

Satan's Compulsive Evil, God's Attractive Good

DOES SATAN EXIST? Where do you see the devil (literally or metaphorically) at work in today's headlines?

1.....A looming, stalking evil presence plagues Jesus in Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," which - if any film ever was - is sadistic torture on display, humanity at its worst against humanity at its best. In the drama's action there are no impersonal forces: everything is PERSONAL, nature itself participating in the personal realities. Including God, whose only appearance is as a teardrop of sympathy for the dying Christ. / The film is Christian preaching as one finds it in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 1:23): "When we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Greeks [that is, the non-Jews, "Gentiles"] say it's all nonsense."

2.....To the religious question "Does Satan exist?" we personalists say "Yes" (as do the film and the Bible). Radical impersonalists say "No": "person" and "consciousness" are not categories in science. But all thinkers face *prior questions*: (1) What does "exist" mean? Ancient Greek philosophy taught us to distinguish being/becoming/nonbeing and to ask why there is anything instead of nothing. (2) Does evil exist, or is it only the absence of good? If one concludes for the latter, the question of evil as personal (Satan, the devil, demons) or impersonal does not exist. (3) Does anything "exist"? (4) Does humanity need pictures and stories in thinking/talking about the experience and mystery of evil (as well as of the mystery of good)? (5) Why does the question "Does Satan exist?" exist?

3.....Here, I'll respond only to the fifth question. The Satan question exists because some evil is so *monstrous* as to seem planned, demoniacally-intelligently designed, though often beginning on the slippery slope of a little lie, a small deceit, or a personal or collective grievance. The verbatim record of the 1942 Wannsee Conference of Nazi planners reveals how intelligent, how logical, was the "final solution" conclusion: it just doesn't make sense to let any Jew live. Once Bernard Madoff got his Ponzi deception going, it just didn't make sense to quit, even though (as he said at his trial) he never did doubt that it was wrong. Reason in itself has no moral content; and the immediate rewards of lying, deception, and "irrational exuberance" (Alan Greenspan's explanation of the Wall Street collapse) are rationally persuasive. Individuals, institutions, nations can let themselves become slaves of Satan, the lying and deceiving snake in gardens of Eden (Genesis 3; put thus in Revelation 12:9: "the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world"). Said Madoff of his evil, "There is no innocent explanation." / Like a tornado sucking up everything and a black hole sucking down everything, evil gains force until it exhausts itself or collides with the greater force of good. / In the biblical drama called "Job," God puts limits on Satan's malevolent behavior. In the Bible's cosmic drama, Satan is an angel gone bad with envy of God; but he's doomed to fall from heaven into the deepest pit. The malevolent obsession of evil, in the cosmos as in the human heart and history, will yield to the magnificent obsession of good. As Martin Luther King Jr. put it in his Baptist-preacher rhetoric, "The arc of history is long, but it leans toward justice." God's embrace, which is freeing, is stronger than Satan's grip, which is enslaving.

4.....The world, the nation, we ourselves are going through a rough patch. But we can choose to have faith that *the wolf will not win*. What makes Little Red Riding Hood a drama is not that she took dinner to her grandmother. What turned a mere fact into a drama was the story's interposing of an obstacle, a resistance, the wolf. No conflict, no victory/heroes/saints. No cross, no door to new life.

5.....Good news is more newsworthy than bad news, though bad news is more attention-getting. Beware of simplistic reading. "The good news of damnation" was what Robert Maynard Hutchins called it when he heard of the world's first atomic chain reaction (under Stagg Field bleachers at the university of which he was president, Chicago) and anticipated that it would put a freeze on major wars, which it has done. Now the globe has suffered a chain reaction of financial collapse, inviting a new self-examination, repentance, humility, sobriety, integrity, and *hope*.

6.....Times have gotten tougher for the devil, too, who prefers to work in the dark. The human tendency to evil, to sin against God and neighbor and the good earth, is now up against history's best facilities for *light against darkness*, "transparency," "total disclosure." Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" shows us evil, humanity at its worst, made visible; but also good, humanity at its best, anticipating Jesus' resurrection-victory over evil/sin/Satan/death. Some say "recovery" is years away; I rejoice that Easter is only three weeks away.

