The Serpent's Identity in Genesis 3

A History of Jewish Interpretation from the Bible through the Thirteenth Century

Bryna Brodt
Department of Jewish Studies
McGill University, Montreal

August 2002

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-612-88623-9
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-612-88623-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

The garden of Eden's serpent appears only in Genesis 3 of the Hebrew Bible but its identity, role, or symbolism, have since been a matter of debate. Literal, allegorical, and mythical interpretations are evident in Jewish sources from the Bible until the end of the thirteenth century, but are not uniformly represented. Literal interpretations—those that rely on an actual serpent capable of communicating with Eve—account for the majority of Jewish interpretations, often to the complete exclusion of other possibilities. Allegorical and mythical interpretations of the serpent are found in the works of Philo and the Pseudepigrapha, disappear in the classical rabbinic texts, but then reappear in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and medieval Jewish philosophical and mystical sources. The patterns of literal and non-literal interpretation may be connected with the history of the concept of the devil within Judaism and with changing attitudes toward esoteric interpretations and midrash.

RÉSUMÉ

Le serpent du Jardin d'Eden se revèle seulement au troisième chapitre de la Genèse de la bible hébraïque mais son identité, son rôle ou son symbolisme ont dès lors été sujet de grands débats. Les interprétations littérales, allégoriques et mythiques sont présentes dans les sources juives à partir des temps bibliques jusqu'à la fin du treizième siècle, mais ne sont pas représentées uniformément. Les interprétations littérales fondées sur un serpent en tant que tel, dont la capacité est de pouvoir communiquer avec Eve, soutiennent la majorité d'interprétations juives souvent à l'exclusion totale d'autres possibilités. Cependant, les interprétations allégoriques et mythiques du serpent se trouvant dans les œuvres de Philon et dans les Pseudépigraphes disparaissent dans les écrits rabbiniques classiques, mais réapparaissent dans le *Pirqé de Rabbi Eliezer* ainsi que dans les sources médiévales juives philosophiques et mystiques. Ces tendances d'interprétation littérale et non-littérale peuvent avoir un lien avec l'histoire du concept du diable au sein du judaisme aussi bien qu'avec les attitudes qui varient envers les interprétations ésotériques et celles du midrash.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In pursuing and completing this thesis and my graduate studies, I have been fortunate to have many different sources of support, encouragement, inspiration and help. The brief acknowledgement and thanks that I offer here are only a token of my true appreciation.

Generous funding from the Fonds pour la Formation de Chercheurs et l'Aide à la Recherche (FCAR) allowed me to devote my time to my studies. While writing, Dr. N. Baumel Joseph also helped by employing me as a research assistant and being very understanding when I had to juggle her projects with my thesis work.

The faculty, staff and fellow students of the Department of Jewish Studies at McGill University helped me throughout the process, sometimes even in ways that have only become clear in hindsight. Courses that I took with Professors G. Hundert, L. Kaplan, C. Fraenkel, D. Abecasssis, were invaluable in allowing me to work with many of the sources. I hope that I prove to have been an apt student. C. Parish helped to take care of all the official details and was always there to answer whatever questions I had. D. Weiser, with her pragmatic and decisive nature, got me through the original paper that was the basis for this thesis. D. Herman made it a pleasure to be in school and J. DuToit convinced me there was a light at the end of the tunnel. M. Distefano lent me his M. A. thesis, with its helpful discussion of the grammatical issues in the narrative. J. Kalman was a perpetual source of knowledge, information, help, and books. I am particularly grateful to him for reading a draft of this thesis and making numerous suggestions, all of which I am sure I would have incorporated, if not for time and size constraints.

Of course, I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dean B. Barry Levy for the many ways he contributed to this thesis, but also for offering the greatest flattery of actually liking my work. He has taught me much over the past years, has sent many opportunities in my direction, and ultimately ensured that I would be able to submit my thesis on time by reading and correcting the various drafts and suggesting improvements.

I am also grateful to my family and friends for their support and encouragement, and most of all for their patience, as I perpetually had only a few more months to go until the end. My mother edited both an early and a late draft of the thesis and was willing to do much more. My siblings, father, grandmother, and other relatives always asked questions or wanted a copy and helped in various ways that are known to each of them. T. Newman lent me part of her computer, arranged a few printings, did some editing, listened, and made sure that I honoured what I was doing. Mme. Toledano and Y. Toledano also deserve mention and a special thanks for translating the abstract with lightning-quick speed and for being so gracious about it.

Lastly, I would also like to thank all the people along the way who seemed genuinely interested in what I was doing and who made me promise to give them a copy when it was finally done. They often helped to motivate me and I hope they enjoy and are able to learn from the final product. To all others I may not have explicitly mentioned here—and there are many—please accept my thanks and know that I do recognize and appreciate your part in enabling me to accomplish this goal of mine.

GENESIS 2:4 – 3:24

2:4 . . . When the Lord God made earth and heaven—5when no shrub of the field was yet on earth
and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth and
there was no man to till the soil, 6but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of
the earth—7the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of
life, and man became a living being.
8The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had
formed. 9And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and
good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.
10A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches.
11The name of the first is Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is.
(12The gold of that land is good; bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli.) 13The name of the second river is
Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush. 14The name of the third river is Tigris, the one
that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.
15The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. 16And the
Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; 17but as for the tree
of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die."
18The Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him."
19And the Lord God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought
them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that
would be its name. 20And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild
beasts; but for Adam no fitting helper was found. 21So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and,
while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. 22And the Lord God fashioned
the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. 23Then the man said,

"This one at last
Is bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh.
This one shall be called Woman,
For from man was she taken."

24Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh.

25The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame. 3:1**Now the serpent
was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the Lord God had made.** He said to the woman, "Did God
really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?" 2The woman replied to the serpent, "We may eat of
the fruit of the other trees of the garden. 3It is only about fruit of the tree in middle of the garden that God
said: 'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.'" 4And the serpent said to the woman, "You are not
going to die, 5but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like
divine beings who know good and bad." 6When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a
delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She
also gave some to her husband, and he ate. 7Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived
that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loinclothes.
8They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and
the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9The Lord God called out to the
man and said to him, "Where are you?" 10He replied, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was
afraid because I was naked, so I hid." 11Then He asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of
the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" 12The man said, "The woman You put at my side—she
gave me of the tree, and I ate." 13And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done!" The
woman replied, "The serpent duped me, and I ate." 14**Then the Lord God said to the serpent,**

"Because you did this,
More cursed shall you be
Than all cattle
And all the wild beasts:
On your belly shall you crawl
And dirt shall you eat
All the days of you life.
[15]**I will put enmity**
Between you and the woman,
And between your offspring and her;
They shall strike at your head,
And you shall strike at their heel."
[16]And to the woman He said,
"I will make most severe
Your pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children.
Yet your urge shall be for your husband,
And he shall rule over you."
[17]To Adam He said, "Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,'
Cursed be the ground because of you;
By toil shall you eat of it
All the days of your life:
[18]Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you.
But your food shall be the grasses of the field;
[19]By the sweat of your brow
Shall you get bread to eat,
Until you return to the ground—
For from it you were taken.
For dust you are,
And to dust you shall return."

[20]The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living. [21]And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

[22]And the Lord God said, "Now that man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!" [23]So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken. [24]He drove man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.[1]

---

[1] This text and all other original English citations of Scripture in this thesis are from *Tanakh: A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia; Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), unless otherwise noted. Bold typeface in this text is not original but is meant to indicate the portions that are most relevant for questions about the serpent's identity.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to trace the history of Jewish interpretation of the identity of the serpent that first appears in Genesis 3:1 of the Hebrew Bible. The serpent is well known as the biblical character in the garden of Eden that leads Eve into the sin of eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Yet, although reference to Eden's serpent might be well recognized, details about its referent are not as clearly delineated or as uniform. Who or what the serpent is, and what, if anything, it represents, have been continually redefined throughout history by biblical readers and commentators, and the uncertainties inherent in the text coupled with the creative variety of interpretive suggestions have ensured that no one interpretation has prevailed to the exclusion of all others. In literature representing more than two thousand years of Bible study, interpretation has not conclusively resolved whether the serpent should be identified literally as a natural serpent or whether an allegorical or symbolic interpretation is more appropriate. There is likewise no agreement as to the physical details of this serpent.

