

SOURCES, SECTS, AND SCRIPTURE: The “Book of Satan” in *The Satanic Bible*

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Michael Aquino reported in his history of The Church of Satan that in 1987 he had discovered that Anton Szandor LaVey had relied heavily on an earlier text, the pseudonymous Ragnar Redbeard’s *Might Is Right*, for the substance of *The Satanic Bible*’s “Book of Satan” and that LaVey had also appended a version of John Dee’s “Enochian Keys” to his text. Since then, the composite nature of *The Satanic Bible* has largely been taken for granted by scholars, though their evaluations of LaVey’s work have differed.

In a recent survey of Satanism, for example, Chris Mathews renders a harsh verdict, describing the composition of LaVey’s text as haphazard, a “hurried pastiche,” and an act of plagiarism. Mathews concludes that LaVey “stole selectively and edited lightly.”¹ Aquino himself had described LaVey’s work as haphazard and asserted that LaVey was not the “true author” of the Book of Satan.² Nevertheless, Aquino perceives *The Satanic Bible* as “inspired writing.”³ On his part, James R. Lewis also describes LaVey as borrowing substantially from *Might is Right*, claiming that LaVey only “added in a few sentences of his own.”⁴ Lewis does note, however, that *The Satanic Bible* functions at least as a kind of “quasi-scripture” for many Satanists.

Although Aquino provides a list of passages that LaVey used from *Might Is Right* in an appendix, neither he nor any other commentator has offered a systematic and detailed account of what LaVey took, changed, and omitted from his source text. By implication, LaVey’s editorial activity is presented as meaningless or simply evidence of his “haphazard” approach. This paper will argue, however, that LaVey’s editing of his source material was much more intentional than commonly portrayed and conducted in the service of his own ideological agenda. In his creative use of his source material, LaVey demonstrates the same dynamics of appropriation and innovation that Jesper Petersen generally associates with contemporary Satanism and other movements⁵ but also the creative use of sources employed in other scriptural texts in the broad Western scriptural tradition, such as the use of Q and Mark by the gospels of Matthew and Luke or the use of J, E, D, and P by the authors of the Pentateuchal narrative. Thus not only the function of *The Satanic Bible* in the broad Satanic community but also its mode of composition suggests that it can be considered a modern

This paper will also consider why Aquino and those who have made use of his source-critical work have not attended sufficiently to LaVey’s editorial activity. In Aquino’s case, the motivation seems clear. Anything that would highlight LaVey’s creativity would potentially cast doubt on Aquino’s assertion that his Temple of Set was the more highly evolved successor movement to the Church of Satan. His unmasking of LaVey’s sources for the “Book of Satan” was a part of an overall strategy of de-legitimation rather than a neutral act of historical investigation. Mathews makes similar use of Aquino’s research to buttress his negative evaluation of contemporary Satanism. Many of the comments about the composite nature of *The Satanic Bible* need to be read as part of a contentious discourse both about sectarianism within the orbit of the Church of Satan and broader attempts to de-legitimate socially stigmatize Satanism in general.

1 See Chris Mathews, *Modern Satanism: Anatomy of A Radical Subculture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), pp. 53-77, quotations from pp. 77, 65, respectively.

2 Michael Aquino, *The Church of Satan*, privately published, 6th edition, 2009; p. 54; available at www.xeper.org/maquino; accessed 12 August 2009.

3 Ibid. p. 53.

4 James R. Lewis, "Infernal Legitimacy" in Jesper Aagaard Petersen, ed., *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 41-58, quotation from p. 49.

5 Jesper Aagaard Petersen, "Introduction: Embracing Satan" in Petersen, ed., *Contemporary Religious Satanism*, pp. 1-24; see pp. 13f.