the sectaries, close to the militant forces which had ignited the whole ugly affair.

Back in 1959 Professor Kurt Schubert noted that Satan's three temptations were all eschatological in intention; that is, they belonged to the rigorist, isolationist camp of political expectation, and as such strongly suggest that Jesus was being asked to put his messianic, miracle-working cards on the table. Schubert put it this way: "Jesus was to prove himself to be the Messiah of the messianic movement".⁵ This allows us to read the text just as it stands, but we have to realise that it's underlying intention is to "demonise" the questioner. As the demonising process has been identified by scholars as belonging to the nationalists, the idea of Jesus' tempter being a Zealot commander is not at all far-fetched.

The Suppressed Gospel of Thomas

The New Testament scholar Helmut Koester has argued for the so-called apocryphal Gospel of Thomas to be recognised as a source document for the canonical Gospels; Elaine Pagels agrees, and argues along with Koestler that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke resemble this controversial Gospel. Pagel's then asks the obvious question: "Why was this Gospel suppressed, along with many others that have remained unknown for nearly two thousand years?"⁶ The answer given is that around 370 CE the Archbishop of Alexandria ordered Christians to destroy all such heretical writings. Heretical? Why heretical? Because like the *Gospel of Thomas*, they presented a view of Jesus almost diametrically opposed to that of the canonical gospels - there was another Jesus, a quite different Jesus lurking in the historical bushes. The Jesus of Thomas's Gospel parallels many statements made by the synoptic

Jesus, but there are also statements which quite literally reverse Jesus' New Testament point of view. This fact, in conjunction with Koester's argument for Thomas's Gospel containing material which *predates* the gospel, allows us to conjecture that the Jesus of the New Testament was either edited into his present shape fairly late in the day, or that coded language, which only the initiated could properly understand, was used from the very beginning. I suspect the latter; it is just possible that these texts are older than previously thought, and that the picture of Jesus being presented in the New Testament is much more complicated than first supposed.

Paul's theology (when in fact it is his own) may appear to represent Jesus as in some sense "divine", but there is just as much evidence in the New Testament pointing in the opposite direction, and this allows us to construct a middle-ground picture which helps steady the image. Paul's Jesus is an inflamed and inflated theological image; the Gospel Jesus is a sober, down-to-earth image of a man struggling to transcend fear and doubt. The Church of Rome's Jesus is the Gospel Jesus explained through Paul's eyes; Thomas' Jesus is the Jesus who sorts it all out, the Jesus who, in Elaine Pagel's words "urges people to seek direct access to God, unmediated by church or clergy."⁷ The Jesus of Thomas' Gospel does not ask for subservience from his followers; he asks them to dig deep within themselves as he has done - the Kingdom of God is not grounded in belief, but in knowledge of the self at the deepest level. In what Pagel's refers to as "sayings as strange and compelling as Zen koans", we hear Jesus say: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." (NHC II. 45.29-33)

History and Mythology

Allowing for Professor Pagel's theoretical stance on the wilderness story, I would posit a further two levels; for I sense a mixing of history and ancient mythology bent to the twin purposes of distraction and supernatural elevation. Distraction in terms of the text's political importance is being cleverly veneered over;

supernatural elevation in terms of the ghost-writers' transposition of Jesus' very earthy messianic ministry transposed on to a cosmic key. It is the only way these writers can overcome the problem of why Jesus' messiahship eventually failed, why he was rejected by his own people and crucified by the Romans as a common criminal. The story of Jesus is no longer the story of an ordinary man become the Messiah of Israel; it has been elevated to the level of a cosmic drama, inflated to the level of a divine/diabolical confrontation where good and evil battle it out in the lives of individuals and nations. The "ordinary" has been banished; the "extraordinary" has been established as daily routine; flesh and blood has been theologised into a literal amalgamation with deity; the capacity of individuals to seek God in their own depths transformed into *things to be believed about Jesus*. The question is, why should such a thing have happened? Yes, there was crisis, persecution; but surely something of the original Jesus managed to struggle through? It couldn't all have been a whitewash, a rearranging of materials to incite solidarity. Jesus had been special, very special, and that fact was stamped all over the apocryphal, as well as the canonical, gospels.