It might be suggested that the ultimate purpose of a history of interpretation of Gen. 3:1 should be to seek out the correct answer to the question of the serpent's identity. Indeed, it is hoped that this study will lead the reader to question the matter, but the goal is not to resolve a problem that has stood for millennia. It is an "oft-stated proposition that the true and sole task of the biblical scholar is to discover what the contemporary audience understood when the writer wrote what he did, and that such meaning, when recovered, is the one true meaning of the text."[1] A history of interpretation, such as this

---

[1] Nahum M. Sarna, "The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in Jewish Tradition," *Understanding Scripture*, eds. C. Thoma and M. Wyschograd (Paulist Press, 1987); reprint, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 75 (page citations are to reprint edition).

one, does seek out evidence of interpretation contemporaneous with the chosen biblical narrative, but it does not limit itself to this. The above-stated proposition "is predicated on the presupposition that the biblical writers consciously wrote only for their contemporaries."[2] Regardless of the veracity of this presupposition, the essential point for histories of interpretation is that commentators throughout the centuries have sought out the correct meanings of the Bible, because they believed it to have true and timeless relevance. Often, they also believed the text contained more than one correct meaning.

Thus, the aim of a history of Jewish interpretation of a particular biblical text or topic is to chronicle the variety of explanations that have been offered in the context of their authors and their authors' sources. This study looks not only at the answer to the question of who or what the serpent is but also at the basis for that answer, the textual support or exegetical approach that leads to it. The collection of the possible understandings of the text is important in itself, for it allows one to compare and contrast interpretations. When done in a chronological manner, such a study also reveals the lines of transmission of ideas and interpretations, exposing what is inherited and what is innovative. Inevitably, in tracing the history of interpretation, one concurrently also traces the history of related ideas and ideologies that have influenced the Jewish approaches to the Bible. The mystery of the serpent's identity represents a challenge to any biblical reader, and the manner in which the issue is resolved often reveals that reader's hierarchy of values.

The topic of the serpent's identity was chosen because it presents a conundrum for any reader, and most interpreters have chosen to comment upon it. The narrative is fairly straightforward, but it involves a talking serpent that tempts Eve and is punished by God. I was intrigued by the mental or logical gymnastics that might be necessary to accommodate a serpent who can speak and be punished for no less than altering the course of history of humankind. I was curious to know both the range of possibilities of explanation and the reasons why some might be chosen above others.

The history of interpretation has included the views that the serpent originally stood upright and could speak, that it was miraculously changed in this moment so that it

---

[2] Ibid., 76.

could speak, or that it never spoke but was possessed by a higher being and subject to a sort of ventriloquism. There have also been allegorical or symbolic interpretations, wherein the serpent is representative of a particular trait or a process in human motivation such as pleasure or the evil inclination. In presenting a novel interpretation about the serpent, or siding with a pre-existing one, the authors of various interpretations often state their position regarding the Bible in general, mythological or supernatural references within it, or the possibilities of multiple layers of meaning within the text, among other subjects. The garden of Eden's serpent is a locus for the expression of one's position on a variety of important subjects related to the Bible and its exegesis.

The Scope of this Study

Although the events that occurred in the garden of Eden are also important in religions other than Judaism, particularly in Christianity, this study is limited to the history of the relevant Jewish interpretations.[3] Where particular commentaries may have been influenced by Christian interpretations, this will be dealt with, without fully delving into the vast field of Christian interpretation relating to Eden's serpent.[4] This allows for a fairly complete Jewish study to be carried out within the permitted space. As well, this ensures that the subjects of the study share the primary tools with which they approach the Hebrew Bible text to as great an extent as possible. Each Jewish interpreter is usually

---

[3] The style of this study resembles Jeremy Cohen's *"Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It": The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* although its scope and methodology differ slightly. Its focus is not on one verse alone but rather on the two or three verses that are essential to the question of the serpent's identity. *Be Fertile* looks at both Jewish and Christian interpretation of Gen. 1:28 and chooses the Protestant Reformation as its end date, after which it is felt the verse and the Bible no longer have the same function in Western society. Although I follow Cohen's chronological model in reconstructing the "career" of the serpent's identity, I do not deal with the Christian source material as extensively as he does, and I chose an end date that is more appropriate to the particulars of this subject. That being said, this thesis nevertheless presents a more detailed analysis of the Jewish sources and has in fact tried to locate most of the relevant texts. Several previous McGill M.A. theses in Jewish Studies have also followed a similar model in tracing the history of Jewish interpretation of a particular biblical verse or topic.

[4] The garden of Eden's serpent also plays a large role in Gnosticism but this thesis does not foray into this subject. The history of Jewish interpretation of the serpent's identity can be adequately understood independent of the body of gnostic literature. (For more on this, see chapters 9 and 10). For an introduction to the topic of the serpent in Gnosticism, I refer the reader to Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988); Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling A Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. and ed., Robert McLachlan Wilson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987).

faced with the same text, in the same language, and with the biblical text playing a similar role in the interpreter's belief system. As one proceeds through the centuries, the corpus of interpretation about the serpent written up to that point will also form part of the common baggage with which Jewish Bible interpreters approach the text and the questions it generates. In this way, the history of interpretation of the serpent's identity becomes a history of the differences among interpreters and interpretations, and it is in this history that our present interest lies.

The temporal scope of this history of interpretation runs through until the end of the thirteenth century. Although ideally such a study should cover all relevant interpretations until the present day, it simply could not—the subject matter is too vast. The period covered spans from the time of the Bible until the end of what is known as the early Kabbalah.[5] Included within these limits are the most famous of the medieval commentaries and the major types of interpretations that were offered until the Middle Ages. The end date is not a random choice. Significantly, the literature of early Kabbalah represents a full return to mythical references first seen in some of the earliest interpretations of the subject. This thesis presents the equivalent of a full swing of a pendulum in the history of Jewish interpretations about the serpent's identity. Its findings are fascinating in highlighting the complete absence of this mythical element in textual evidence over a period of several hundred years.

Methodology

This history of Jewish interpretation of the serpent's identity is presented mainly in a chronological fashion. The study begins with an analysis of the primary text that involves the serpent, Genesis 3:1, and the surrounding narrative. Grammatical, textual, contextual, and other issues are analyzed to identify those characteristics that may contribute to various modes of interpretation. Continuing the focus on the Hebrew Bible, an analysis is also made of material in the rest of the Bible that may be of consequence

---

[5] According to Joseph Dan, the early Kabbalah is "the period of Jewish mystical creativity in Kabbalistic form bracketed by two literary creations of mystical theosophy: the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (The Book of Brilliance) marks the beginning of this stage and the *Zohar* . . . marks the end." Joseph Dan, ed., *The Early Kabbalah*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans., Ronald C. Kiener (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 1.

for the serpent's identity. This includes the question of whether inner-biblical interpretation of the Genesis narrative exists, as well as questioning the role of other serpents in the Bible.

With this background, the thesis continues with its main purpose of chronicling the history of Jewish interpretation about the serpent. Chapters are divided according to broad historical periods and literary genres. Chapter 3 deals with non-rabbinic Jewish literature of the Greco-Roman period, including Philo, Josephus, the Apocrypha, and Pseudepigrapha. Chapter 4 examines rabbinic texts, including tannaitic, amoraic and other material that precedes Saadiah Gaon. Chapter 5 presents the brief but important evidence available from the writings of the Baylonian geonim Saadia ben Josef, Samuel ben Ḥofni, and Hai ben Sherira. Next, in chapter 6, the focus shifts to Sefarad and the development of Hebrew linguistic science and the concurrent trends of Bible interpretation there. The interpretations of Rashi and other Ashkenazic commentators are the subject of chapter 7. Chapter 8 returns to Sefardic sources, specifically those that involve philosophic-allegorical interpretation. Chapter 9 then deals with mystical-allegorical interpretation of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries in both Ashkenaz and Sefarad. The main findings and conclusions of the study are summarized in chapter 10.

