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Biblical Boogeymen, Holy Ghosts, and the New Demonology: A Review of Three Recent Books on Religion and Horror

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Abstract

This is a book review essay on three books: Brandon R. Grafius, *Reading the Bible with Horror* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Brandon R. Grafius and John Morehead, eds., *Theology and Horror: Explorations of the Dark Religious Imagination* (Fortress Academic/Lexington, 2021); and Steve A. Wiggins, *Nightmares with the Bible: The Good Book and Cinematic Demons* (Fortress Academic/Lexington, 2020).

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Wiggins, Steve A., *Nightmares with the Bible: The Good Book and Cinematic Demons* **(Fortress Academic/Lexington, 2020).**

In his cleverly titled *Reading the Bible with Horror* Biblical studies scholar Brandon R. Grafius employs theoretical models associated with the interpretation of horror movies to read the monstrous or haunting parts of the Hebrew Bible. Writing as someone who is not only a horror fan but has "grown up with horror" (as most fans probably have) Grafius is drawing an analogy between the impulse to sanitize, rationalize, or ignore horrific-seeming parts of the Bible and the impulse to dismiss or condemn horror films. And because theorists like Noël Carroll and Cynthia Freeland have examined how horror movies are uniquely equipped to do some important psychological work for both the individuals that watch them and the cultures that produce them, Grafius wants to use their theoretical framework to recover the similarly crucial work performed by the Bible's monstrosities and terrors.

In chapter two, Grafius uses monster theory to examine the role of Leviathan in the book of Job. Drawing on references to John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) and Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo's *À l'intérieur* (AKA *Inside*, 2007), he argues that the chaos represented by Leviathan speaks to a hidden aspect of YHWH, the supposed god of order who created the firmament to separate the waters, as well as to a hidden aspect of Job, YHWH's most faithful servant.

In chapter three, he employs Derrida's "hauntology" and a reference to J. A. Bayona's *El Orfanato* (2007; AKA *The Orphanage*)—which was unfortunately left out of the book's bibliography—to unpack the famous episode in which Saul visits the Witch of Endor to summon the ghost of Samuel. Pointing out that the semantic field of *elohim* encompasses ghosts, gods, and YHWH himself, Grafius briefly opens up a discussion into what I think would be the most fruitful avenue for cross-cultural research in this area: a theory of a ghost-centric substrate for religion that would encompass the widespread prevalence of ancestor worship and spirit possession cults, the near ubiquity of haunting experiences, and what we can glean from Upper Paleolithic grave goods about the role the dead played in the earliest human cultures.

Staying with the theme of haunting, the fourth chapter uses the haunted house trope to examine the haunted "house" (*beyt*) of David in the books of Samuel, Chronicles, and Kings. Taking up a new theme, that of the monstrous feminine explored in the work of Julia Kristeva, chapter five ("The Calls Are Coming from Inside the House!") makes references to proto-slasher films like *Black Christmas* (1974) and *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), imagining the "house" as the Israelite community in which the element of danger has already found its way inside in the form of a woman. Grafius argues that in the world of the Hebrew Bible (as, I would add, they are in many other cultures, especially patrilocal and/or patrilineal ones), women are perpetual outsiders and thus treated with suspicion. They are the strangers, and potentially the dangers, within. To make matters worse, they are often imagined as leaky vessels of fluid, not only because they menstruate but also (as Indian sexologists noted in texts like the *Kāma Sūtra*) produce their own sexual fluids in the form of vaginal lubrication.

In Grafius's sixth chapter, he focuses on the chaotic unpredictability and capriciousness of YHWH, reading the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Job in conjunction with the work of Rudolf

Otto but also alongside the underappreciated horror films *Frailty* (2001) and the Stephen King adaptation *The Mist* (2007). In his conclusion, Grafius describes horror's function in the Hebrew Bible in a way that might be called the "heuristics of horror," or "the inoculations of horror," or, at best, "the masochistic pleasures of horror." Though he previously used the phrase "pleasures of horror" in his introduction, there seems to be no place among the range of responses to horror in the Hebrew Bible for pure, unalloyed pleasure.

But this is no longer the case when we turn to the horrors of Hell in Christian soteriology. It was the 19th-century philologist and Anglican clergyman Frederic William Farrar who coined the term "abominable fancy" to describe the idea that, after the Day of Judgment, the already considerable joys of the saved in Heaven will be multiplied by looking down into Hell and observing the eternal torments of the damned. While some more or less inchoate form of the old Marcionite heresy that the God of the Old Testament is full of wrath while the God of the New Testament is a god of love still holds sway over many (non-Jewish) believers and non-believers alike, for most of Christian history the "pleasures of horror" were understood theologically *as an aspect of the experience of salvation*.