Extraordinary things had been spliced into the original Jesus story; but to this day the question of why such miraculous shadings were added remains a real question - Jesus seems to have so deeply affected those around him that tall stories became the coinage for those who interacted with him. And amalgamated as he eventually was with a pagan-infused interpretation of Paul's highly evolved theological vision, it is not at all surprising that the new centre of Christian oriented authority set up in Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem should have considered itself in receipt of a remarkable truth. The later Roman Church, the new Roman seat of apostolic authority displacing the original Nazarene Mother Church, cannot in all honesty be accused of making up a new Jesus story just for the sake of it; but it can, as history clearly reveals, be accused of progressively manipulating an already hybrid story down the centuries for the sake of naked power.

Early Jewish belief had it that Satan was God's silent partner in moral affairs (witness the temptation of Job); they believed that God allowed Satan to tempt and harass the inhabitants of the earth

for moral reasons. But as noted elsewhere, this ancient Old Testament scenario was eventually replaced with a view of Satan in which he ceased to be God's silent partner and became his moral adversary. It is however this former conception of Satan that arises in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, not the latter; Satan sounds as if his control of affairs is God-given, not wrested from God via human weakness. Basically, this old conception of Satan is the tenor of these longer passages, and for my money that is the mistake committed by the writers as they dressed up political confrontation as diabolical temptation. The story's offer of "worldly power" in return for a reversal of Jesus' mind-set clearly reflects what lies hidden; and the mistake of dipping too far back into Jewish mythology in their attempt to conceal what is going on is, for me, a secondary proof that Matthew - whoever Matthew might have been - merely camouflaged a political argument with an ancient view of Satan which just happened to fit the circumstances. For if it is true that Satan can dish out perks of the magnitude offered to Jesus, and that this right had been given to him by God as the text of Matthew and Luke suggest, then God and Satan really are in cahoots and Christianity, since its inception, has quite mistakenly interpreted the delicate relationship, or balance, between good and evil.

By the end of the wilderness temptation passages, what was in all likelihood a Zealot commander trying to persuade Jesus to submit to sectarian authority has been transformed into an event of cosmic proportions; an event made serve all sorts of late first, and early second, century Christian propaganda purposes. Jesus is no longer a pacifist, no longer a rogue-Messiah making sectarian leaders and the rule-bound Jewish priesthood squirm; he is now the cap "S" son of God to whom angels must minister. Identified with God come down to earth in human form, with a divine intelligence methodically working to some pre-ordained plan, whatever Jesus does or says takes on such significance that every chapter and verse of the New Testament becomes a means to an end. And by tacking the whole shebang on to the Hebrew Old Testament, what is basically the history of a rejected Jewish Messiah and sectarian drop-out is later transformed into the autobiography of Israel's war-God become a man who eschews

war. From that contradictory point onward, whoever disagrees with Jesus disagrees with God. And from there anyone who disagrees with Jesus' disciples also disagrees with God. And from there anyone who disagrees with the Church set up in Jesus' name and run by those claiming to be the legitimate succession from those disciples is disagreeing with God. By the end of the New Testament story, no one will be safe from the writers' literalist touch. Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrays Jesus, will, by definition, become the excuse for torture and murder on a vast scale; for this unfortunate individual is conveniently demonised with the words "Then entered Satan into Judas...",⁸ and with this ultra useful shorthand Christianity's future enemies will be demonised en masse. Jews, pagans, heretics - all will be classified as dupes of the Evil One and exterminated. On this score, thanks is probably due to the Jesus Seminar for finally debunking Judas's betrayal of Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

