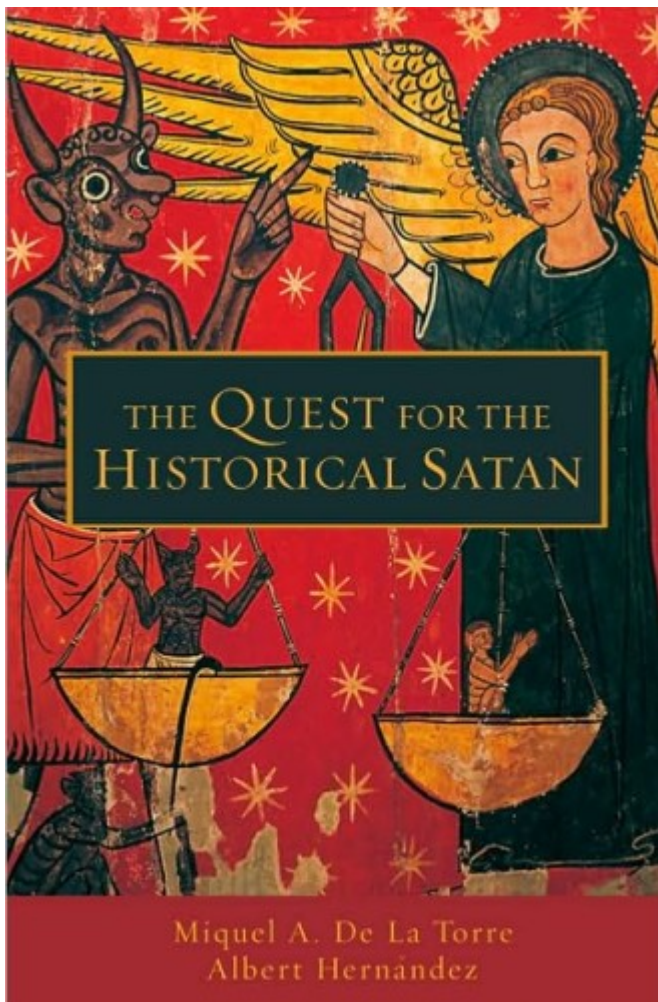


The Quest for the Historical Satan, by Miguel A. De La Torre and Albert Hernández
reviewed by [Robert Cornwall](#) in the [January 9, 2013](#) issue

In Review



The Quest for the Historical Satan

By Miguel A. De La Torre and Albert Hernández
Fortress

According to Albert Schweitzer, the quest for the historical Jesus ends with the questers looking down a well and seeing their own reflections. Could the same be said of a search for the historical Satan? With few exceptions, we have tended to see

Satan in the face of the other. Satan has proved to be a useful foil to describe one's enemies and to make sense of the continuing presence of evil and suffering in the world, whether or not one believes in a literal Satan.

A quest for the historical Satan has been undertaken for the purpose of understanding how this image came to be, how it has been used in history and how, despite technological progress, it is still used to explain the fact that evil remains with us. Leading this quest are two professors from Iliff School of Theology, ethicist Miguel De La Torre and historian Albert Hernández. They begin in the present, introducing us to the ways in which Satan is portrayed by Hollywood and by various religious communities. From there, they go back to Egyptian mythology and move through early Jewish developments and on to evolving Christian and Muslim understandings.

Satan began as a trickster with an ambiguous identity and became the embodiment of absolute evil. The evolution of this image is fascinating and enlightening, and as we delve into it, we discover that many of our assumptions about Satan and evil are misguided and mistaken.

Why this book? The vast majority of Americans say they believe not only in God but in a literal Satan. A 2000 Princeton survey suggests that 75 percent of Americans believe in Satan, and a 2007 Baylor survey reached similar results. Books and movies, whether religiously oriented or not, give evidence of our fascination with the dark side of reality, and some American Christians believe that the United Nations is a satanic entity. All the evidence suggests that we continue to believe that "Satan is alive and well on planet earth" (as in the title of a 1972 book by Hal Lindsey).

In their quest to tell the story of the evolution of human understandings of the figure of Satan and other personifications of evil, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Hindu, the authors discovered that through the ages there has been great variation. In the book of Job, Satan is a member of the heavenly court whose responsibility is that of accuser and prosecutor. Whatever mischief Satan causes is at the direction of God. Later, especially after the postexilic encounter with Zoroastrianism, a dualism set in, and Satan began to emerge as a powerful opponent of God. By the time of the New Testament, Satan was often seen as the personification of absolute evil, a view that continued to develop into the patristic era and on through the medieval era.

As an exclusivist Christian monotheism engaged the Hellenistic syncretism that dominated the Roman Empire, it interpreted such options as expressions of the demonic and the Satanic. Dualistic tendencies were present, but some of the more adept theologians, such as Augustine, recognized the danger of seeing evil as having an equivalence of the good; thus Augustine portrayed Satan as real, but not as a rival to the good.

Satan came of age as Christians gained power in the time of Constantine and began to suppress their rivals, whom they viewed as minions of Satan. Charlemagne sought to resist evil by forcing his enemies to convert on pain of death, and in the medieval age not only pagans but Muslims and Jews were envisioned as followers of the Antichrist. During this era Dante defined what would become the most common understanding of the devil, while witch hunts led to the suppression of women. Later, colonizers rationalized their violent conquests as acts of liberating their subjects from demonic oppression. The pattern continued in the modern era as the enemy, whether it was Hitler, communism or Islam, was cast as the embodiment of evil.

Although we moderns may be more skeptical of supernaturalism, we remain fascinated by the continuing presence of evil and by the image of Satan. The authors suggest, however, that we may have lost our fear of Satan. Indeed, perhaps Satan is now dead. But do we need Satan in order to believe in God? That is, do we need the image of Satan to help us explain the continuing presence of evil in the world?

If traditional views of Satan as the embodiment of evil are no longer satisfactory, could we benefit by a return to the earlier image of Satan as trickster (as in Job)? Could this image help us make sense of suffering and evil, while helping us let go of dangerous dualisms that lead us to demonize others?

Although we tend to portray the other as satanic, I agree with the authors' suggestion that the quest for the historical Satan leads back to us, especially those of us who are Christians. This quest, if we're open to its revelations, will help us exorcise "Satan and the demonic legions lodged within the heart and mind of an exclusivist and persecuting tradition."

Well researched and well written, with scholarly integrity, this book is accessible to nonspecialists. Readers will find themselves drawn in by the authors' exploration of

our fascination with images of evil, by the color plates that illustrate this fascination and by the stories from popular culture and legend that the authors weave together with textual studies from religious traditions ranging from Egyptian polytheism to Islam.

The quest ends close to home, revealing to us our complicity in demonizing the other and justifying our own engagement in acts of evil. It can be a frightening reminder, and the authors are to be commended for their courage in raising the question: Who is the historical Satan?