Where possible throughout the study, analysis questions the source of each commentary and the previous interpretations upon which it might depend. In this manner, it is hoped that the development of interpretations about the serpent's identity will be evident, as well as the coincidental history of Jewish Bible interpretation.

CHAPTER 2

THE SERPENT IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Introduction

The serpent is introduced in Genesis 3:1[1] where it begins a conversation with the first woman, later to be named Eve.[2] Following a brief exchange in which the serpent speaks twice, the woman is swayed by the serpent's words, succumbs to the temptation and eats from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The serpent is not

---

[1] Note that the chapter and verse numbers in the Hebrew Bible are medieval in origin. The beginning of Gen. 3 is not indicated in the more ancient system of the spacing of the Hebrew text (i.e., the system of *parashot petuḥot* and *setumot*). According to the spacing, Genesis 3:1 is part of a literary unit that begins with Gen. 2:4, "Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created . . . ," which follows a *parasha petuḥa*. According to the triennial system of Torah reading, Gen. 2:4 also represents the beginning of the second portion, which ends at Gen. 3:21 with God making clothing for Adam and his woman. However, the Greek sources indicate a different tradition of dividing the text. Many ancient manuscripts of the Septuagint join verse 2:25 to Gen. 3:1, ending chapter 2 with 2:24 and beginning the third chapter with a statement about the human pair's nakedness and lack of shame. The difference in spacing in the Greek texts has the effect of connecting the theme of nakedness more closely with the narrative in which the humans eat from the Tree of Knowledge. In other editions of the LXX, 2:25 does close chapter 2. [J.W. Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis* (Society of Biblical Literature, 1993), 36, and M. Harle, trans., *La Bible d'Alexandrie: La Genèse* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1986), 106]. Regardless of the versification and chapter divisions, the play on words involving the root ע-ר-מ in both 2:25 and 3:1 nevertheless draws the reader to make some sort of connection between both verses. See below, "Word Play Involving *ʿārûm*," p. 9.

Transliteration of Hebrew in this thesis follows *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*, eds. Patrick H. Alexander et. al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999). The academic style is used for transliterations of words from the Bible, but the general purpose style is used elsewhere. However, unlike the *SBL Handbook*, I have chosen to represent "ח" by *ḥ*, even when using the general purpose style. Note that "פ" is *f* in the general purpose style but *p* according to the academic style [e.g., שרף = *śārāp* (academic) = *saraf* (general)].

[2] See Gen. 3:20 for the naming of Eve. For a discussion of the possible relationship between Eve's name in Hebrew, חוה (*Ḥawwah*), and the Aramaic word for serpent, חיויא (*Ḥiwya*), see A. J. Williams, "The relationship of Gen. 3:20 to the serpent," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89,3 (1977) 357-374; A. Shinan, "*Ḥava ve-ḥiviya*," *Migvan De'ot ve-Hashkafot be-Tarbut Yisrael* (Jerusalem) 8 (1998): 49-65. The connection appears in *Gen. Rab.* 20:11 as one of three interpretations of the name Eve that are based on word plays with similar roots, instead of the etymology provided in the verse. "R. Aha interpreted it: The serpent was thy [Eve's] serpent [i.e., seducer], and thou art Adam's serpent." [H. Freedman and M. Simon, eds., trans., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis I* (London: The Soncino Press, 1939)]. Similar connections are also drawn in Gnostic literature, linking Eve's name to the serpent as well as other similarly spelled ideas. See II, *4 Hypostasis of the Archons* 89. 11-17, a riddle in which Eve's name is linked with five different concepts with similar letters. [Bentley Layton, "The Riddle of the Thunder," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, & Early Christianity*, eds. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 47].

heard from again, but it and its progeny receive curses from God as a consequence of the serpent's role in the humans' sin.

No doubt, even a cursory reading of this narrative raises questions about the nature of the serpent. Up to this point in the book of Genesis, although the events depicted are extraordinarily miraculous, it is God who is creating the world and all of its living and non-living contents. The world He creates seems to be that which the human reader will recognize, even if He places the first man in the wondrous garden of Eden. The location of the garden and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life, both banned from human consumption, admittedly are unfamiliar to the reader. Yet all elements of the narrative still suggest that the living forms mentioned in the text are quite normal and natural, despite their idyllic state. Genesis 3:1 and the conversation it commences require that the reader re-examine these assumptions, because the text now introduces a serpent that is capable of speech, not just with those of its kind, but with the human female![3] The Bible contains one other occurrence of an animal speaking to a human, but there the text specifically states that God opened the animal's mouth.[4] Here, there is no suggestion in the text that this is a bizarre occurrence or that God has intervened in the events.

The Role of Genesis 3:1

A close reading of the Hebrew text is necessary to begin to answer questions about the nature or identity of this serpent. To aid in understanding the various opinions in the history of interpretation, the following discussion notes the textual factors that are of relevance for both literal and non-literal readings of the text.

The serpent is introduced following a statement in 2:25 about the human pair's nakedness but lack of shame. The text moves rather quickly from this into the midst of a hugely significant and consequential conversation. Aside from the possibility that 2:25

---

[3] There is actually no indication in the text whether this serpent could speak with others of its own kind or whether its conversation with Eve was a unique occurrence.

[4] Balaam's ass speaks to him in Num. 22:28. "Then the Lord opened the ass's mouth, and she said . . ."

serves as an introduction to this episode, the only other introductory words are those in 3:1 that present the serpent and offer some indication of its place in the world.

> והנחש היה ערום מכל חית השדה אשר עשה ה' אלוקים ויאמר אל האשה
> Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman . . .

This circumstantial clause is by no means unusual. In narrative prose, circumstantial clauses often have a "macrosyntactic function, beginning narrative or an episode within it by introducing a new topic or character."[5] Following on the heels of Genesis 2, in which the setting of the garden of Eden and the newly created humans has been laid out, 3:1 now introduces the new character in the narrative—the serpent—providing some background information.

The serpent is clearly compared with the חיות השדה, "the animals of the field," or "wild beasts."[6] Logically, this comparison indicates that the serpent is in fact a member of this class of animals, for otherwise there would be no sense to the statement. The verse also makes a point of reiterating that these animals have all been created by God, the serpent included.[7]

The Meaning of *ʿārûm*

Although it is clearly one of the wild beasts, the serpent is a distinguished member of this class. It is ערום מכל חית השדה, "the most *ʿārûm* (ערום) of all the wild animals." *ʿĀrûm*, however, is a somewhat ambiguous adjective. Depending on the context, the noun of the same root can have the positive meaning of wisdom or knowledge or the more negative meaning of slyness or trickery.[8] Thus, the adjective

---

[5] J. C. L. Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar ~ Syntax*, 4th ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1994), 166.

[6] The comparison is drawn through use of the preposition מן. See E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius's Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 382, §119w.

[7] Gen. 2:19-20 has just described how this class of animals, among others, was created by God and then brought before man so that he could name them all.

[8] For the positive meaning, see Prov. 1:4, 8:5, 12, 12:23, and Job 5:13; for the negative, see Ex. 21:14 and Josh. 9:4.

ʿārûm can also mean either cunning, shrewd, and crafty, or wise, deliberate, etc.[9] Most commentaries assume that in this verse *ʿārûm* refers to slyness or trickery. If the meaning were wisdom, one would still need to question why the serpent is considered the wisest of the wild beasts and the reason this information is conveyed to the reader at this moment.

The negative quality most often assumed to be the intention of *ʿārûm* probably derives from the content of the serpent's conversation with Eve. Following an ambiguous opening statement, the serpent proceeds to insinuate that God has lied about the consequences of eating the fruit and claims that He has selfish and jealous motives. The serpent's slyness is relevant to the narrative because it drives the serpent's method of temptation and argumentation. It explains the content of the conversation.[10] Regardless of whether an interpretation follows the positive or negative meaning of *ʿārûm*, it must always explain how or why that information is relevant to the narrative.