As distasteful as this notion is to many contemporary Christians for whom *schadenfreude* is rated as a guilty pleasure at best, no less important Christian thinkers than Augustine, Tertullian, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Jonathan Edwards propounded it in their lifetimes. Further, it was well grounded in their readings of Biblical passages like Psalms 58:10 ("The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance: he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked") and the parable of the rich man and the steward described in Luke 16.

And since the tortures of Hell (no less in certain forms of Buddhism and Hinduism than in certain forms of Christianity) are imagined in terms calculated to frighten hardened sinners into

repentance, the infernal horrors serenely observed by the blessed in Heaven must have been horrors indeed. No theater audience that cheers at a gruesome torture scene in a *Saw* movie can have more than a fraction of the pleasure experienced by the saved as they watch the endless suffering of sinners cast into Hell.

Indeed, it is salvation itself that takes the very same sights calculated to induce horror in the living and transforms them into pleasurable spectacles for the saved, making the abominable fancy an article of faith for those who want to preserve both the perfection of God's justice and the permanence of damnation (the latter recently having been the subject of theological and philosophical demolition in committed Universalist David Bentley Hart's *That All Shall Be Saved*). Imagining salvation required imagining Hell's horrors as well as the idea of watching them with pleasure.

These theological aspects of horror are explored by some of the authors in *Theology and Horror: Explorations of the Dark Religious Imagination*, edited by Grafius and John Morehead. The book consists of four parts, each comprising three essays. The first ("Horrifying Foundations") is dedicated to providing the volume's theoretical grounding and *raison d'être*, and the three subsequent parts ("Christianizing the Monster," "Paranormal World, Monstrous History," and "Readings in Theology and the Horror Film") are there to provide case studies. The twelve essays cover a range of disciplines, including religious studies and theology, but they also include contributions from media scholars, an anthropologist, and a psychotherapist.

In the first essay, Douglas E. Cowan argues that the horrifying-yet-humorous hellscapes in the fiction of Clive Barker and Edward Lee "allow us to interrogate and extrapolate three central theological concerns: cosmology, theology, and theodicy," and thereby explore, if not reconcile, the contradictions between the sense of natural justice by which the wicked should suffer

proportionally for the suffering they inflicted on others and Christian teachings about salvation in which Christ can redeem any sinner.

Cowan calls this contradiction the "'Hitler in Heaven' problem" but he could as well have called it the "'Duryodhana in Heaven' problem," the source of the particular horror experienced by the aged and righteous king Yudhiṣṭhira, hero of the *Mahābhārata* epic, when he climbs the Himalayas into Heaven and is heartily welcomed by the cheerful spirit of his villainous cousin and bitter enemy Duryodana (which turns out to be an illusion). I use this example to support and extend Cowan's argument by observing that in South Asia, elaborate mythmaking and narrative world-building have long been used to explore the contradictions of what in the Sanskritic context is called *dharma*, a term that covers ethics, natural law, religion, and much else.

In the next essay, Steve A. Wiggins traces the conventions of horror fiction (and later, movies) that are usually attributed to the Gothic novel all the way back to the religious imagination of the Hebrew Bible. The argument is sound enough, but Wiggins would have done well to engage the material covered in Irving Finkel's *The First Ghosts* (2021), namely, the demons and spirits described in the Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform tablets that predate the Hebrew Bible. The development and expansive proliferation of these ideas in the popular and learned demonologies of Eurasia appear to have made a parallel tradition that spread along the Silk Roads and was continually influential on the same medieval, early modern, and Romantic writings whose Biblical genealogies Wiggins traces. Both David Gordon White (2021) and the Indian-Canadian Gothic scholar Devendra Varma (1989) have identified the influence of Tantric Buddhist demonology on the image of Dracula, for instance.

In the final theoretical essay, Jack Hunter looks at weird and Gothic fiction to explore the dark side of the ambiguous "*Heilige*" as explicated in the influential work of Otto (whose 2022

biography by Yoshitsugu Sawai would have been a useful resource for the author). But scholars working in Lovecraft studies have long argued that the "Unnamable" that plays such a large part in weird fiction is as much an aspect of the numinous as the face of God, which Exodus 33:20 says no man can see and yet live (as gruesomely depicted in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)). Thus, Hunter does not bring much that is wholly new into this discussion, but his chapter (and Part I as a whole) fulfills its purpose of setting up the rest of the volume, which I will only be able to review in much less detail.