Comments

Please report offensive comments below.

TO FARNAZ2:

1

Thanks for the Talmud story. The last line is, for me, reminiscent of New Testament references to John the Baptist & "Jesus as the Christ": "May you [Akiva] be comforted by the footsteps of the messenger." / I liked to stop for the Talmud in the first room on the right as one enters the N.Y. Public Library. It's all there, in Hebrew & Aramaic (languages I was required to learn as a Christian biblical scholar).

2

My reflections on Mel Gibson's "Passion" were from my Jewish & Christian contacts. You seem unable to believe that some were "surprised that there was so little" anti-Semitic violence in reaction to the film; I remember at least four who expressed that. What's "Pharoanic" about my reportage? Where's the "idolatry"?

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 31, 2009 10:26 PM
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Rev. Elliot,

I gathered that 2,3 were for me. Thanks for your reply. Here is a nonreply for me, just a beautiful passage from Talmud for you to enjoy.

Farnaz

Rabbi Akiva's Laughter

"Once, several years after the destruction of the Holy Temple, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Eliezer ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva were going up to Jerusalem. When they reached Mt. Scopus, the site of the Temple came into view, and they tore their garments. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox dart out from the spot where the Holy of Holies had stood in the Holy Temple. The other rabbis began to weep, but Rabbi Akiva laughed. They said to him: "Akiva, you never cease to amaze us. We are crying, and you laugh!" But Rabbi Akiva said, "And you, why are you crying?"

The rabbis responded: "What? Shall we not weep? The place about which Scripture states (Numbers 1:51), 'And the stranger who draws close shall die,' has become a den of foxes? Indeed, this is a fulfillment of the verse, 'For Mt. Zion which lies desolate, foxes prowl over it.' (Lamentations 5:18)

Rabbi Akiva answered them: 'This is exactly why I laugh. For just as we have seen the prophecies of Jerusalem's destruction have come to pass, so too, know that the prophecies of her future consolation shall also be fulfilled. I laughed because I remembered the verses (Zachariah 8:4-5), 'Old men and old women will once again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with his staff in his hand because of advanced age; and the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets.' The Holy One, blessed be He, has declared that just as the first prophecies have been fulfilled, so shall the latter. I am joyous that the first have already come to pass, for the latter shall be fulfilled in the future.'

Said the rabbis, 'You have comforted us, Akiva, you have comforted us. May you be comforted by the footsteps of the messenger.'

(Rabba Eicha, 5)

POSTED BY: FARNAZZ | MARCH 30, 2009 9:35 PM
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"And I think you exaggerate the anti-Semitic violence the film provoked: some critics, having predicted it, were surprised there was so little of it."

It was next to impossible--in fact, it was impossible--for me to get any information outside of areas where I had personal connections. Do take a look at the Daily News and Newsday for that period. These are New York newspapers. There were also incidents in California and elsewhere.

"Surprised there was so little of it?"

Rev., I'm speechless. But consider the matter dropped.

I guess you startle me at times. You're clearly not unintelligent, are enlightened in any number of ways. Still from time to time, something oddly Pharoanic appears where once Willis was. In my neck of the desert, that's a big deal--idolatry, I mean. Keeps us on the lookout for sandstorms.

POSTED BY: FARNAZZ | MARCH 30, 2009 9:31 PM
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#3 to LEPIDOPTERYX:

Sorry I didn't make clear that this statement was my addition, not something you said:
"The notion that the category of the personal is limited to humanity is narrow-minded and arrogant."
But I hope you agree with me!

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MARCH 30, 2009 9:29 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Apologies to:

LEPIDOPTERYX:
Only my section 1 of "#2 to LEPIDOPTERXY" was for you.

FARNAX:
Sections 2 & 3 of "#2 to LEPIDOPTERYX" were for you.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MARCH 30, 2009 9:24 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

#2 to LEPIDOPTERYX:

1

Right you are about stories of caring. As an old Christian hymn has it, "By deeds of love and mercy / the heavenly Kingdom comes." But what turns stories into drama is (as I said) "obstacle, resistance," the personal-transcendent names being Satan/devil/demons. Of course one may choose to use only the impersonal term "evil," or even have no summary-word for the reality.