Word Play Involving *ʿārûm*

The word *ʿārûm* also raises the question of how the episode of the serpent connects with the previous verse, Gen. 2:25. A similarly spelled word is used to say that Adam and Eve were "naked," *ʿărûmmîm*. Although few other options for a choice of words in 2:25 exist, this is not the case for 3:1. These two words are not synonymous, but a pun of some sort does seem to have been intentional. A reader cannot help but notice the repetition of a similarly spelled word in describing Adam, Eve and the serpent. The question is what sort of connection should be drawn between the verses because of the repetition. In the history of interpretation, the theme of nakedness from 2:25 is connected with the narrative that seems to begin with the introduction of the serpent.[11]

---

[9] The JPS edition has translated *ʿārûm* as "shrewd," which does in fact retain the ambiguous nature of the original Hebrew word.

[10] A further possibility is that the serpent's shrewdness or wisdom may give it the power of speech.

[11] In a vocalized Masoretic text, the differences in vocalization will always distinguish between these two different roots, provided that one is knowledgeable enough to know the distinction. ע-ר-ם is the root of *ʿārûm*, while the root of *ʿărûmmîm* is a matter of debate. *Brown-Driver-Briggs* consider the root ע-ו-ר preferable to ע-ר-מ. Koehler-Baumgartner present ע-ר-מ as a hypothetical form but prefer ע-ר-ה, with ע-ו-ר and ע-ר-ר as by-forms of ע-ר-ה. [Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906; reprint, Peabody, MA:

This is fairly transparent, since it is the *ʿārûm* serpent that initiates the series of events that lead the humans to realize that they are *ʿărûmmîm* in Gen. 3:7. A more creative reading links the two verses by assuming that the former is the proximate cause for the serpent's decision to approach the woman. That is, it assumes that the repeated root reveals the serpent's motivation.[12]

Non-Literal Interpretations

Thus far in the analysis, there has been no compelling reason to associate the serpent with a demonic being, to assume that it has been possessed, or that it symbolizes something else.[13] Although this sort of interpretation must ultimately involve the first word of Gen. 3:1, והנחש (*wĕhanāḥāš*), the reasons for it are found in the rest of the narrative. As mentioned regarding the assumed negative connotation of *ʿārûm*, the serpent's own words paint it as a being intent on leading the humans down a path toward sin and in the process reveal that it has a cynical and quite blasphemous perspective about God and His motivations. "And the serpent said to the woman, 'You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad.'"[14]

The serpent's sinister words lead some to attribute a more sinister identity to him—hence interpretations in which the serpent is associated with a being motivated by jealousy or revenge against the humans or God. The punishment meted out to the serpent in Gen. 3:14-15 is also suggestive of an ageless battle waged between humans and

---

Hendrickson Publishers, 2000) 735, 790; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, revised by W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm, study edition, trans. and ed., M. E. J. Richardson, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 803, 882, 886, 889]. It is important to point out that the Torah scroll has always had an unvocalized tradition, maintained even after the invention and popularization of various systems of vocalization. The distinction between the words "naked" and "shrewd" is all the more blurred in an unvocalized text, unless one knows the reading tradition and the associated differences in meaning.

[12] See *Gen. Rab.* 18:6.

[13] Indeed, modern scholars reject the idea that the serpent in Genesis 3 was meant to be equated with the Devil. See Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 182 n. 6, for a listing of recent interpretations of the sin of Adam and Eve.

[14] Gen. 3:4-5.

serpents. "Because you did this, more cursed shall you be than all cattle and all the wild beasts…I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; They shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel." Or perhaps it is the expectation that the Bible could not simply be relating the origins of the relationship between humans and serpents that leads to interpretations that involve a greater time scale and cosmic significance.[15]

The Definite Article of והנחש (*wĕhanāḥāš*)

Ultimately, the variety of ways in which the narrative can be read will play themselves out in how to read the opening words of Gen. 3:1, והנחש היה ערום, *wĕhanāḥāš hāyā ʿārûm*. Two questions must be answered. The first is whether the word *nāḥāš* can designate anything other than serpent. The second is what meaning should be attributed to the definite article (ה-) with which the serpent is introduced. Should "the serpent" be read as "The Serpent"? Does the term *nāḥāš* or the definite article indicate that this serpent is not just any ordinary serpent? "Does this refer back to a myth, well known to the early audiences of the tale, or does it suggest something special about the snake's position in the creation, or was it used to indicate that that snake was the ancestor of all snakes?"[16]

From a grammatical perspective, the definite article may indicate a variety of nuanced meanings. Although some usages are more common than others, the various possibilities do in fact support a variety of different interpretations, rather than help us choose definitively from among them.

> With individual persons or things the article is used when they are *known*, and definite to the mind for any reason, e.g.: (a) From having been already mentioned, or otherwise well known to the audience; (b) Or from being the only one of their kind; (c) Or, though not the only one of the class,

---

[15] For an example of a modern Jewish interpretation that allows for this possibility, see Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Pt. 1, translated by Israel Abrams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1978), 139. ". . . [T]he investigation of the causes of particular phenomena, like human speech, man's clothing and the characteristics of the serpent, are not, to the Semitic mind, matters of moment. Hence aetiological interpretations of the kind mentioned should be reviewed with great caution."

[16] J. Tabick, "The Snake in the Grass," *Religion* 16, 2 (1986): 164. Cf. Gen. 6:17 for an equally ambiguous use of the definite article regarding the flood, ואני הנני מביא את **המבול** מים על הארץ.

> when usage has given prominence to a particular individual of the class; (d) Or when the person or thing is an *understood* element or feature in the situation or circumstances; English also uses the definite article in such cases. (e) It is a particular extension of this usage when, in narratives particularly, persons or things are treated as definite, the person simply from the part he is playing, and the thing from the use being made of it. In this case English uses the indefinite article. (egs. with creatures…)
>
> …In addition to these unique or particular usages the article also denotes *classes* of persons, creatures or things. This generic use is very common, particularly in *sing.* either to describe the whole class or an individual person etc. representative of it. (c) The various classes of creatures.[17]

The serpent has not yet been mentioned in the Genesis narrative prior to its introduction in 3:1. However, the serpent may be "otherwise well known to the audience."[18] People are generally familiar with serpents, but the original audiences may have also been familiar with a different serpent, known to them from a mythology that is not recorded here, or with particular symbolism associated with the serpent. If such a common mythology was well known, the Bible may have intended to evoke the memory of a particular serpent and not merely a natural one.[19]

At this point in the biblical account of the history of the world, it is also possible that the serpent is in fact the only one of its kind. The serpent, like the human male, may have been created alone or as part of a lone pair.[20] Even if this were not true, it would still be correct to use the definite article, as the text informs the reader that the serpent is a prominent member of its class, "[T]he serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts."[21]

---

[17] Gibson, *Davidson's Grammar*, 26-28, §30.

[18] Ibid.

[19] See below, fn. 28, regarding Israelite mythology involving serpent-like creatures. The serpent was also a common symbol in ancient Near Eastern cultures. Karen Randolph Joines, "The Serpent in Gen 3," *ZAW* 87 (1975): 1, associates the serpent in the narrative in Gen. 3 with the symbolism of "recurring youthfulness, wisdom, and chaos." However, the serpent was generally a fairly ambiguous symbol, with evidence showing that it represented many concepts and their opposites as well. Thus symbolic associations include protection and danger, deity and demon, and life and death. See Joines's work for the ancient Near Eastern texts which contain possible parallel symbolism. For a more generalized treatment of the serpent as a symbol in the ancient Near East also see Lowell K. Handy, "Serpent (Religious Symbol)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992); R. S. Hendel, "Serpent," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (DDD)*, eds. Karel van der Torn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 1404-12.

[20] The serpent is assumed to be male in most interpretations. Also, see Gen. 1:27, 2:7, 8, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, where man is called "*hāādām*" with the same grammatical form of definite article and singular noun.

