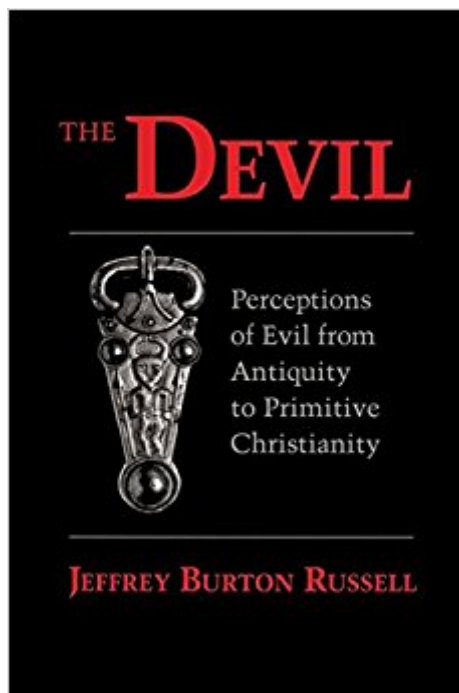




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# Devil: Perceptions Of Evil From Antiquity To Primitive Christianity (Cornell Paperbacks)



## Synopsis

This lively and learned book traces the history of the concept of evil from its beginnings in ancient times to the period of the New Testament. A remarkable work of synthesis, it draws upon a vast number of sources in addressing a major historical and philosophical problem over a broad span of time and in a number of diverse cultures, East and West. Jeffrey Burton Russell probes the roots of the idea of evil, treats the development of the idea in the Ancient Near East, and then examines the concept of the Devil as it was formed in late Judaism and early Christianity. Generously illustrated with fifty black-and-white photographs, this book will appeal to a wide range of readers, from specialists in religion, theology, sociology, history, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy to anyone with an interest in the demonic, the supernatural, and the question of good and evil.

## Book Information

Paperback: 276 pages

Publisher: Cornell University Press; 1 edition (September 2, 1987)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0801494095

ISBN-13: 978-0801494093

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 19 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #346,623 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #181 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Other Religions, Practices & Sacred Texts > Cults](#) #1982 in [Books > History > Ancient Civilizations](#) #2158 in [Books > History > World > Religious > Christianity](#)

## Customer Reviews

"Russell is not only a conscientious historian, anxious to examine in texts, myths, legends, art and literature the persistence and transformation of a particular idea. He is also an introspective essayist who acknowledges his own continuing struggle to understand the nature and source of evil." —Robert Coles, New York Times Book Review

"This is a serious work by a first-rate medievalist who has turned his eyes to antiquity in order to elucidate the sources of man's experience of the evil one. The result is scholarly, readable, and comprehensive. . . . Russell's notations are copious and impressive, attesting to the vast amount of research that has gone into this study. The text is richly illustrated with some fifty well-chosen plates. . . . An exceptionally lucid study and a major contribution to the field." —Review of Books and Religion

All readers . . .

will be enriched and stimulated by this honestly presented biography of the Evil One. The Devil, in religious myth, personal vision, and mystical reality, offers invaluable material for reflection and meditation." *Studia Mystica* "This fascinating story of 'the Devil' explores the concept and personification of evil (defined as 'the infliction of pain on sentient beings') from its ancient beginnings into New Testament times." *Seventeenth Century News*

This lively and learned book traces the history of the concept of evil from its beginnings in ancient times to the period of the New Testament. A remarkable work of synthesis, it draws upon a vast number of sources in addressing a major historical and philosophical problem over a broad span of time and in a number of diverse cultures, East and West. Jeffrey Burton Russell probes the roots of the idea of evil, treats the development of the idea in the Ancient Near East, and then examines the concept of the Devil as it was formed in late Judaism and early Christianity. Generously illustrated with fifty black-and-white photographs, this book will appeal to a wide range of readers, from specialists in religion, theology, sociology, history, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy to anyone with an interest in the demonic, the supernatural, and the question of good and evil.

WOW! What a book, and what a history lesson. The first half of the book covers so much mythology, ancient Eastern views of evil, and enough odd names and stories to make your head spin. Yet all along you start to see some similarities shared and transferred from culture to culture, until you finally hit the second half of the book, which deals with evil in the Hebrew and biblical context. This was (to me) the most fascinating section, as it is an area I knew a little more about already. The author uses many ancient apocryphal and extra-biblical writings to show the developing mindset that seems to have eventually led to the more modern view of evil and the Devil that is believed today. It is so hard to clear out the traditional thoughts that you have had all your life, and that made this section a bit harder, though surprisingly revealing too. If you strip away all that you know of the Devil, and simply use the few mentions in the Bible, you will find that the information is quite lacking from the whole story we hear now. Then you start to see how Hellenistic thought started coming in and influencing the text, to build the whole story we mostly now believe in the modern church. The influence of Dante and Milton adds to the story line, and the details grow and grow to a story that is nowhere to be found in biblical text. Even the non-canonical writings add to the story, filling in many of the gaps that the Bible has in this story. How much emphasis should we put on those extra bits and pieces? Is the "Devil" a member of the heavenly council of God, doing the evil? Is he a fallen angel, and if so, did he fall for pride against God as some tell us, or

was it for lust as the book of Enoch displays? Was his fall before the fall of Adam, or just prior to the flood? These and so many more topics are examined in detail, making this a fascinating, and sometimes mind boggling look at the topic. In the end, I do not know if what I have learned is more for the better or the worse on this topic. There is much more to it than I had originally thought, and now in some ways I am a bit more confused on where I stand on certain aspects. All in all though, a good read that looks at many questions, many histories, gives many answers, and in the end just makes me wonder even more. Fortunately, there are more volumes in this series that might provide further answers; so I will refrain from making any decisions on where I stand on this whole topic.