The first two essays of Part II do an excellent job of elucidating the creative tension between official religious doctrines and their far better known presentations in horror movies (which is the phenomenon I am referring to in this essay's title as "the new demonology"). I disagree with Karra Shimabukuro's description of cinematic exorcisms as examples of the *deus ex machina*, since the latter comes out of nowhere to conveniently save the day, while the exorcisms in *The Rite* (2011)*, The Exorcist* (1973)*,* and *The Conjuring* (2013) are climactic battles of good and evil to which the films' respective plots have been building. But Shimabukuro is surely right to point out that the Catholic Church, whose National Legion of Decency once had the power to doom a movie to box office failure, now has to contend with and sometimes accommodate (if not adapt to) its representation in horror movies in order to stay relevant to believers.

Another fascinating transvaluation is documented by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., who explores how the apocalypse once longed for by Messianic Jews, Christians, and Muslims has been transformed in horror movies into a terrifying disaster that must be stopped at any cost. He could have summed it all up with Idris Elba's iconic line from *Pacific Rim* (2013): "Today we are canceling the apocalypse!"

The essays of Part III are theological reflections on ghosts, werewolves, and zombie apocalypses, respectively. The book's fourth and final part begins with Mark Richard Adams' essay on the development of the religious worldview of the *Hellraiser* franchise. This is a difficult task since *Hellraiser* is a series notorious for including films made from scripts completely unrelated either to the original movie or to Clive Barker's source material, but which had a few scenes of Hellraiser's chief antagonist Pinhead clumsily shoehorned in to justify the title (i.e., *Inferno* (2000), *Hellseeker* (2002), *Deader* (2005)). Nevertheless, Adams presents a compelling argument for reading the series in light of its own discontinuity and heterogeneity.

In the next essay, Amy Beddows presents a feminist reading of what she identifies as the "religious matriarchies" modeled in the video game adaptation *Silent Hill.* And in the book's final essay, Wickham Clayton's analysis of the discursive function of Hell in the *Friday the 13th* franchise, perceptive though it was, would have benefitted from taking a multimedia approach. Especially useful would have been Paul A. Woods's *Hell Lake,* a 2005 novel set in the *Friday the 13th* universe in which Jason Voorhees is suffering damnation in a crowded but bleak stony landscape before rebelling against the infernal authorities and escaping back up into the human world.

After beginning with a useful introduction to the parameters and presuppositions of the field, then, *Theology and Horror* follows it with nine case studies that fulfill the promise of the title. It serves as a good starting point for those wanting to research or teach material of this kind.

In *Nightmares with the Bible: The Good Book and Cinematic Demons*, a follow-up volume to his *Holy Horror: The Bible and Fear in Movies* (2018), Steve A. Wiggins directly deals with what I have been calling "the new demonology," i.e., the popular conceptions of demons and other spiritual beings that are being propagated neither by learned elites nor by traditional preservers of

inherited wisdom, but by their powerfully influential representations in movies and other media. This is a fact as obvious as it is consequential. As Wiggins rightly observes in his introduction, "popular culture drives theology, not the other way around" (2). But even this misses the point that all theologians are also part of the *populi* themselves, making a sharp popular culture-theology distinction difficult to justify.

Increasingly, we should also note, the centrality of film to popular culture is being supplanted by a heterogenous community that includes not only television auteurs like Mike Flanagan and Ryan Murphy, as well as other content producers (e.g., Youtubers, Instagrammers, and podcasters), but also the fandom communities that receive, reject, or reinterpret the narratives they produce. One cannot understand the television show *Supernatural* (2005-2020) (a favorite among my students and a prolific producer of demonologies) without understanding the outsized scope and influence of its fandom on LiveJournal, Reddit, Tumblr, and other platforms. By the time the internet's most famous horror icon, Slenderman, had his own official horror movie in 2018, his popularity had already begun, peaked, and faded without the benefit of film or television. Fan culture drives content, not the other way around.

But Wiggins does not deal with new media or online fandoms, keeping his focus on horror movies and how they represent demons. In his introduction, Wiggins explains that the two strands of his inquiry are 1) the definition of demons and 2) their purported preference for female victims. Next, the first two chapters introduce demons and possession, respectively. As he has previously set up in his introduction, Wiggins argues that the lack of an authoritative, internally consistent, and widely held understanding of demons at the level of Christian doctrine has created space for popular culture to fill in the gaps, and that consequently many of the most familiar characteristics of demonic possession originate from cinema rather than scripture.

Chapters three through six present a genealogical prehistory of cinematic demons. In a narrative that will be familiar to many, Wiggins goes from Mesopotamian mythologies to the Hebrew Bible to the apocrypha to the New Testament to the writings of the medieval Scholastics. He then sets the stage for his main argument by describing the state of demonological affairs in the early modern period, in which grimoires and learned treatises provided a relatively clear nomenclature and taxonomy for demons while a hodgepodge of folk beliefs provided everything else.