[21] Gen. 3:1.

Similarly, the definite article can be used in conjunction with the singular to denote a whole class or an individual representative of it.[22] Thus, perhaps the first clause of Genesis 3:1 introduces all serpents as shrewder than the other wild beasts, but one specific member of this class speaks to the woman.[23] Furthermore, the serpent is definite, simply from the part it is playing in the narrative. *Wĕhanāḥāš* can therefore refer to the character in the narrative that is called "serpent" without making a statement of quality about the nature or identity of the character. All these options are grammatically possible, and so the definite article can in fact support a variety of interpretations.

Naḥāš and Other Serpents in the Hebrew Bible

Unlike some other biblical events, which are discussed often in later books, reference to the first sin and to the interaction between the serpent and the first woman never recurs in the Hebrew Bible.[24] Therefore, no direct indication within the Bible

---

[22] Note that this usage can also account for the grammar of Gen. 1:27, where man is created but then referred to in the plural. This situation may be clarified by assuming that *hā'ādām* denotes the whole class, mankind, and that the verse is making a statement about mankind as a class containing more than one member.

[23] See below, ch. 3, "The Septuagint," regarding the wording of the LXX and clarification of who the speaker is. Also, see Saadiah's commentary, according to which this serpent alone becomes a prominent member of its class so that it can be used by God in this circumstance. [Below, ch. 5; Saadiah ben Joseph Gaon, *Saadya's Commentary on Genesis* (Hebrew), ed. and trans., M. Zucker (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1984), 283-284].

[24] The same claim cannot be made about the Christian Bible, in which these events are referred to in numerous passages. In these later sources, the serpent is identified as the "great dragon," the "ancient serpent," "Devil," "Satan," and "deceiver of the whole world," among other titles. "The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world . . ." (Rev. 12:9); "He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand year . . . so that he would deceive the nations no more . . ." (Rev. 20:2-3). [Quotes are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV, eds. Bruce Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991)]. The equivalents of some of these terms do in fact appear in the Hebrew Bible, although they are not explicitly connected to the serpent from Genesis. See later in this section regarding the dragon.

Although the *satan* appears in the Hebrew Bible, it is never as leader of an "evil empire." See Peggy L. Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: śāṭān in the Hebrew Bible*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 43, ed. Frank Moore Cross (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) for a characterization of the roles of *satan* in the Hebrew Bible and Elaine Pagels, "The Social History of Satan, The 'Intimate Enemy': A Preliminary Sketch," *Harvard Theological Review* 84,2 (1991): 105-28 or *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995) for a study of the transformation of the idea of Satan from the Hebrew Bible into its role in Christianity.

Christian interpretation from the time of Irenaeus and continuing in Catholic and evangelical tradition has understood Gen. 3:15 as a reference to a struggle between Jesus and the devil (Satan) with the woman's seed having the final victory (Protoevangelium). See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A*

exists of whether the serpent in Genesis 3:1 should be interpreted as a natural serpent, a symbol, or a mythological being, or how in fact it was understood in biblical times. One may nevertheless try to infer what sort of being the serpent was, based on the roles of other serpents within the Bible and the range of semantic meanings associated with the root letters of the word *nāḥāš*, נ-ח-ש.[25] An analysis of this sort may lead to the intended meaning of the serpent in Genesis 3, but only if the original intention was to have a reader make these sorts of associations.[26] Despite the possibility that this supposition is incorrect, this analysis is still valuable in indicating the basic connections that a reader of the Hebrew Bible might make. If this analysis fails to determine the intended meaning of Genesis 3, it still determines the pool of referents available to all interpreters of the Hebrew Bible.

Serpents (of the root נ-ח-ש) mentioned elsewhere in the Torah are always clearly natural serpents. Dan is compared to a serpent on a path in Jacob's final words about him. In Exodus, God turns Moses' rod into a serpent and this is used as one of the signs before Pharaoh. In Numbers, poisonous snakes are sent as a punishment to the rebellious Israelites. The serpents kill Israelites until Moses constructs a brass serpent on a staff and people are cured as they look up toward the brass serpent. In Deuteronomy, serpents are mentioned along with other hazards of the desert.[27]

Continental Commentary, translated by John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 260-61 for further references to the history of Christian exegesis of the serpent.

[25] *Abot de Rabbi Nathan*, version A, ch. 39 lists six names by which the serpent is called in the Hebrew Bible: (1) נחש (Gen. 3:1); (2) שרף (Deut. 8:15); (3) תנין (Ex. 7:9); (4) צפעוני (Is. 11:8); (5) אפעה (Is. 30:6); (6) עכשוב (Ps. 140:4). [Judah Goldin, trans. *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, Yale Judaica Series, Vol. X, ed., Julian Obermann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 163]; According to *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, 639, aside from serpent, the root נ-ח-ש also has the meanings of (a) to practise divination, (b) copper, bronze, and (c) one use where the context favours the meaning of lust, harlotry (see Ez. 16:36).

[26] This approach involves making connections among books separated by centuries in their composition. Although it is difficult to make any claim about the intentions of the earlier texts, later biblical texts at the very least have the potential to reveal how an earlier text was understood at the time of the writing of the later text.

[27] Gen. 49:17, "Dan shall be a serpent by the road, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that his rider is thrown backward"; Ex. 7:9-10. See Saadiah, *Commentary on Genesis*, 283, who compares the language of this verse to Gen. 3:1; Num. 21:4-9; Deut. 32:24. Note that in Num. 21:4-9 and Deut. 32:24, as well as in Jer. 8:17, serpents are God's messengers for bringing punishment on people. At times they are also the agents which save people from death.

However, elsewhere in the Bible, *nāḥāš*—alone or in conjunction with another term—is used in a symbolic manner or referring to a mythological being. In Job 26:12-14, in the midst of enumerating God's great deeds in creating the world, the text records,

By His power He stilled the sea;	בכחו רגע הים
By His skill He struck down Rahab.	ובתבונתו מחץ רהב
By His wind the heavens were calmed;	ברוחו שמים שפרה
His hand pierced the Elusive Serpent.	חללה ידו נחש ברח
These are but glimpses of His rule,	הן אלה קצות דרכו
The mere whisper that we perceive of Him;	ומה שמץ דבר נשמע בו
Who can absorb the thunder of His mighty deeds.	ורעם גבורתו מי יתבונן

The same events are referred to in Isaiah 51:9, although there, reference is made to the Dragon (תנין, *tannin*) rather than the Elusive Serpent (נחש ברח, *nāḥāš bāriaḥ*).

It was you that hacked Rahab in pieces,	הלוא את היא המחצבת רהב
That pierced that Dragon.	מחוללת תנין

The Dragon, תנין, or the Elusive Serpent, נחש ברח, refers to a mythological sea serpent, the embodiment of chaos, which was slain by God.[28] Although not referred to explicitly in Genesis, repeated reference to it elsewhere in the Bible attests to its position in the cosmogony of the Israelites. Again in Isaiah 27:1 this creature is mentioned.

In that day the Lord will punish,	ביום ההוא יפקד ה'
With His great, cruel, mighty sword	בחרבו הקשה והגדולה והחזקה
Leviathan the Elusive Serpent—	על לויתן נחש ברח
Leviathan the Twisting Serpent;	ועל לויתן נחש עקלתון
He will slay the Dragon of the sea	והרג את התנין אשר בים

---

[28] *JPS Translation*, 670, note b. The subject of myths involving a sea serpent that seem to be referred to in these biblical texts has been dealt with extensively. It is important to note however that the serpent in Genesis is not included in the subject matter of these works. These biblical sources are evidence of Israelite mythology for which there are parallels in Canaanite, Ugaritic and Mesopotamian mythology, among others. See Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers), 1988; John Day, *God's Conflict With the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Benedikt Otzen, Hans Gottlieb and Knud Jeppesen, *Myths in the Old Testament*, trans., Frederick Cryer (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1980); Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York; Evanston: Harper and Row, 1969). Levenson points out that the eschatological combat myth is "rare in the Hebrew Bible and absent altogether in the Pentateuch," but "survives and even grows in Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic literature and is found, with a phenomenal degree of continuity, in the *aggadah* of the Talmudic rabbis" (*Creation and Persistence*, 48). For a further discussion of the mythological serpent in the Bible in light of evidence from the Ancient Near East, see Adolfo D. Roitman, "'Crawl Upon Your Belly' (Gen. 3:14) – The Physical Aspect of the Serpent in Early Jewish Exegesis" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 64, no. 2 (1995) 157-182, particularly the notes in the article and the reproductions of artwork in appendix B.

