

## The Temple of Set

By C. K. Salmon

**Founder:** Lt. Col. (Ret.) Michael Aquino, Ph.D. (1946-)

**Founding Date:** IX<sup>1</sup>/1975

**Publications:** the *Scroll of Set* (a newsletter), a series of magical texts called the *Jeweled Tablets of Set*.

**Scripture:** The Temple of Set doesn't have any "scriptures" in the traditional sense of the term. *The Book of Coming Forth by Night*, the Setian revelation to Aquino in 1975 that prompted him to found the Temple of Set, is perhaps as close as one might come. But it is not a divine revelation to be believed in as absolute truth; rather, it is a *magical* text that Setians believe transferred the mandate of Satanism from LaVey's Church of Satan to the Temple of Set.

**Organization Structure:** The Council of Nine hold the executive authority. They appoint the High Priest of Set and the Executive Director. There are then six degrees [°] of initiation. From lowest to highest—Setian I°, Adept II°, Priest/Priestess of Set III°, Magister/Magistra Templi IV°, Magus/Maga V°, and Ipsissimus/Ipsissima VI°. The Temple of Set consists of seven Orders and eight Pylons.

**Unique Terms:** *Neter* [Egyptian, "god"], *Set*, *Setian*, *Xeper* (pronounced, KEPH-er [Egyptian, "I Have Come into Being"]), Working

**Symbols:** The scarab beetle of Egypt and the dawning sun, the Pentagram of Set

### HISTORY

The history of the Temple of Set is necessarily, in part, a history of the Church of Satan, the organization from which the Temple evolved. The Church of Satan has its own roots in the magical tradition that sprang from early Masonry, later Rosicrucianism, the Knights Templar, and Aleister Crowley's Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Anton Szandor LaVey (born Howard Stanton Levey) organized the Church of Satan in 1966. He presented a media-savvy, near caricature of Satanism that attracted an underground following in jaded 1960s Los Angeles. LaVey routinely stated that the Church of Satan embraced and embodied the principle of indulgence over abstinence. The public face of Satanism, with LaVey at the helm, was just a new name for Hedonism—albeit with a religious veneer. But, despite the cartoon-like nature of some of LaVey's public appearances and rhetorical postures, privately, the founder of the Satanic Church seems to have believed in an actual Satanic being, "the man downstairs," as he referred to the Devil. LaVey went so far as to compose a private pact with the devil that he allowed no one else to read.<sup>2</sup> LaVey's Satan was not the traditional "scarecrow of Jude-Christian tradition"; rather, "Satan . . . was understood to be an authentic metaphysical presence: a being not evil, but rather independent, assertive, and creative."<sup>3</sup> While casual members of the Church of Satan were allowed to see Satan as a mere metaphor, once one joined the Priesthood, "the allegory [ended]."<sup>4</sup>

In March 1969, on military leave to be married, Michael Aquino attended a lecture on "fortune-telling and character analysis"<sup>5</sup> held in LaVey's by-then notorious black house at 6114 California Street in Los Angeles, CA. Aquino quickly lost interest in the lecture itself, but LaVey fascinated him.<sup>6</sup> Aquino (along with his wife Janet) sent in their letters of application not long after. Aquino's talents were recognized early, and he quickly rose to prominence in the Church of Satan. Among his distinctions are that he performed the first *Missa Solemnis* as a relatively new Priest of Mendes (II°, the second degree, or level, in the Church of Satan), he performed the second Satanic wedding ever, he wrote portions of *Satanic Rituals*, he wrote the *Manual for Grotto Administration* (Grottos are the Church of Satan equivalent to Pylons), and, for years, he wrote for and edited the official Church of Satan newsletter, *The Cloven Hoof*.

Though he left the Church of Satan in 1975, Aquino still recalls his time spent in the organization with genuine fondness.<sup>7</sup> During the course of that particular year, however, he found that he could no longer, in good conscience, continue to be identified with the Church of Satan. The

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crisis point occurred when LaVey decided to begin selling priesthood offices. Rather than Satanists advancing through the degree system based solely on merit, LaVey announced a new policy through the *Cloven Hoof*: "...[P]rofessional services, funds, real estate, objects of value, etc., which contribute to the tangible, worldly success of the Church of Satan are qualification for elevation to both II° and III°."<sup>8</sup> Aquino, the newsletter's editor, cordially but forcefully objected. LaVey did not budge. He insisted that Aquino publish the article as written.