The Satanic Indictment

In her ground-breaking book *The Origin of Satan*, Elaine Pagels traces the evolution of Satan as an idea from its earliest origins to its later Christian interpretation. At first merely obstructive, Satan later changes into evil incarnate, becoming the Prince of Darkness. But as Pagel's so carefully shows, the four Gospels take to condemning as "creatures of Satan" *anyone* who disagrees with them, and the end result is that even Christians with a tangentially different view of Jesus are eventually described as "satanic". Thus is born the Christian Church's certainty, its seemingly indefatigable belief that what it decides to nominate as "the truth" must necessarily be left to stand as the truth beyond all debate or criticism. It is God's will that the New Testament is the way it is, and no amount of scholarship or study or honest modernist probing will ever undermine the Good News it contains.

Behind closed doors, or in the secret depths of their own minds, the educated, thinking clergy may well voice serious doubts about Jesus' divinity and much else, but before the public they mostly deny that any real problem exists. Alas, as anyone with a skerrick of commonsense knows only too well, the old old

story of the Gospels is a problem; in fact the whole New Testament is a problem. Jesus as he is offered to congregations all over the world is a problem. The form western society has taken in conjunction with Christianity's growth and success is a problem. And, in particular, Christian fundamentalism is a problem; for at the heart of fundamentalist views, whatever their variety, hides the dread spectre of God's diabolical counterpart - Satan is alive and well in the twentieth century, and he's out to get YOU.

Professor Pagels is most enlightening about all of this; she produces a book which, according to Professor David Sperling of Hebrew Union College, "helps us to understand the power of irrational forces that still need to be confronted in contemporary society." And this is exactly what Pagels does manage to accomplish in her delicately constructed text; she shows how the sectarian demonisation of Christianity's early enemies - Jews, pagans and heretics - shaped the Church's growth and allowed her to survive against all odds. But at what price has this monumental organisational and theological success straddled so many centuries? For as the Jesuit Malachi Martin and Peter de Rosa show clearly in their separate historical accounts, the Church's early successes, in conjunction with the favoured status conferred on Christianity by Constantine, eventually produced a lethal cocktail that was composed of power and authority backed by unassailable certainty.

The Demonic Cloud

Pagans came to hate Christians because of their atheism; yet another strange twist in an already twisted tale. They sincerely believed that Christianity's growing success in converting fellow pagans to the new faith would bring the wrath of the gods down on their communities, and predicted both the destruction of family life and social cohesion if this hybrid Jewish cult were allowed to spread unchecked. For from being a minority religion within Judaism, Christianity became (between 70 and 100 CE) a largely Gentile-cum-Diaspora movement due to orthodox Jewish rejection and the earlier efforts of Paul among pagan communities. And just as the Jews were quickly demonised for rejecting the up-dated

Good News of Paul, so also were pagans eventually demonised for not recognising Jesus the Jew as "Son" of the only real god in existence - the Jewish one. Complicated. And made more so by the fact that the Christian view of the pagan gods was not only that they did not exist, but that what did exist were demons mistakenly worshipped as gods. That was quite a slap in the face for non-Christians and it produced a backlash.

What happened at the time is hard for us of the twentieth century to fully appreciate; we simply do not hear the word "demon" in quite the same way. And the word "demonise", as we have come to use it, has almost completely lost any connotation with "demons" in the real sense. In the real sense? That's the catch; we don't really believe in demons any longer. But the early Christians did believe in them and some still do.

Recapturing that earlier belief in, and fear of, demons is no easy task; but it can be accomplished by empathically entering the Christian mind of that period. No, that's not quite right; what we have to do is enter the Christian *imagination*, for it is there, in the dim, preternatural light of a mental cosmology given over to Satan and his angels, that we stumble into the terror. Terror? The terror of living on a planet in the throws of a cosmic war. What has to be understood is that the whole climate of Christian opinion was locked into a vision of things where God and Satan battled it out for supremacy allied to a *still developing* theology of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. As a result of this, daily events took on unusual significance, being interpreted in the light of this belief system. This is to say that everything "said" or "thought" or "done" was subject to internal scrutiny. Satan was never far off; his angels-cum-demons were always at hand to lead the unwitting astray.