Here, the monster is once again referred to as התנין אשר בים, the Dragon of the sea, and as the Elusive Serpent, נחש ברח. Synonymous with these terms, the verse also presents the names Leviathan, לויתן, and Twisting Serpent, נחש עקלתון. Thus, a connection does exist between the term *nāḥāš* and a great mythological being that operated in opposition to God's activities until it was slain by God.

Nāḥāš is also used as a symbol in biblical texts. In the above-mentioned source from Isaiah 27, the serpent monsters are in fact symbolic of the forces of evil in the present world; the verse envisions a day when God will once again slay the sources of evil. The serpent also appears as a symbol in Isaiah 14:29, in an oath sworn by God that Babylon will be wiped out. Isaiah alludes to different kings and kingdoms with the imagery of different serpents, again using terms that are equivalent to or associated with *nāḥāš*. Here, a positive future event is depicted in association with serpents.

Rejoice not, all Philistia,	אל תשמחי פלשת כלך
Because the staff of him that beat you is broken.	כי נשבר שבט מכך
For from the stock of a snake there sprouts an asp,	כי משרש נחש יצא צפע
A flying seraph[29] branches out from it. . .	ופריו שרף מעופף . . .
Quake, all Philistia!	נמוג פלשת כלך
For a stout one is coming from the north	כי מצפון עשן בא
And there is no straggler in his ranks.	ואין בודד במועדיו

These other terms might indicate serpents in general or might denote a particular sort of serpent. As well, *nāḥāš* may be modified by certain terms, denoting still other creatures or beings, or else simply qualifying the characteristics of the serpent. Not all the terms are clearly understood. Even within the Bible there seem to be assumed overlaps in meaning such that, for example, within the same narrative a serpent will be referred as *nāḥāš* and *śārāp*, as well as calling other serpents הנחשים השרפים, *hanĕḥāšîm haśĕrāpîm* possibly meaning poisonous snakes but translated as fiery serpents in other contexts.[30]

In fact, one must look at the occurrences of all such terms in the Hebrew Bible, because there is no absolute consistency in associating a particular role or image of a

---

[29] Others translate as a flying serpent.

[30] See Num. 21:4-9 for apparently interchangeable uses.

serpent with a particular name. Thus, Tabick has identified three themes regarding snakes, which arise in biblical (and Talmudic) literature:

> (a) the snake as a servant of God,
> (b) the snake as a symbol of the rebellion against God and
> (c) the snake as a creature independent of God.[31]

Although these themes can be identified solely through the term *naḥaš*, it is probably more useful to look at all serpent terms and to organize them thematically, as Tabick has done. Zakovitz has similarly blurred the lines between the various serpent terms in order to apply conclusions from the rest of the Bible to the garden of Eden's serpent.[32] This has particularly interesting consequences for the question of the serpent's identity and physical appearance.[33]

One must determine the relationship between the garden of Eden's serpent and the other sorts of serpents in the Bible and question whether any of the thematic classifications applies to the serpent in Genesis 3. This relationship affects early interpretations of the chapter, although not necessarily explicitly.[34] It is most clearly dealt with in modern interpretations of Genesis, particularly those commentaries that are written in light of knowledge regarding beliefs of the ancient Near East.

---

[31] Tabick, "The Snake in the Grass," 156.

[32] Yair Zakovitz, "*Neḥashim, Mikdashim, Leḥashim ve-Nashim*," *Migvan Deot ve-Hashkafot be-Tarbut Yisrael* 8 (1998) 25-37.

[33] See below, chapter 5, "Saadiah Gaon," regarding the potential textual basis for the physical appearance of the serpent in *Apoc. Mos.*

[34] That is, the relevant texts do not necessarily present their interpretations as originating from, or being in any way connected to, this sort of methodology.

CHAPTER 3

THE SERPENT IN JEWISH LITERATURE OF THE GRECO-ROMAN ERA

Introduction

Included in the section of Greco-Roman interpretation are those texts composed by Jewish authors in antiquity that did not proceed to become part of, or to overtly influence, the main textual corpus of rabbinic Jewish writings. Tannaitic literature, in the form of the Mishna, Tosefta and certain midrashic works, represents the beginnings of classical rabbinic literature and is the focus of the next chapter. However, rabbinic literature is not the earliest or the only Jewish literature to have followed the Hebrew Bible.

Despite general rabbinic avoidance of these texts, many Jewish writings composed during the Greco-Roman era are connected with the Hebrew Bible. Thus, included in this chapter are the Greek translation of the Bible (the Septuagint), the Apocrypha,[1] and the Pseudepigrapha that are thought to be of Jewish authorship.[2] Also included are the works of Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus. These works were preserved primarily by non-Jews and so, although they represent the first evidence available to us of post-biblical Jewish Bible interpretation, they did not overtly influence the subsequent history of Jewish Bible interpretation. Although some of the authors and their works may have been contemporary with certain rabbinic figures or works, this body of literature is presented separately.[3]

---

[1] The Apocrypha are those works which are not part of the Hebrew Bible but were considered to be part of the Greek Bible by the Jews of Alexandria.

[2] The Pseudepigrapha are a diverse collection of texts, some of which appear to be of Jewish authorship and dating from approximately 200BCE – 200CE. These texts often claim to be inspired and are related in form or content to the Hebrew Bible. Often they are attributed to a figure from the Hebrew Bible.

[3] This body of literature, as it pertains to interpretations concerning the serpent, has been dealt with elsewhere. See J. L. Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 5 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968), 121 n. 117 and other notes in section entitiled "Adam."

Texts from the Greco-Roman era, many of which depended on the Septuagint, reveal three major trends in interpretations of the identity of the serpent. Although the textual foundations upon which these interpretations are built are not always clear, the same trends continue to reappear throughout the history of Jewish Bible interpretation. These categories can be referred to as literal, allegorical and mythical.

The Septuagint

Bible translations are by necessity a form of interpretation, preserving in a different language how the translator(s) understood the text or thought others (i.e., the audience or readership) should understand it. Occasionally, an ancient translation may indicate a particular interpretation through a physical feature of the text. As previously mentioned, although manuscripts are not entirely consistent, some of the oldest Greek sources attach verse 2:25, which states that both humans were naked, to Gen. 3:1, the verse which introduces the serpent. This might suggest that the verses are in some way connected, or at least that those who copied the text thought they were.[4]

Although the meaning of the Hebrew adjective *ʿārûm* can be ambiguous, in the context of Gen. 3:1 it is generally understood to have a negative or pejorative connotation.[5] In contrast, the Greek word that is used as the equivalent for this term in the Septuagint, *phrónimos*, has a positive value.[6] Furthermore, a generic term for snakes is used, and the serpent is said to belong to the wild animals that are upon the earth.[7] As well, while the Hebrew text does not identify the subject of the verb ויאמר (*wayōmer*), the Septuagint repeats that it is the serpent that is talking. The serpent's initial words are translated as questioning God's motive, removing the difficult expression of אף כי (*ap kī*), and perhaps the trickery that might have been involved in the statement.

---

[4] See ch. 2, fn. 1.

[5] See above, ch. 2, "The Meaning of *ʿārûm*," 8.

[6] Aquila and Theodotion have nevertheless tried to explain it otherwise. See Wevers, *Greek Text of Genesis*, 36, n. 3 and Harle, *Bible d'Alexandrie*, 109, note on Gen. 3:1.

[7] Wevers, *Greek Text of Genesis*, 36.