This brazen move by LaVey to profit from the Church of Satan infuriated many Satanic priests and priestesses (including another high-ranking Satanist, the priestess Lilith Sinclair, who would eventually become Aquino's second and current wife); a significant number of them resigned their offices in disgust. Michael Aquino, right-hand man to LaVey and a devout believer in an actual Satanic being, performed a Satanic Working intended to obtain an explanation from Satan. The answer was *The Book of Coming Forth by Night*, a personal revelation and mandate to continue the Work that had begun in 1966 (considered Year I of the Satanic Calendar).<sup>9</sup> The Temple of Set was born.

While the Church of Satan had privately professed belief in the "Lord Satan"<sup>10</sup> and honored him in secret ceremonies, its public face tended to mirror the surrounding pop culture. The Temple of Set, headed by Aquino, though, quickly moved "in an occultist and ceremonial direction"<sup>11</sup> in which Black Magic, in the form of magical Workings, featured much more prominently. Members are encouraged to use the organization, as well as the entity Set, as a magical tool box for their individual quest to *Xeper*, or "become." In essence, Setian philosophy is extreme individualism aided by occult magical ceremonies and practices.

To this end, the Temple embraced a decentralized structural organization that sought to maximize the benefits to individual Setians. Pylons serve as localized discussion and lecture forums for Setians; Orders are formal initiatory schools along the road to *Xeper*, whose individual members are often separated by great distances. The Order of Horus, for example, proclaims as its purpose "to make manifest the *netjer* HarWer . . . the brother of Set," through consciousness, action, and skills.<sup>12</sup> As another example, the Order of the Trapezoid is a chivalric organization whose goal is self-deification through antinomianism ("lawlessness").<sup>13</sup> Members are expected "within one year after II° recognition . . . to affiliate with an Order reflective of his or her personal interest and aptitudes."<sup>14</sup> Pylons, on the other hand, are the local "congregations" of the Temple, where members from the same geographical regions interact with one another, regardless of individual Order affiliation.

Unlike the contemporary Church of Satan,<sup>15</sup> the Temple of Set remains an initiatory organization. One is expected both to be recognized as worthy of full admission to an Order within the Temple (within three years of one's first affiliation) and to progress through the degrees. One cannot join simply for the perceived notoriety it might bring. Setians are expected to be utterly committed to their pursuit of *Xeper*.

The Temple of Set is highly selective in terms of whom it admits to official membership—"fewer than half of all applicants are accepted for membership with the two-year recognition period."<sup>16</sup> While primarily an American phenomenon, the Temple of Set boasts members from all continents save Antarctica. No reliable estimate of the Temple of Set's membership can be made; as a matter of policy, the group does not release such information to the public. Its membership was estimated at approximately 500 in 1984.<sup>17</sup> The Temple of Set has a fairly high turnover rate, and it is speculated that most members will remain in the organization for fewer than ten years.<sup>18</sup>

## BELIEFS

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It will be useful to remember that "dogma—to include fixed ideology in any form—is repugnant to the Temple."<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is not possible to construct a rigid list of Setian beliefs. Some general trends and tendencies, however, can be highlighted.

With Michael Aquino as its high priest (having been recognized as Magus V° and Ipsissimus VI°, the Temple of Set's two highest degrees), the newly-founded Temple of Set drew many former members of the Church of Satan into its fold. While Aquino writes that the Temple of Set was more an *evolution* of the Church of Satan than a *reaction* to it, the founding of the Temple of Set has a definite reformatory feel. As the Temple of Set evolved, it came to distinguish itself from several "corruptions" that had occurred in the Church of Satan:

1) LaVey had come to see Satan as merely a metaphor for personal indulgence; the Temple of Set views Satan (or Set-hen ["majestic Set," or just Set]) as a supra-personal entity (a being that transcends humanity).

2) While Satanism (as espoused by LaVey) was a glorification of animal pleasures, the Temple of Set holds that devotion to Set is bound up in the assumption that man's self-awareness and will separate him from mere animals.

3) LaVey's Satanism was anarchic—a matrix in which organizations were bound to collapse; thus, Satanism stressed rigid, centralized control of local Grottos; Setians, on the other hand, believe that Satanism is too complex for such control and that a cooperative, decentralized environment is necessary for their success.

4) While LaVey's Satanism tended to attract the sensually indulgent, the Temple of Set aims to attract philosophically-minded magicians with high personal standards.

