

Adam, Eve, and the Serpent: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity

By Elaine Pagels

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Deepens and refreshes our view of early Christianity while casting a disturbing light on the evolution of the attitudes passed down to us. How did the early Christians come to believe that sex was inherently sinful? When did the Fall of Adam become synonymous with the fall of humanity? What turned Christianity from a dissident sect that championed the integrity of the individual and the idea of free will into the bulwark of a new imperial order—with the central belief that human beings cannot *not* choose to sin? In this provocative masterpiece of historical scholarship Elaine Pagels re-creates the controversies that racked the early church as it confronted the riddles of sexuality, freedom, and sin as embodied in the story of Genesis. And she shows how what was once heresy came to shape our own attitudes toward the body and the soul.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The disgust felt by early Christians for the flesh was a radical departure from both pagan and Jewish sexual attitudes. In fact, as Princeton professor Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospels*) demonstrates, the ascetic movement in Christianity met with great resistance in the first four centuries A.D. Sex became fully tainted, inextricably linked to sin under the teachings of Augustine. This troubled sinner invoked Adam and Eve to justify his idiosyncratic view of humanity as permanently scarred by the Fall. Instead of being dismissed as marginal, Augustine's grim outlook took hold, according to Pagels, because it was politically expedient. Now that Christianity had become the imperial religion, Rome wanted its imperfect subjects to obey a strong Christian state. This highly provocative history links the religious roots of Western sexual attitudes to women's inferior status through the centuries.

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From Library Journal

Pagels explores the development of the ideas of human nature, moral freedom, and sexuality in the four centuries following Christ. Focusing on the various interpretations of the Genesis creation stories, she concludes that early Christians regarded their message to be one of moral freedom and human worth. In the 5th century, Augustine turned the tide with his view of human depravity and original sin (which he linked with sexuality). She argues that his interpretations, implying human incapacity for true political freedom, appealed to the interests of the emerging Christian state and forged the mainstream of ensuing Christian theology. In her analysis, Pagels does not convincingly deal with other foundational biblical material, although she does ably dismantle Augustine's identification of sexuality with original sin. Cynthia Widmer, Williamstown, Mass.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

This virtuoso study may disquiet some readers and refresh others; the debate it opens is not likely to leave and reader unmoved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Alyson Hardy:

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Rafael Perez:

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Elbert Lupton:

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