The serpent in Gen. 3:1 of the Septuagint is portrayed as the wisest of all animals on earth, which would clearly rank it just below humans.[8] Yet, the serpent is still identified simply as that, a snake, and its motivation is perhaps even less clearly "evil" than in the Hebrew Bible because of the unambiguously positive manner in which it is described in the Septuagint. The clarification that the serpent is the subect of the verb *wayōmer* removes any possibility for imaginative exegesis that might suggest an unnamed being is the true speaker. However, since the wording of the continuation of the narrative is virtually identical to the Hebrew text, the effects of the translation might merely be to delay questions regarding the serpent's motives and its true identity. Note that the serpent still asserts that God had selfish reasons for forbidding humans to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

Jubilees

The Pseudepigraphic book of *Jubilees*, dating from the second pre-Christian century, with fragments of manuscripts in the original Hebrew found at Qumran and Massada, is one of the few pre-rabbinic sources that claims the serpent in Genesis was simply a snake, although it was unusual in being capable of speech. It is the earliest piece of Pseudepigraphic literature to contain reference to the garden of Eden's serpent. Judging by its presence in more than one archeological find in addition to being preserved in other manners, *Jubilees* was probably also one of the most popular texts of the period.[9] As with other sources, the identity of the serpent may be revealed in whatever passage is equivalent to Gen. 3:1, in relating the serpent's approach to Eve. The details of the curse that is given to the serpent, or other sources, may help to fully characterize the nature of the serpent and its ultimate identity.

---

[8] A. Roitman, based on Aristotle, notes that the intelligence of the serpent may necessitate its physical similarity to humans. See A. D. Roitman, "'Crawl Upon Your Belly' (Gen. 3:14)—The Physical Aspect of the Serpent in Early Jewish Exegesis" (Hebrew) *Tarbiz* 64, 2 (1995): 157-182. See also below, ch. 4, fn. 23.

[9] See introduction to the *Jubilees* text in Charlesworth's edition. O. S. Wintermute, "Jubilees," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985), 35-142. All subsequent references to *Jubilees* and other Pseudepigrapha are to Charlesworth's edition.

Presenting a chronology of the events of Eden, *Jubilees* states that, "At the end of seven years which he completed there, seven years exactly, in the second month on the seventeenth day, the serpent came and drew near to the woman. And the serpent said to the woman. . . ."[10] The first introduction to the serpent in *Jubilees* provides less information about the serpent than does the account in the Hebrew Bible. The same is true regarding the curse the serpent is given as a consequence of its actions: "And the Lord cursed the serpent and was angry with it forever. And he was angry with the woman also because she had listened to the voice of the serpent and had eaten."[11] No information is given about the physical appearance of the serpent, just as none was given about its intellectual capabilities. Charles, in his edition of *Jubilees*, indicated a lacuna in the text at this point precisely because no information is given about the physical consequences for the serpent.[12] Numerous other sources, which seem to be dependent on *Jubilees*, claim that the serpent originally had four legs, and so it would seem appropriate that *Jubilees* should have a reference to their being cut off at this point in the text. There is, however, no evidence that the text ever actually contained this information.

Jubilees does indirectly address the issue of how the serpent was able to speak to Eve. Speech did not distinguish the serpent from the other animals; they too were capable of speaking. *Jub.* 3:28 states that, when Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden, "On that day the mouth of all the beasts and cattle and birds and whatever walked or moved was stopped from speaking because all of them used to speak with one another with one speech and one language." In fact, it is later made clear that, from "the day of the Fall," even humans stopped speaking in the original language, "the language which is revealed."[13] It was only spoken again once God instructed an angel to teach it to Abraham: "And I opened his mouth and his ears and his lips and I began to speak with him in Hebrew, in the tongue of creation."[14]

---

[10] *Jubilees* 3:17.

[11] Ibid., 3:23.

[12] See Wintermute , "Jubilees," 60, note d.

[13] *Jub.* 12:25.

[14] Ibid. 12:26.

According to *Jubilees*, the serpent need not represent an evil force, nor need the humans' actions be blamed for causing evil in the world. Evil is thought to originate in a breach in the angelic world, which occurred at the time of the flood, and is not an important feature of the narrative until then.[15] The version of events that is told in *Jubilees* seems to represent the simplest, or perhaps the most literal, understanding of the events in Genesis. It seems to be assumed that the Bible is conveying information in a straightforward manner, even if it might not supply all the information. This serpent is just a serpent.

Flavius Josephus and Philo of Alexandria

Two other sources from the Greco-Roman period that interpret the serpent's identity as a natural serpent also happen to be among the most important works of the period, written by its historically most important authors, Philo and Josephus.

> [41]At that point in time when all creatures spoke the same language, a serpent living together with Adamos and his wife, felt jealous at the happiness that he thought would be theirs if they obeyed the instructions of God;
> [42]and thinking that they would fall upon misfortune if they were disobedient, he maliciously induced the woman to taste of the plant of wisdom, saying that in it was the means of distinguishing good and evil, through that, if it were theirs, they would live a blessed life not at all inferior to the divine.[16]

Josephus explains the motivation, means and method used by the serpent in deceiving the humans. The serpent is a natural serpent who could speak with humans, because all creatures originally spoke the same language. No mention is made of the serpent's shrewdness or subtlety, perhaps because the Septuagint, which Josephus would have been using, employs a term which ascribes wisdom to an animal.[17] According to Josephus (1.40), both Adam and Eve know of the prohibition of eating from the Tree first-hand, and the serpent probably knows of it because it lives with the humans. The jealousy that motivates the serpent is a common theme in Josephus' paraphrase of the

---

[15] See Gen. 6:1-4 and *Jub.* 5:1-2 as well as Wintermute, "Jubilees," 45-7.

[16] *Judean Antiquities* 1.41-42. L. H. Feldman, trans. and commentary, "Judean Antiquities 1-4," vol. 3 in S. Mason, ed. *Flavius Josephus, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 16.

[17] See Feldman, *Antiquities*, 16, note 91, where he states this probability.

Bible, although it is also found as an explanation in rabbinic literature.[18] Note that there is also no mention of nakedness related to the story involving the serpent.

The third source that maintains that the serpent was a natural serpent capable of speech is Philo's *On the Creation*, although the author's opinion on the matter is more ambivalent. "Philo wrote in an extremely discursive style, jumping back and forth between biblical exegesis, which endows most of his treatises with their form, and philosophical exposition, which provides the intellectual backdrop for his interpretations."[19] He held that the Bible could be understood allegorically, "as an account of the soul's striving for God."[20] Philo theoretically maintains both the literal and symbolic levels of exegesis in his writing but his "interest clearly aims at finding the 'deeper meaning.'"[21] Occasionally in his interpretations of Genesis, Philo's allegorizing becomes so radical as to deny the literal sense.[22]

With regard to the identity of the serpent, Philo presents an explanation that would allow for the possibility of the serpent speaking to the woman, the literal meaning of the text. However, elsewhere he suggests that he thinks this interpretation is ludicrous.[23]

> It is said that in olden time the venomous earthborn crawling thing could send forth a man's voice, and that one day it approached the wife of the first man and upbraided her for her irresoluteness and excessive scrupulosity in delaying and hesitating to pluck a fruit most beauteous to behold and most luscious to taste, and most useful into the bargain, since by its means she would have power to recognize things good and evil.[24]

---

[18] See Feldman, *Antiquities*, 16, note 92 on jealousy in Josephus and BT Sanhedrin 59b for an example of the role of jealousy in rabbinic interpretation of the narrative.

[19] L. H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1991), 95.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Folker Siegert, "Early Jewish Interpretation in a Hellenistic Style," in Magne Saebo, ed., *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 1 (Gottingen: vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 179.

[22] Siegert, "Hellenistic Style," 179.

[23] See *Planting* 8; comp. also *Alleg. Interp.* 1.30.

[24] Philo, *On the Creation*, 155-156. Citations of Philo's works are to F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, trans., *Philo* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929; reprinted 1962).