But there is a single point where all of this falls into a clear and terrifyingly real perspective, and that point is in the Roman arena. It is in there that we see this belief system at work with astonishing success. Arrested for not sacrificing to the Emperor, many Christians managed to sustain a quiet fortitude in the face of unbelievable barbarity. So much so that Justin, a student of philosophy in Rome around 140 CE, was startled to witness Christians being torn apart by wild animals with the kind of

equanimity generally associated with philosophers. And not only that, for these unfortunates, he discovered, were not even educated Christians, but illiterate trades people. By inexplicable means, these simple Christians had "tapped into a great, unknown source of power", to use Elaine Pagel's words. Pagel clarifies this situation by revealing that the incredible confidence of these Christians lay primarily in their certainty that their deaths would advance God's victory over the forces of evil, forces that inhabiting the minds and hearts of Roman magistrates as they condemned Christians to death. It is impossible for us to fully savour what having a belief system like this really felt like, but knowing something of what lay behind such acts of courage does allow us to at least partially penetrate their mystery.

And so we are left with a vision which intuitively sees unseen energies forcing human beings to do their enigmatic will; a view heartily endorsed by the pagan world itself. According to Pagel's, Justin "realises with a shock that Socrates himself had said the same thing the Christians are saying - that all the gods Homer praises are actually evil energies that corrupt people."⁹ But it was not seen in quite this way by the pagan world; their gods weren't evil, just capricious. Justin could however see through this subterfuge, for wasn't Socrates himself charged with atheism, just like the Christians, and given poison to drink? And so, in Justin's mind, there arises a form of "proof" for the Christian point of view: the irrational hatred being exhibited against the Christians was merely a symptom of the very thing the Christians were describing - demons were in control of the pagan mind.

But not only the pagan mind; orthodox Jews too were under the thrall of Satan in Christian opinion. In fact everyone not in agreement with Christianity was eventually perceived in such a light. And the word "light" is the operative one, for like the wilderness holy ones, the Essene-Essene, Christians saw themselves as "sons of light", the pagan nations and orthodox Jews as "sons of darkness". Blanketing everyone with satanic intention, Christians came to see themselves as besieged by evil. The battle lines were drawn, the great cosmic conflict between God and Satan was now being fought out in the streets and back alleys of Rome. Relentlessly persecuted by all and sundry, the Roman

Christians scratched a living, kept a low profile, and methodically lived their message out into the populous. If educated, they ran the constant risk of discovery, but could at least claim for themselves a clean, quick death; if uneducated, there was less chance of discovery, but the risk of a brutal death prefaced with torture.

There is absolutely no doubt that these Roman Christians were utterly sincere in their faith; in fact the word "sincerity" is not really sufficient to describe the kind of faith they possessed. Their patience, good works and perseverance in the face of what must often have appeared to be insurmountable odds is quite staggering. One is reminded of Tielhard de Chardin's comment that he himself did not measure up, in moral terms, to someone of simple faith. But as can be imagined, not all of them managed to hold their simple faith in place when arrested and tortured. Some crumpled under the brutality and named their associates, betrayed their brothers in Christ and died in stark terror of what the afterlife would bring. Some did sacrifice to the gods, to the emperor, and lived to tell the tale. Not all Christians walked or crawled into the arena with a beatific smile on their face, as Hollywood would have us believe. And many Christians of Gnostic persuasion didn't end up in the arena at all; tongue in cheek, they happily sacrificed to the Roman god's and got off without as much as a curt word. It is known that the behaviour of these Gnostic Christians caused much consternation among the regular variety. The regular variety? Yes, there were "regular" and "irregular" Christians, and the irregular ones constituted yet another category of demonised individual.