2

You may be unaware that many Jewish leaders & critics denied that the Gibson film exaggerated the anti-Jewish element in the Gospels. And I think you exaggerate the anti-Semitic violence the film provoked: some critics, having predicted it, were surprised there was so little of it.

3

I agree that the film is not high-quality. Not as high as the quality of its pre-promotion. But it's unfair to compare it with a Nazi masterpiece.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MARCH 30, 2009 9:12 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Rev. Elliot,

"The critics (Jewish/Christian/secular) were & are, predictably, all over the place."

Yes, indeed. They, however, were surely of less concern to the Jews whose windows were shattered by rock-throwing Christian gangs in the wake of their "uplifting" film experience. Equally unimportant were those self-same critics to the Jews whose jaws were broken, arms were broken, for those tormented at work and at school by the newly inspirited Christian film-goers.

"It made 750,000,000 for Mel Gibson," and that said an actor, "is the important thing."

As film, it was IMHO unimpressive, not within a thousand miles of Riefenstahl's "The Triumph of the Will," but Gibson could never have mustered such talent, and it did do the job for old Jew-hating, Black-hating, Woman-hating Mel.

None of this is to say that the film couldn't have been good for your soul, comforted you, etc.; however, the fact that it had a rather different, predictable (and predicted) effect on others needs to be considered, as does the despicable cover-up of the circumstances surrounding its release, the denial of the (predicted) consequences to the innocent.

Regards,
Farnaz

POSTED BY: FARNAZ2 | MARCH 30, 2009 6:10 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Rev -

"Every human encounter with opposition is an occasion for drama. The Bible's drama is richer than merely horizontal (human-human personal encounters); it is also vertical (suprahuman-human personal encounters)."

Let's take the RRH analogy a little further, shall we?

I guess I just don't understand why it's not sufficient for RRH to bring food and wine to Granny just cuz Granny's under the weather. Is RRH's deed more virtuous because there was a wolf in the woods than it would have been without him?

Seems to me that without the goodie basket, Granny could have died of hunger or dehydration. So RRH was already on a quest to save Granny's life - just by bringing her a snack. Is the person who saves another from death by fang and claw somehow more godly than one who saves another from death by starvation?

Why do we need a wolf/devil to make the story of one person taking care of another person worth telling/hearing?

"The notion that the category of the personal is limited to humanity is narrow-minded & arrogant."

Where exactly did I say any such thing?

POSTED BY: LEPIDOPTERYX | MARCH 30, 2009 3:48 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO FARNAZ:

Yes, for me, experiencing Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" was (as you said it could be) "a few hours well spent."

To the public's experiencing a work of art, the artist's character & motives are relatively unimportant (though to critics, everything knowable about a work of art is important).

As a professional biblical scholar, I found in that film nothing exceeding artistic license (i.e., no significant deviation from textual data). The critics (Jewish/Christian/secular) were & are, predictably, all over the place.

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 30, 2009 3:16 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO LEPIDOPTERYX:

Good question.

1

As I said: no wolf, no fairytale ("R.R.Hood").

No "obstacle, resistance," no drama.

And, as you extend,

no "devil," no Bible-as-drama.

2

But you exaggerate (going beyond what I said) when you say "the only reason for the devil" is to make the Bible dramatic. Every human encounter with opposition is an occasion for drama. The Bible's drama is richer than merely horizontal (human-human personal encounters); it is also vertical (suprahuman-human personal encounters). The notion that the category of the personal is limited to humanity is narrow-minded & arrogant.

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 30, 2009 3:02 PM
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4.....The world, the nation, we ourselves are going through a rough patch. But we can choose to have faith that the wolf will not win. What makes Little Red Riding Hood a drama is not that she took dinner to her grandmother. What turned a mere fact into a drama was the story's interposing of an obstacle, a resistance, the wolf. No conflict, no victory/heroes/saints. No cross, no door to new life.

