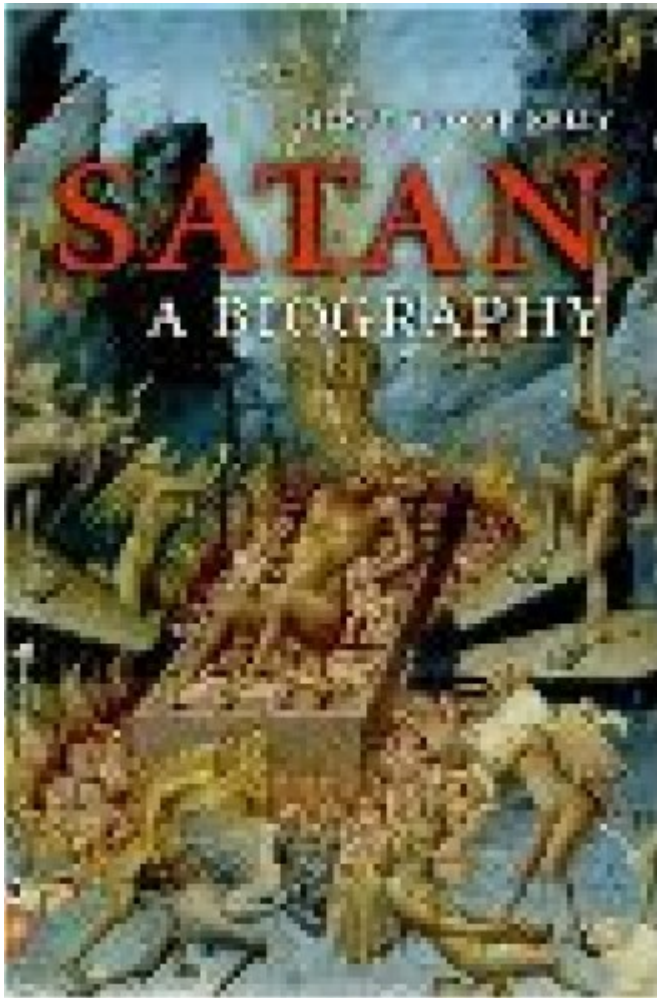


Satan: A Biography

reviewed by [Jeffrey Burton Russell](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Satan: A Biography

Henry Ansgar Kelly
Cambridge University Press

Henry A. Kelly, professor of English at UCLA, has published many studies in both literature and history, and he is the author of several studies of the devil, including

two previous books, *The Devil, Demonology, and Witchcraft* and *The Devil at Baptism*. Sadly, his new book combines close scholarship with deconstructionist principles. Though it contains thorough studies of the Old and New Testaments, pseudepigrapha and the church fathers, *Satan* has a fundamental flaw: it dismisses the problem of evil. Kelly vehemently denies that there is any such thing as evil (tell that to people in Darfur rather than to an academic audience), though he grants that some things may be “bad” or “nasty.” Since he evades the problem of evil, he cannot take his subject seriously, which accounts for the book’s numerous ironic flippancies. The author’s expressed purpose is to liberate Satan from “bad press,” to “rehabilitate Satan’s reputation” and to “eliminate discussions of evil” in order to focus on the “real reasons” (none of which Kelly suggests) that people do bad things.

Kelly’s assumptions and arguments have implications far beyond the study of Satan himself—implications that involve the nature of Christianity, of the Bible, of tradition and of human morality. First, is Christianity what it is, or is it something else? Or at least *should* it be something other than what it is? Kelly, like some other contemporary scholars, prefers it to be something other than what it is. (Strangely, he virtually ignores the gnostics and the Manicheans.)

Kelly thinks that what Christianity should be is what it was in the beginning; that is, he commits the historical fallacy called “primitivism,” the illusion that an entity is *really* what it was in its origins, as if America were *really* 13 original states. It is philosophically incoherent to strip away two millennia of what something has become as simple “deterioration.”

For Kelly, tradition means deterioration: from the time of Origen, “Christianity was transformed, in effect, into a Zoroastrian system.” Idiosyncratically, Kelly dismisses all Christian exegetes and theologians except Schleiermacher (1768-1834), whose theology he affirms in detail.

What deteriorates along with Satan, Kelly implies, is Christian doctrine in general, for he deconstructs sin and redemption as well. Only the Bible, he claims, presents the “original biography” of a nonevil Satan, as opposed to the degenerate “new biography,” which portrays him as evil. The important question, then, is what Kelly does to the Bible.

Kelly tries to assert that the Bible is the authoritative source on what to believe about the devil, and thus he seems to be offering support for *sola scriptura*. But his deconstructive method is such that no reading of scriptures has any authority without his personal approval and interpretation. First, since evil does not exist, there is no prince of evil or any personification of evil at all. Second, and more important, Kelly tracks a line (though a blurry one) of development of views from the earliest New Testament texts to the latest. Indeed, he organizes his first survey of the texts chronologically (as currently dated).

Here's the rub: if the Bible is divinely revealed (or even divinely inspired), we need to take all the texts as seriously (though not necessarily literally) as, for example, Jesus and the New Testament writers took the Old Testament. But Kelly's chronological run through the New Testament describes a development that actually runs through early Christian theology. We are left with the question of just when the "deterioration" begins: with the conclusion of 2 Peter (which may be the latest new Testament book and which may overlap the patristic period)? Or . . . ?

In fact, Kelly's deconstruction goes much deeper. The evidence about what he really thinks as opposed to what he claims to think is made clear when he says: "We cannot escape the conclusion that Jesus himself, as well as Paul and other New Testament writers, except perhaps for Jude, have a decided bias against Satan." Kelly hopes to save us from the wrong-headedness of such as Jesus and Paul. As for human morality, Kelly undercuts the basis for understanding human action and has minimized its seriousness.

Certainly the volume is clever and provocative—and valuable as a study of mythology.