The Heretics

Everything hinged on whether you followed the party line or not; veer from the accepted code of behaviour, ritual and interpretation of gospel events and you were out. It was as simple as that. Questions were utterly forbidden. Jesus may have said: "seek and ye will find, knock and it will be opened unto you", (Matt. 7:7) but such an argument did not wash with the leaders of the Christian community as it developed at the end of the first century. Elaine

Pagels details this attitude in her book on Satan's origins, and what she reveals is that dissident thinkers did not have a chance of being heard. And it is at exactly this point that we stumble upon the transition point between a church governed by apostles, and a church governed by deacons, priests and bishops.

Things had changed; the days of the visiting apostle were over. The communities were now on their own and subject to the pressures of the pagan world on all sides. And like all rapidly growing communities, the Christian community was also subject to internal pressures. Pagel's cites a letter written to Christians in the Greek city of Corinth by Clement around 90, a letter in which he reveals much of what was going on during this period. Sections of the Church were in uproar, it seems, over heavy-handed behaviour from leaders such as Clement; leaders who seem to have decided that what they nominated as "the truth" was utterly beyond question. And to cement their supposed apostolic authority in place, such leaders resorted to writing their own Scriptures; that is, they created letters (Epistle) supposedly written by some of the Apostles themselves. In these letters they contrived events to show that certain individuals had received the necessary apostolic blessing to make them heirs of these Apostles.

Of such a nature was Peter's first Epistle, and Paul's Letters to Timothy. Ordained an "overseer" or "bishop" by Paul, Timothy is made Paul's legitimate successor, and as such allowed to wield Paul's portion of apostolic authority. There was good reason for this transfer of power, for it is in these supposed Letters to Timothy that Paul makes child bearing the chief task of women, so barring them from occupying position of power in the Church. Professor Heinemann remarks: "Women in particular are given all sorts of pious directives in both the presumably false and the certainly false letters of Paul. And down through history the Church has toiled tirelessly to get women to take such exhortations to heart."¹⁰ Women should obey their husbands, learn in silence and submissiveness, and keep silent when men are around. Child bearing is their lot. In her witty and provocative book *Putting Away Childish Things*, Professor Ranke-Heinemann sums up this situation with characteristic force. Suggesting that some kind of warning against forgeries ought to be printed on the

New Testament, she says: "Perhaps it would cut down on the use of the expression 'Word of God', not just for false Letters but also for the genuine ones. For all their genuineness, not one of them has ever been anything more than the word of man."¹¹

Referring to those Christians who did not agree with him as self-willed people who had initiated a "horrible and unholy rebellion", Clement rails against their rejection of the "clergy", and in the process lets slip that the dissidents considered such appointments an innovation. Clement's reaction to such a charge is to quote Paul's Letter to Timothy in the hope that this forgery, this conveniently created piece of propaganda, will cancel dissident objection; for is it not because of such apostolic successions that the church's consensus truth-claims must be accepted? The irony of the situation is that Matthew and Luke, virtual contemporaries of Clement's, had just revealed in their gospel reconstructions that the Jewish priesthood had been Jesus' principle enemy - the house of selected cards was shaking.

By the second century this dispute over "clergy" had hotted up and infected church's everywhere; the growing authority of the clergy was alarming many Christians. But those of Clement's persuasion used Clement's tactics, and adherence to pre-set moral codes and interpretations of earlier writings already edited and rendered historically "safe" was not only demanded, but enforced. And often for very good reason; for there were Christians who had evolved not only a hatred of the clergy, but also Christians who evolved for themselves fantastically illiterate theories around the Church's basic doctrines. Conscious of scriptural manipulation in high places, these Christians tried to sort out the true from the false and ended up creating an even greater doctrinal mess of their own.