Of course, the most significant corruption was that LaVey had “decided that the Church might as well be converted to a vehicle for his personal financial benefit,” rather than remain a vehicle for the Satanic evolution of individuals, based solely on perceived merit.<sup>20</sup>

**Christianity:** The Temple of Set—like the Church of Satan before it—reduces Christianity to a “moral propaganda device.”<sup>21</sup> Far from seeing Setian philosophy in opposition to Christianity, though, Setians hold that Set, not the traditional Christian God, is the ultimate reality of the universe.

**God:** In Setian belief, all traditional concepts of God (e.g., Christianity's God the Father, Islam's Allah, or Hinduism's Vishnu) are rejected. “God” is a generic descriptor for what is seen, *not* as the transcendent creator of the universe, but merely as “the balancing factor in nature.”<sup>22</sup> Setians do not deny the existence of “God,” but see “it” as an impersonal force that has “little concern for any suffering which we may encounter.”<sup>23</sup> In this sense, Setians do not see themselves as opposing the Christian God—as LaVey's Satanism was inevitably accused of doing—or any other god. Instead, they view themselves as *beyond* such simplistic, and individual-stifling, beliefs.

**Set:** Setians do, however, believe in an ultimate supra-personal entity. They identify this entity, not as God, but as *Set*. They believe Set was manifested as the most ancient god of Egyptian religiosity. Set enjoyed a long and varied career in the Egyptian pantheon. Originally the god (Egyptian, *neter*, NAYT-er) of the desert, Set came to be seen as the god “of disorder and confusion manifested in the elemental forces of nature.”<sup>24</sup> Set was the murderer of Osiris and archenemy of his brother, Horus. Later still, Set was viewed as the god of darkness, a god in opposition to all other Egyptian gods—a *neter* against the *neteru*. When the Hebrews left their captivity in Egypt, the Setian view goes, they took belief in Set-hen (“majestic Set”) with them in the form now known in the Judeo-Christian tradition as Satan.

Setians view Set, then, as the original Satanist: the “god” against all false, man-imagined gods. Set is the original individual consciousness of the universe. It would be wrong to surmise that Setians “worship” Set, in any traditional sense; rather, they pay homage to him as something of an elder magician who is useful to their individual quests. As Don Webb (V°), one of the movement's former high priests, states, “The ‘worship’ of Set is . . . the ‘worship’ of individualism.”<sup>25</sup> It is the realization that man's psyche, and the desire for that psyche to continue to live and experience existence forever, sets him apart from all other forms of life.

Webb compares a Setian's belief in Set to a sailor's belief in the ocean,<sup>26</sup> with individual Setians cast in the role of sailors of that ocean. Set, as the original, active intelligence of the universe, would seem to be both above humanity, and, also, in some sense, subservient to it. It is involved not only with mankind's quest for ultimate self-realization (read: “self-divinization”), but also, in a subservient sense, to mankind's achievement of that goal. In this sense, Set is more like a toolbox of personal evolution than a supreme being. While Setians believe that Set is some sort of entity (that is, “it” seems to be held as a “being” of some sort), they also believe that Set's ultimate goal is the evolution of the individual human's quest to become a god unto himself. When Set revealed itself to Aquino in 1975, the entity gave him a new magical word, *Xeper*: “to come into being.”

**Xeper—Man's Purpose:** According to Setian philosophy, the purpose of life is *Xeper*—“to become.” Although this notion assumes differing forms in various Setian Orders, essentially it is the belief that, through diligent personal work and magical exploration, “through deliberate exercise of the intelligence and Will,”<sup>27</sup> one can self-divinize: i.e., make of oneself a “god.” As Webb writes, “The Satanic religion proposes to raise the individual to personal godhood, free from enslavement to any other ‘God’ [or gods].”<sup>28</sup> This self-divinization process involves a facility with the Left Hand Path and Black Magic, as well as the guiding hand of Set.

**Christ:** According to Aquino, Jesus Christ was merely “an uncommon man whose understanding of human psychology ranks with those of Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, and Nietzsche.”<sup>29</sup> The Temple of Set, however, tends to regard Jesus as “a benevolent egomaniac rather than a god.”<sup>30</sup> While Jesus Christ may have been “necessary [for] social evolution” as were those

philosophers who preceded and came after him, Jesus himself was just a man,<sup>31</sup> in whom Setians have no significant interest.<sup>32</sup>

**The Bible:** In Setian thought, the Bible, along with all traditional religious texts, is seen as a refuge for those who feel a need for absolute truth. Setians, on the other hand, are much more interested in “working assumptions based on personal observations.”<sup>33</sup>

## BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Setian philosophy insists that Satanic religion “proposes to raise the individual to personal godhood, free from enslavement to any other ‘God’ [or gods].”<sup>34</sup> Essentially, this is the same lie that Satan told Eve in the Garden: “For God knows that when you eat of [the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). Satan promised that if she acted against God’s controlling influence, by directly disobeying him, her consciousness would be raised so that she, like a god, would be able to determine good and evil for herself. Satan’s lie brought death and evil into the world.