So the only reason for the devil is to make the Bible a more interesting story book?

POSTED BY: LEPIDOPTERYX | MARCH 29, 2009 6:22 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Hi Rev. Elliot,

I hope you are well. I think the Devil has possessed ole Mel Gibson for a long, long time, as witnessed in his atrocious "Passion" and subsequent drunken antisemitic, anti-black, anti-feminist spewing.

Interesting to note that the "Passion" opened first in Dubai (hardly objective when it comes to Jews). In the weeks before it appeared in America, it was given tons of publicity on network television shows, magazine types, talk-show types, etc. Still scared of possible consequences, ole devil-possessed Mel publicized its opening in only one theater, that one in Muslim neighborhood, Cobble Hill, in Brooklyn, New York. Call, search the net, do what you would, the only theater announcing a US showing of the "Passion" was that one.

It gets curiouser. In the midst of it all, a number of priests wrote to the New York Times vehemently protesting the film, deeming it alien to their Catholic Christian sensibilities, anti-Christian, etc. There were, as I recall, more priests than ministers fuming, as it were.

In the meantime, ole demonic Mel, figuring he'd had enough hype in his favor, decided to let the film run generally, that is, to let it run in numerous theaters across the US on the same day it had been scheduled to open in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, Brooklyn, New York.

Although it was widely reported that no antisemitic riots took place, of course they did and were reported in local newspapers.

I watched all this quite carefully to see if it might merit an article. It did, and I subsequently published it. I closed it with the comment of a television actor: "It made 750, 000,000 for Mel Gibson, and that's the important thing."

Still, whatever gets you through the days and nights, Rev. Elliot. If you derived some peace of mind from the film, if it meant something to you and caused you no harm, caused you to do no harm to others, then your watching it was a few hours well spent.

Farnaz

POSTED BY: FARNAZ2 | MARCH 29, 2009 5:13 PM
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TO PAGANPLACE:

I wrote you a long response & clicked "Submit," but it didn't register. Tried again; no success. Anyway, I always appreciate your comments. I'll try to recover what I sent you.

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 29, 2009 3:29 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Hi, Reverend: It's a problem with dualistic 'logic,' actually: it tends to assume everything we can seem to see, in our minds, in or out of a book, whatnot, either 'exists' or 'does not,' and furthermore, tries to identify part of what 'exists' with perhaps some aggressive or painful form of 'not-existing.'

No wonder people can't think straight:

"But all thinkers face prior questions: (1) What does "exist" mean? Ancient Greek philosophy taught us to distinguish being/becoming/nonbeing and to ask why there is anything instead of nothing."

Who taught you that these three parts were in fact two separate and opposed things?

"(2) Does evil exist, or is it only the absence of good? If one concludes for the latter, the question of evil as personal (Satan, the devil, demons) or impersonal does not exist."

We're humans right now. We tend to take *everything* personally. But who taught you that there was this 'choice,' you frame, 'Does evil exist or is it the absence of its opposite?'

May as well ask if a light switch turns out the dark. :)

There's always a third option, at least: often a synthesis.

In this case, that 'evil' is an illusion. Part of a 'definition.' What we think of as Goodness can be an active, living force that requires no negation. Its being present does not mean it must be 'absent' when not perceived, and nothing says the 'default state' of a world without such must be 'evil.'

What moralists call 'good and evil' and muddle up with other virtues and fears is itself a thought, too many. A meme of polarization, like a coin of two sides we're taught to flip constantly when we could be looking and feeling and communicating.

Plug a bunch of *kind of random text* into this dualistic illusion, call it 'authority beyond reason, but try to plug it into reason,' and you have an equation for corruption in the name of 'righteousness,' and blindness to that which one may do in that name, in the guise of 'opposing evil.'

Maybe call it 'reason' or 'Better Than.'

But in logic, it's all about what you take as 'givens.' These can be chains, better let fall around our ankles than struggled against.

People can do bad or random things when faced with poor choices.

I'd rather trust a heart than words, that way. And I do love words. :)

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | MARCH 28, 2009 3:10 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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