By 180 CE such ideas had spawned such wildly diverging offshoots of standard Christian belief that Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, wrote a five-volume refutation of such deviance - the writers were from there on called "heretics" (*hairesis*: "choice"), and linked to Satan. Those guilty of making a "choice" between one interpretation of the gospel story and another were automatically categorised as having become self-willed and out of control, their safety even among fellow Christians removed at the stroke of a

pen. Later, Tertullian will bring this absurd situation to a state of dictatorial perfection when he announces that the clergy must not allow their congregations to ask questions, for it is the asking of questions that makes heretics.¹² One question in particular was to be avoided: Where did evil come from? This is the question that must be circumvented for fear of stumbling onto the fact that it reveals the dark side of the Church, the dark side of Christianity, the dark side of Christianity's God. Face this question, and you face the creative darkness which Christianity refuses to acknowledge.

It is, I think, legitimate to identify Tertullian with bringing to perfection that sinister state of mind which eventually invaded Christian thinking; for he goes on to make some hair-raising assertion about the nature of truth, assertions justified with statements which reveal a mind utterly closed to all commonsense. Writing that believers must desist from any discussion of Scripture, that all deviation in opinion comes from the devil, and that Satan has master-minded "false exegesis", this divinely-governed apostolic mind observes that "Heretics ought not to be allowed to challenge an appeal to the Scriptures, since we . . . prove that they have nothing to do with the Scriptures. For since they are heretics, they cannot be Christians."¹³ Such reasoning, circular and profoundly silly as it is, quickly became the tenor of so-called inspired Christian reasoning. With dexterity, future Fathers of the Church built intricate travesties of logic on this unassailable foundation, and the stranglehold gained by the clergy on people's lives became the standard form.

Radical and Ultra-radical Christians

Still, there were Christians who rejected this heavy-handed approach without becoming ultra-radical in either their ideas or their behaviour. One such Christian, Valentinus by name, broke invisibly with the unquestioning majority and formed an underground group of Christians who, although still a professing part of the standard Church, considered themselves more mature by way of spiritual experience and discernment. Accepting that faith, hope and love were truly the foundation of the Christian life,

they added "understanding" (*gnosis*) to the mix, and developed a doctrine of understanding which invited Christians of standard practice to experience their deeper spiritual levels - shades of the *Gospel of Thomas*. Covert meetings were held, and we learn from Elaine Pagel's fascinating studies that Valentinus had been taught secret teachings attributed to Paul by a teacher called Theudas. These teachings caused Valentinus to steer a middle course between extreme radicalism and the standard confession of faith, and resulted in an interpretation of Scripture carrying meanings believed to be part of the very early Christian communities - meanings which went "beyond the literal interpretation of the Scriptures to question the gospel's deeper meaning."¹⁴

It will be appreciated that educated Christians responded to this kind of thinking, and Pagel's records that Tertullian complained that it was often the very best of his membership who deserted the ship of faith for the ship of understanding - a point that should not be overlooked. And so the Church began to subdivide and the Christian community began to fragment in front of the eyes of Tertullian and Irenaeus. Enter Marcus, a doctrinal innovator who was castigated for his alleged seduction of women. He appears to have offered them no more than participation in celebrating the Eucharist - something often denied them in Irenaeus' church.

The reason for such openness towards women was because Valentinus sometimes used the image of divine "Father" and divine "Mother" to describe what he believed to be the indescribable Source of all things seen and unseen. Marcus, working from this enlarged vision of God, is recorded in Irenaeus' writings as having allowed women to officiate at church services, and of encouraged them, like Paul, to speak in prophesy; he is even accused of calling down the holy spirit on their behalf, and of "touching them" (blessing them) with his hands. Pagel's makes the point that when Irenaeus speaks of Marcus and his followers as "adulterers", he is in fact using the biblical image of *illicit religious practices*, not accusing them of actual adultery.

