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Pagels, Elaine. *The Origin of Satan*. New York: Random House, 1995.

Elaine Pagels writes about how Satan came into being in our worlds and the social impacts that it has on human relationships. Pagels analyzes sources such as Roman laws and procedures as well as the gospels and Jewish archives in order to find the beginnings of the figure Satan. In her book, she claims that “Satan” is the term we used in order to demonize those who are not “us” and to isolate who the enemies of God, and therefore us, are (13).

In the introduction, Pagels goes over her initial thoughts when approaching this topic, and how she had consulted many other scholars’ works and analyzed them in order to form her own conclusion about the possible origins of Satan (xvi). She then goes on to talk about the various viewpoints that she had observed and even agrees to some of them, such as that the Romans had executed Jesus on political grounds, rather than religious ones (xxi). The introduction continues by showing the many discrepancies and issues with the gospels and whether or not they can be historically accurate, but Pagels writes that maybe the writers of the gospel were not writing for historical accuracy (xx). Pagels writes further that, based on James Robinson’s works, “the gospel of Mark is anything but a straightforward historical narrative; rather, it is a theological treatise that assumes the form of historical biography (xx). At the end of the introduction, Pagels mentions how she will be discussing the social impact of Satan, and “how the events told in the

gospels about Jesus, his advocates, and his enemies correlate with the supernatural drama the writers use to interpret that story—the struggle between God’s spirit and Satan (xxii-xxiii).

In the following chapter, titled “The Gospel of ark and the Jewish War,” Pagels provides contextual background about how Jesus appeared in the gospels and how Mark, Luke, and John each wrote about his story. Pagels says that “Satan becomes, among other things, a way of characterizing one’s actual enemies as the embodiment of transcendent forces. For many readers of the gospels ever since the first century, the thematic opposition between God’s spirit and Satan has vindicated Jesus’ followers and demonized their enemies” (13). In saying this, she explains how we use “Satan” in order to isolate and recognize our enemies as evil. Pagels also goes on to explain her analysis of the gospels and how the shift of blame of Jesus’ death slowly went from “the nations” (15) to some of Jesus’ own followers. Then she writes about the part of the gospel where Mark is writing about the two trials Jesus went through (25). The earliest uses of “Satan” was used against the Jews, and in this passage, Pagels proves further about how the Jews were targeted by the gospels. She writes about how there is surely no true witness that could keep record of the events that happened at either trial, and that it is certain that the author of Mark would not be focused on historical accuracy. This is because “Mark wants to show above all that the well-known charge against Jesus—sedition—not only was false but was invented by Jesus’ *Jewish* enemies; further, Mark says, the Roman governor himself realized this and tried in vain to save Jesus” (25).

In defining who exactly “we” are and who “they” are, Pagels says that, according to Israelite tradition, “we” are “‘the people of Israel,’ or ‘the people of God,’ as against ‘them’—the (other) nations (in Hebrew, *bagoyim*), the alien enemies of Israel, often characterized as inferior, morally depraved, even potentially accursed” (36). This thought process in Israelite tradition

would certainly seek to demonize, or at least recognize, their enemies and phrase writings in such a way that would continue to pass on that outlook on other groups. The evidence that Pagels provides to explain how this worldview has survived for so long is because Israel's influence was spreading and winning victory after victory. When a group of people is successful like that, it's highly unlikely that they will want to change how they are operating, and definitely wouldn't change the fact that they are dehumanizing their enemies. Even King David himself had said about these victories, "By this I know—that God is pleased with me—in that my enemy has not triumphed over me' (Ps. 41:11)" (38).

Pagels brings up an interesting point about how writers in the 500s B.C.E. had used mythological and superhuman creatures in order to define their enemies. "The *satan* is not an animal or monster but one of God's angels, a being of superior intelligence and status; apparently the Israelites saw their intimate enemies not as beasts and monsters but as *superhuman* beings whose superior qualities and insider status could make them more dangerous than the alien enemy" (39). This shows how the Israelites were afraid of their enemies not because they were lacking or inferior, but rather because they are beings that are close with God and much more superior to humans.

Despite all of this interesting information and evidence, all of it is from a piece that is historically inaccurate to some degree. Pagels uses interpretation of texts, in most cases, to provide supporting evidence and that is not a strong way of gathering evidence. She could be interpreting the writings in such a way that is biased towards her argument. While I am still skeptical due to lack of a lot of unquestionable evidence, I do think that she brings up good points about the use of "Satan" to characterize one's enemies and to further the gap between "us" and "them".