When an American Prisoner Tried to Sue… the Devil

Among the strangest lawsuits in American legal history, the case filed by Gerald Mayo against Satan himself remains one of the most extraordinary. Convinced that the Prince of Darkness was responsible for all his misfortunes, the Pennsylvania inmate decided to seek justice in federal court.

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According to the complaint submitted at the time, Mayo claimed that the Devil was the source of his daily suffering. In court documents, he alleged that “Satan had on numerous occasions caused plaintiff misery and unwarranted threats.” He further argued that the Devil had deliberately placed obstacles in his path and was directly responsible for his personal downfall.

For Mayo, the matter was not merely symbolic or theological. The prisoner insisted that Satan and his “evil minions” had violated his constitutional rights — a claim so unusual that it left the American justice system facing both legal and philosophical questions.

The judge ultimately dismissed the case, though not without a touch of irony. One of the court’s primary concerns involved jurisdiction: there was no evidence proving that the Devil actually resided within the district where the complaint had been filed. In practical terms, the court could not determine whether it even had authority over the ruler of Hell.

Another major obstacle involved the delivery of a legal summons. Under American law, defendants must officially receive notice of the lawsuit against them. Yet few court officers appeared willing to undertake the journey to Hell in order to serve the necessary papers to Satan himself.

The bizarre lawsuit has since become a famous anecdote in American law schools, illustrating both the creativity of litigants and the very real procedural limits of the judicial system. It also serves as a reminder that even the most serious courts can occasionally find themselves dealing with cases worthy of satire.

More than fifty years later, Gerald Mayo’s attempt to sue the Devil continues to fascinate legal scholars and lovers of unusual history alike. After all, filing a lawsuit against Satan may be theoretically possible — but ensuring he signs the receipt is another matter entirely.

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