Great insightful book

An excellent historical account!

An excellent work from Burton Russell!!! The book focuses on the main theme of devil from the old testament until the primitive christianity. It's a very interesting research from a historian and despite its age, it remains classical and must read!!!

perfect

If one does decide to read this tome it is recommended that the second chapter be paid close attention for therein the author reveals a formula for arriving at his definition of perceptions. Without considering his approach as described in Chapter 2 the value of the work may be overlooked. If you are seeking an objective description of the devil, so called, then keep looking, for Mr. Russell's honesty is sobering in that he makes it very clear that as far as one can ascertain there is no true definition, as such, rather there are only developing views as to what the devil is as a living history. He insists that evil is the infliction of suffering upon others and that this infliction is the only objective reality we must face as undeniable. He does offer valuable insights into the historical development of the concept of evil. In the end he states his personal opinion as to the existence of the devil and does summarize with a thorough enough bibliography.

Though I find myself having many negative things to say about this book in this review, a few pervasive aspects of Russell's assiduous research and writing inevitably atones for these negative aspects. Russell opens his four volume series spending 1/4 of this book discussing evil in

ancient cultures other than in Israel. Only in the last quarter does Russell discuss anything relating to the Biblical Satan. Though this is defiantly interesting material, it left me wondering what it had to do with the stated purview. This material would make a fine piece of literature outside this series, but it had nothing to do with the Biblical devil. Not even Russell discusses its relevance. The first chapter could have been cut from the book without any consequence, Russell would have just as easily make his case without it. When Russell does occasionally mention outside influences on Old Testament he admits that there are only a few at most, and what few that do exist are tentative and speculative anyway. The only influences that are mentioned seem only to be on the apocryphal texts any way. Russell does a marvellous job as a historian, but whenever he goes off on excursions into theology one can see that he is out of his depth. The mere fact that he goes on these excursions raised my eyebrow when one remembers that the \*very first\* words of this book state that "This is a works of history, not of theology". It's not the actual excursions that disappoint me, it is the combination of the two facts that 1) his explicit statements that he isn't going to but does, and 2) his orate diatribes against Yahweh, most of which are frivolous and at the very least invalid. Though it is inevitable that one has to ask theological questions such as "why does God allow evil" as Russell does, it makes me wonder why he asserted at the beginning and the end that theology is untouched in this book. I was left a little bewildered by these theological excursions, on the one hand he brings up many fine and well articulated arguments, and on many occasions treats these points in authoritative and impartial manner, but on the other hand he makes use sophistry, intentionally or not I do not know. On page 185 Russell asserts that the religion of the ancient Hebrews was more polytheistic the monotheistic. Russell quotes a passage from Psalms (82:1-7) as evidence. Russell quotes God as referring to other angelic beings as "Gods", whereas the actual passage uses only lower case 'g'. To the uninitiated this may seem negligible if not irrelevant, but as most educated readers will know the upper case 'G' denotes of the supreme Biblical god, whereas the lower case 'g' denotes a false god or idol. So contrary to Russell's implicit assertion that God in the passages referring to other 'gods' the fact is that when the passage is not misquoted, God in the passage is actually referring to the fallen angels/demons who were commonly worshipped by humans as false gods' or idols. I refuse to believe that a learned historian such as Jeffery Russell is ignorant enough make mistakes such as this and fail to make the distinction between the 'God' and 'god'. I think that this is a deliberate misquote in order to deceive the readers and to discredit the Bible and/or God himself, if not he has done this to try and give this thesis credence. I hate to say it, but this is what it seems. On page 199 Russell attempts to portray God and Satan as 'work buddies', though Russell acknowledges Satan's obvious opposition to God, but he still goes on to suggest that it is Satan's

job to persuade God for two taken morally wrong actions, this is but one interpretation, and questionable at that. It is more likely that God accepted Satan's challenge to prove how righteous Job and actually was, and in doing so Satan's actions and intentions were shown to be malevolent. This proof would be testament to the angels/demons/Satan's and humans that God is omniscient and to be trusted, but Satan is maleficent and devious. Without such proof God's omniscience could be legitimately questioned. Job, as a righteous man, would have been happy to go through such trials for such an ends. Russell asserts that as the social moral situation changed, then the Torah writers suitably changed the nature of Yahweh. This assertion is solely based on the assumption that Yahweh was fabricated entity. Yet is it no less plausible to assume that as the political and military/defence situation changed then Yahweh changed his rules? Both are assumptions based on prior thesis/prejudices, neither of which is any less valid, both are to be taken on faith from one's world view. Being a born and bred devout protestant, this book became an assault on my prior inherent perceptions of demonology. It was constantly giving me a reality check of where many of the ideas about Satan came from; extrapolation from scripture, not scripture itself. Though there are many instances where Russell's reasoning is below par and invalid, he constantly recovers to deliver many poignant arguments. Russell makes it clear that the story of Satan has constantly evolved. His impartiality is such that one cannot tell whether Russell believes that Satan himself has gone through this change or if it is just the character/idea of Satan that has evolved, this is a great credit to the clear and unbiased nature of this work. But overall this book is quite good. Though if I was the editor I would have cut out some rather large chunks that are interesting, but ultimately have no impact whatsoever on Russell's thesis. And on many theological points I would have referred him to a theologian to correct many other parts of his theological reasoning. For these two above reasons I'm tempted to give this work a rather low rating, but so many times in this book Russell picked himself up and gave some five star material. And for this reason I am somewhat reluctantly giving it a generous four stars.

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