But perhaps the most revealing idea that Valentinus-inspired is to be found in the *Gospel of Philip*, a gospel offers an alternative explanation to good and evil as cosmic opposites. Ditching this

approach, Philip's gospel argues that opposites such as "good" and "evil" are actually *interdependent pairs*. Moral law as handed out by the now alarmingly authoritarian Christian Church is the equivalent of eating from the tree of knowledge which delivered not knowledge, but a slow death and estrangement from paradise.¹⁵ Such a view flies in the face of how Gnostic teaching was being interpreted by people like Irenaeus and Tertullian. These Church Fathers translated *gnosis* as "hard knowledge", so making Gnosticism into no more than a cerebral creation; but the facts were otherwise. Gnosticism proper was not about intellectual knowledge at all; and neither was it about imagination run riot. At its best, it was about understanding something in terms of deep insight. Such knowledge arose from the depths of the human heart (the unconscious) and signalled, not an intellectual or theological "interpretation" of God, but an experience of God allied to the discovery that the human self constituted a barrier to spiritual comprehension. Attempting to understand God through the eyes of a self that automatically claimed everything as its own (even God) was deeply problematical. What we had to do was thoroughly examine this so-called self's opinion of itself and note that its claim on everything as its own was, to say the least, misplaced. The idea of the mind being "my" mind, of the heart being "my" heart, of God being "my" God, was an illusion. And so with the gospels. Just as there were deeper ways of approaching the self, so also there was a deeper way of approaching what these gospels seemed to say about the self in relation to God.

Moral law strictly adhered to was the outcome of minds struggling to get back to God by a self-conscious route. Jesus rejected this self-conscious route and, as a result, deeply angered and infuriated the upholders of Jewish religious orthodoxy. Like Jesus, the Gnostics believed that each person carried a different set of needs, different levels of comprehension, and different qualities of maturity. To feed everyone on the same strict moral diet was to ignore true need and further distort an already distorted self in need of help. Forcing everything into opposition and demanding *this* choice over *that* choice undermined our ability to act with freedom and love - particularly when we set up one of those

choices as an unquestionable truth. To be told, as Adam was told, that he could eat from *this* tree, but not from *that* tree, clearly suggested a lack of freedom on Adam's part; the intrinsic freedom which "truth" or "real knowledge" is supposed to impart, indeed, the very thing the forbidden tree embodied. And this in turn suggested a form of cosmic enslavement which religiously-enforced moral law perfectly mirrored. In this sense, the Genesis story could be reversed: God was the Evil One because he denied Adam and Eve comprehension of evil. Jealous of the fact that these two beings have achieved "knowledge of good and evil", God threw the pair out of the garden and barred their return. Previously ignorant of the existence of evil, the two now recognised that they had been denied this knowledge because it revealed too much about their creator who had imbued them with his own unpredictable nature.

In Gnostic thinking there is a curious reconciliation of God and Satan, of heaven and hell, of light and darkness. Satan turns out to be not so much a ravenous being intent on the moral destruction of the human race (a conception of Satan developed at the time of Jesus by the wilderness sectarians, particularly the Essenes), but rather a creative principle, an energy of obstruction and opposition not separate from God, but an integral expression of God's character. *And ours*. As the early history of Satan reveals (in spite of what Genesis seems to say), cosmic opposites were unthinkable to the early monotheists of Israel; which rather suggests that the Genesis story is not quite as it ought to be. And there are no cosmic opposites in Valentinian thinking either; God and Satan constitute one force, one truth, one experience which we break apart due to the perceptual development of the self. There is no Satan in the *Gospel of Philip*, and there is, by Gnostic definition, no Satanic being "out there" in real life either - God controls everything, even the lower cosmic forces.

The existence of such forces, creative and destructive by turn, are recognised by the Gnostics to exist, but they are thought by advanced Christian Gnostics like Valentinus to inhabit our natures in the form of "archetypes", psychic configurations of an anthropomorphic type backgrounding our collective psychology as human beings. Such entities are necessarily projections of the

human mind; but they are also arguably “actual” to the extent that they represent energies of consciousness beyond that of the personal. Human self-consciousness is presumed to be the summit of the evolutionary process; but just as Paul Davies suspects mathematics to be integral to the universe, and not merely an expression of human sensibility, so also could consciousness be integral to matter which is perhaps mathematical at base.