What would have been useful to Wiggins's genealogy is the 1922 Swedish silent film *Häxan* (AKA *Witchcraft Through the Ages*), which serves as the bridge between Early Modern demonology and the dawn of cinema. *Häxan* presents rationalist psychological explanations of European witchcraft beliefs along with (far more memorable) lurid reenactments of the same, including a nude female somnambulist and a Satan-figure with a protruding tongue who beckons a wife out of bed while her husband sleeps. Notably for the timeline of Wiggins's argument, an edited version was re-released in the United States in the fateful year of 1968, aimed squarely at the counterculture with its avant-garde jazz soundtrack and narration by William S. Burroughs.

Instead Wiggins's film analyses begin with the second half of the 20th century. He starts in chapter seven with a look at humorous depictions of demons from five movies. Three of these (*Ghostbusters* (1984), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), and *Dogma* (1999)) are comedies, and two (*Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000) and *Drag Me to Hell* (2009)) are more like horror films with comedic elements. The next four chapters deal with four hugely influential and (for the most part) financially successful horror franchises in which demons play a central role: *The Conjuring, The Amityville Horror, Paranormal Activity,* and *The Exorcist*. Throughout, Wiggins draws our

attention to the tropes introduced by each film series and the prevalence of female victims in nearly every film examined.

His final chapter looks at the way post-*Exorcist* films have adhered to or diverged from the model it created, including not only "Catholic revival films" like *The Rite* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), but also *The Last Exorcism* (2010), a found-footage series whose first film notably features a secretly agnostic evangelical exorcist (who seems to be partially based on Marjoe Gortner), and *The Possession* (2021), based on the invented Jewish tradition of the "Dybbuk Box." Though he includes both Protestant and Jewish post-*Exorcist* visions, Wiggins leaves out the low-budget Turkish cult classic *Şeytan* (1974) (AKA *Devil,* AKA *The Turkish Exorcist*) a nearly shot-by-shot copy of Friedkin's original but with some important differences to cater to its Muslim audience.

Lacking a conclusion, the book ends with an epilogue that returns to the definition of demons and their preference for female victims. On the former point, Wiggins seems to add to the general confusion. In the same paragraph, he writes that demons cause confusion, presumably because their actions disturb the natural order, and that they are fundamentally conservative (and prefer female victims) because they represent patriarchal domination and because their cinematic appearance can be read as a backlash to the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. It would seem more accurate, though, to say that while *demonology* as a system is inherently conservative, *cinematic demons* are better understood as agents of chaos. A longer and more systematic conclusion would have been useful in synthesizing his chapter-by-chapter findings.

Finally, I would have liked Wiggins to have touched on the role of *The Exorcist* as the cultural source of modern possession experiences. The "cultural source hypothesis" refers to the idea that anomalous experiences like demonic possession are not only reported but also

experienced in forms given to them by existing theological, folkloric, and medical scripts. According to this hypothesis, the similarities in reports of UFO abductions are best attributed to the common features of most popular UFO abduction narratives. In his study of the "Old Hag" phenomenon, David Hufford criticizes the cultural source hypothesis as an unexamined a priori assumption rather than the product of any systematic study. The near universal acceptance of the cultural source hypothesis, Hufford argues, blinds us to evidence for an experiential source for such phenomena.

The Exorcist presents a golden opportunity to think through this problem by asking some questions: Why are so many of the phenomena associated with demonic possession today traceable to this film rather than the far less cinematic descriptions in the gospel accounts? Since some of the most iconic moments from *The Exorcist*, including the notorious "pea soup" scene, are partially based on a 1935 description of events that took place in Earling, Iowa in 1928, did the Earling possession case differ from other contemporaneous accounts or were its dramatic demonic symptoms par for the course? To what extent do the reports of actual demonic possession since 1973 resemble the scenes depicted in *The Exorcist* compared to the reports made before the film came out?

Cinema has been driving our demonology for a long time now. But how does this work? There may exist a recursive relationship like we can see with the early modern descriptions of the Witches' Sabbath, in which stereotyped accusations based on existing narrative accounts led to coerced confessions that confirmed and even elaborated upon those accounts, which led to updated stereotypes, which were recorded in still more detailed accounts, and so on. One promising future direction for the study of religion and horror that could answer this question would be to look at

the development of demonological ideas, images, and tropes in cinema alongside contemporaneous accounts of actual demonic experiences to see how they relate to one another.