While Setians believe that Set is the ultimate reality in the universe, Paul writes that it is “In [God that] we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17.28). For Christians, the creator-God of the Israelites is the ultimate reality—not a shadowy “Lord of Darkness” whose goal is for humans to become gods unto themselves.

Setians teach that God is a mere balancing factor in the universe which, if it is able to think at all, cares very little about the suffering of humanity. But Jesus said that God is an active, loving Father to all of his creation: “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matthew 6.26); moreover, “not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matthew 10.29). Jesus asked his followers, “Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6.26). The message of the New Testament is that humans are incredibly valuable to the Heavenly Father and that he loves them so much that he sent his only son to live among them (John 1.14), to heal them (John 5.15), and to die for them (John 3.16).

Setians believe that Set is the source of human creativity. Christians know that Jesus Christ is the ever-flowing fountain of all creative power: “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1.3-4). Eternal life is not obtained through black magic, but through a relationship with Jesus Christ (1 John 5.11).

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Church of Satan christened 1996 as Year I of the Satanic epoch. The Temple of Set retained that calendrical system, thus making 1975 Satanic Year IX.
- <sup>2</sup> Michael A. Aquino, *Church of Satan* (San Francisco: Michael Aquino [unpublished Adobe© PDF document]), 351; available at “Recommended Reading [“Library”],” Temple of Set, [http://www.xeper.org/pub/lib/xp\\_FS\\_lib.htm](http://www.xeper.org/pub/lib/xp_FS_lib.htm) (accessed October 5, 2006). The Church of Satan disagrees with Aquino’s assessment regarding LaVey’s ever having believed in an actual Satanic being. The issue must be decided at the level of primary documents. In Aquino’s defense, he is an exhaustive, and apparently scrupulous, historian with regard to the history of the Church of Satan.
- <sup>3</sup> Webb, “General Information and Admissions Policies [“Info”],” Temple of Set, [http://www.xeper.org/pub/lib/xp\\_FS\\_lib.htm](http://www.xeper.org/pub/lib/xp_FS_lib.htm) (accessed September 3, 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 734.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Chapter 37, “Despair, Depletion, and Destruction,” of Aquino, *Church of Satan*.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 734.
- <sup>11</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, ed., *The Harper-Collins Dictionary of Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 963.
- <sup>12</sup> “Order of Horus,” Temple of Set, <http://www.xeper.org/ohorus/main.html> (accessed September 28, 2006).
- <sup>13</sup> “The Mysteries,” Temple of Set, <http://www.trapezoid.org/mission/mysteries.html> (accessed September 28, 2006).
- <sup>14</sup> Don Webb, “General Information” (accessed August 20, 2006).
- <sup>15</sup> “Home,” Church of Satan, <http://www.churchofsatan.com/home.html> (accessed October 2, 2006). The Church of Satan maintains that it “is not an initiatory

- organization” (emphasis in original). That is, one may become a registered member, by paying the requisite \$200 fee, without becoming an “active member.” In addition, in the Church of Satan, the monikers High Priest and High Priestess are considered “administrative titles” only, rather than overtly religious ones.
- <sup>16</sup> “Temple of Set,” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple\\_of\\_Set#History](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Set#History) (accessed October 3, 2006).
- <sup>17</sup> Bromley, David G., and Ainsley, Susan G. 1995. “Satanism and Satanic Churches: The Contemporary Incarnations,” in *America’s Alternative Religions*. Timothy Miller ed. (Albany: State University of New York), 401-9.
- <sup>18</sup> “Temple of Set,” Wikipedia (accessed October 3, 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> Webb, “General Information” (accessed August 10, 2006).
- <sup>20</sup> Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 164.
- <sup>21</sup> Webb, “Belief in Set” (accessed September 28, 2006).
- <sup>22</sup> Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 439.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Smith, 974.
- <sup>25</sup> Webb, “General Information” (accessed September 26, 2006).
- <sup>26</sup> Webb, “Belief in Set” (accessed September 26, 2006).
- <sup>27</sup> Webb, “General Information” (accessed September 10, 2006).
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> Aquino, *Church of Satan*.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*



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