This suggests that the “little devil” and the “little angel” which metaphorically sit on our shoulders and whisper diametrically opposed things into our ears are not merely the result of enculturation or social conditioning, but allied to deeply mysterious elements of consciousness continually suggesting creative “alternatives” to what we think and do. Here then is the energy base from which angels and demons of more substantial psychic reality can miraculously arise alongside that of dreams and creative reveries. Introduce a distorted religious formula into this mix, and the result will be suitably grotesque. Introduce a pathology into this mix, and almost anything will be possible.

Elaine Pagels is at pains to point out that ethical questions are just as real and as important to these Gnostics Christians as they are to their consensus-loving brothers and sisters; the difference is that they have realised that fear disables our ability to make helpful ethical choices. Connecting this fact to his rejection of cosmic opposites, Philip says: “Do not fear the flesh, nor love it. If you fear it, it will gain mastery over you; if you love it, it will devour and paralyse you.”¹⁶ This is the dilemma facing all of us, the dilemma of how to mentally balance ourselves between our fears and our loves, our revulsions and our desires, our projections and what actually exists. To live with the constant restriction of fear is to be mastered by life; to live without any kind of restriction is to be overcome by one’s own appetites. The secret is simply to avoid extremes; it is extremes of belief and behaviour and theory that bedevil us. Push the moral question too far and we end up killing people for their own good; refuse to properly recognise the moral question and we end up doing exactly the same.

Jesus seems to have understood this; he was not an extremist.

The Satan Jesus talked to in the wilderness was not the Satan of Job's temptation; and neither was he the Satan of later pathological sectarian fear. He was, I believe, simply a human being demonised by the gospel writers for the purpose of deflection. But why? If the gospel writers were trying to please the Romans, then why not say outright that Jesus had rejected Zealot extremism? Wouldn't that have pleased and satisfied their Roman readers? Possibly. But it would also have alerted them to the uncomfortable fact that Jesus had spent what appears to have been a protracted length of time in the company of an enemy of Rome. There had been a secret meeting in the desert between this prominent Nazarene and an important sectarian leader, and this fact, although mitigated by Jesus' refusal to recognise this leader's authority, inadvertently informed the reader that Jesus the Nazarene was known to, and had had complicated dealings with, the militant branch of the desert sectaries. This would not have been a surprise for, as shown by Elaine Pagels, the Nazarenes were viewed by the surviving Jewish community as sectarian heretics just as responsible as the Zealots for the Roman invasion. To put it mildly, Jesus was much more complicated than he seemed to be, much more complicated than the early Church Fathers wished him to be, and much, much more complicated than the New Testament eventually allowed him to be. This fact, side-stepped by Christian thinkers both then and now, has resulted in an excuse-making policy of allowing anything at all threatening to be conveniently dropped into the demonic dustbin.

References and Notes:

- 1 Craveri, Marcello, *The Life of Jesus* (1970), p. 85.
- 2 Luke 4: 6.
- 3 Craveri, Marcello, *The Life of Jesus* (1970), p. 83.
- 4 Pagels, Elaine, *The Origin of Satan* (1995), p. 81.
- 5 Schubert, Kurt, *The Dead Sea Community* (1959), p. 132.
- 6 Pagels, Elaine, *The Origins of Satan* (1995), p. 69.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 8 Luke 22: 3
- 9 Pagels, Elaine, *The Origin of Satan* (1995), p. 124.
- 10 Ranke-Heinemann, Uta, *Putting Away Childish Things* (1994), p. 227.

- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Pagels, Elaine, *The Origin of Satan* (1995), p. 164.
- 13 Ibid., p. 165.
- 14 Ibid., p. 167.
- 15 Ibid., p. 171.
- 16 Ibid., p. 172.