In *On the Confusion of the Tongues*, Philo states the tradition that, according to the writings of the "mythologists," all animals originally spoke the same language.[25] The "man's voice" which the serpent was capable of sending forth was a natural phenomenon for the time period. However, this explanation is evidence of a common interpretation of the text more so than of Philo's preferred interpretation. More importantly, in Philo's interpretation the serpent is a symbol; so too, the first man and woman are symbols of the mind and body (sense perception), respectively.

> Now the serpent was the most subtle of all the beasts of the earth, which the Lord God had made (Gen. iii. 1). Two things, mind and bodily sense, having already come into being, and these being in nakedness after the manner that has been set forth, it was necessary that there should be a third subsistence, namely pleasure, to bring both of them together to the apprehension of the objects of mental and of bodily perception... Since then it was necessary that both these should come together for the apprehension of the objects about them, who was it that brought them together save a third, a bond of love and desire, under the rule and dominion of pleasure, to which the prophet gave the figurative name of a serpent? . . .
>
> The reason pleasure is likened to a serpent is this. The movement of pleasure like that of the serpent is tortuous and variable. To begin with it takes its gliding course in five ways, for pleasures are occasioned by sight and by hearing and by taste and by smell and by touch . . .[26]

At the symbolic level, the questions of how a serpent could speak and why it chose to tempt the woman are still relevant, but they and their answers belong to the symbolic realm. The serpent chooses to speak with Eve and not Adam because of what they each symbolize and not because of their qualities as humans or animals.

> Pleasure does not venture to bring her wiles and deceptions to bear on man, but on the woman, and by her means on him. This is a telling and well-made point: for in us mind corresponds to man, the senses to woman; and pleasure encounters and holds parley with the senses first, and through them cheats with her quackeries the sovereign mind itself.[27]

Philo's commentary works through symbolic links. Things that have something in common are ipso facto references to each other. They are connected by a relationship of meaning.[28] In a garden of Eden that represents luxury, pleasure and lust work against the mind by playing on the bodily senses. Through symbolism, the events of Genesis are

---

[25] *Confusion* 3.6.

[26] *Alleg. Interp.*, 2.71-76.

[27] *Creation*, 165.

[28] Siegert, "Hellenistic Style," 187.

transformed from an account of the history of the world into a moral lesson that applies for all people at all times.

> ...for if serpentlike pleasure is a thing in-nourishing and injurious, self-mastery, the nature that is in conflict with pleasure, must be wholesome and full of nourishment. Do thou also contend, O my mind, against all passion and above all against pleasure, for indeed "the serpent is the most subtle of all beasts upon the earth, which the Lord God made" (Gen. iii. 1); for pleasure is the most cunning of all things. Why is this? Because all things are enthralled to pleasure, and the life of bad men is under the dominion of pleasure. The things that yield pleasure are obtained by means of cunning of every kind; gold, silver, glory, honours, offices, the materials of objects of sense, the mechanical arts, and all other arts in great variety that minister to pleasure. It is for the sake of pleasure that we do wrong, and wrong deeds are ever associated with desperate cunning. Therefore set judgement, the serpent-fighter, against it, and contend to the end in this noblest contest, and strive earnestly, by defeating pleasure that conquers all others, to win the noble and glorious crown, which no human assembly has ever bestowed.[29]

Philo's commentary represents the earliest available source that clearly attributes a symbolic or allegorical meaning to the biblical text. Although he continues to provide an explanation for the literal meaning, Philo's focus is on the allegorical level of interpretation. The question of the serpent's identity is answered in two ways, although it is the latter that is of most significance for one who is attuned to the Bible's message. There may indeed be a "historical" explanation that would account for how a serpent could possibly be able to speak with humans, but this sort of explanation would not satisfy Philo. The character and the narrative in which it appears are assumed to have a purpose that would be neglected were one to venture no further than the literal, historical, explanation.

The Apocrypha: Wisdom of Solomon

If it can be said that the best-known texts of the era acknowledge a literal reading of Genesis 3 that involves a natural, talking serpent, it can also be said that the majority of texts available from the same time period evidence a different interpretation of the serpent's identity. As is possibly shown from the following quote from the Apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, the devil, or an equivalent character, has a role to play. "For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the

---

[29] *Alleg. Interp.*, 2.106-108.

devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it."[30]

Although it is not absolutely clear whether these verses are referring specifically to the events in the garden of Eden, they do concisely summarize what many Pseudepigraphal texts portray as the role of the serpent, its identity, and motivation. The serpent is in some way connected with a devil-like being that is motivated by envy of the human pair or of God. The first-century-BCE Wisdom of Solomon may belong to this same interpretive tradition regarding the garden of Eden and its serpent. If so, it claims that prior to the first sin, and sin in general, humans were, or still are, undying. It is sin and corruption which are the cause of death and, in this specific case, sin caused by the devil's envy brought death into the world for the first time.

The *Apocalypse of Moses*, The *Life of Adam and Eve*

The Apocalypse of Moses[31] provides a more detailed account of the events in Eden. The serpent is still wiser than all the beasts but, as Eve recounts the events, this is not the reason for its approaching Eve. The serpent becomes a vessel used by the devil.

> And the devil spoke to the serpent, saying, 'Rise and come to me, and I will tell you something to your advantage.' Then the serpent came to him, and the devil said to him, 'I hear that you are wiser than all the beasts; so I came to observe you. I found you greater than all the beasts, and they associate with you; but yet you are prostrate to the very least. Why do you eat of the weeds of Adam and not of the fruit of Paradise? Rise and come and let us make him to be cast out of

---

[30] Wisdom of Solomon 2:23-24. [B. M. Metzger and R. E. Murphy, *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha: The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books of the Old Testament* [NRSV] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 57]. See also David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1979), 121-123, for other possible meanings of these verses and a discussion of the origins of this notion and parallel sources.

[31] All references to *Apocalypse of Moses* are to M. D. Johnson, trans., "Life of Adam and Eve," in J. H. Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, 249-295. *Apocalypse of Moses* is the Greek version of the Latin *Life of Adam and Eve*. It dates to the first century and was probably originally a Hebrew text. It is said to have the form of Midrash and the theology of Pharisaic Judaism. [See Johnson's introduction where he quotes J. L. Sharpe, *Prolegomena to the Establishment of the Critical Text of the Greek Apocalypse of Moses* (unpublished dissertation; Ann Arbor: Duke University, 1969), pt. 1, 226]. Michael E. Stone discusses the history and dating of *Life of Adam and Eve* in his *A History of the Literature of Adam and Eve*, Early Judaism and Its Literature 3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) and has published a synoptic edition of the five principal versions [Gary A. Anderson and Michael E. Stone, eds, *A Synopsis of the Books of Adam and Eve*, Early Judaism and Its Literature 17, 2nd revised edition (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999)]. Also, see his *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Adam and Eve* for other related sources (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

> Paradise through his wife, just as we were cast out though him.' The serpent said to him, 'I fear lest the Lord be wrathful to me.' The devil said to him, 'Do not fear; only become my vessel, and I will speak a word through your mouth by which you will be able to deceive him.'[32]

The devil used the serpent's subservience to stir up its jealousy so that it too would want to bring misfortune on the humans.[33] According to the Latin version of the *Apocalypse of Moses*, *Life of Adam and Eve* (12-16), Satan and his angels were expelled from heaven. The angel Michael worshipped man because he was created in God's image, and he urged the other angels to do so. Satan refused to worship a being that was lesser than him and caused rebellion within the heavenly ranks. God, angry over these events and Satan's claim that he could be as high and powerful as God, expelled Satan and his angels from the heavens into the human world. In retaliation, Satan sought to cause Adam's expulsion from his 'heavenly' abode, the garden of Eden.[34]

In the *Apocalypse of Moses*, Eve continues by describing how Satan, in conjunction with the devil who spoke through the serpent's mouth, conspired and deceived her. Eve sees Satan "in the form of an angel," singing "hymns to God as the angels."[35] It is this seemingly angelic being who begins the conversation with Eve. It is then the devil, speaking through a serpent, who challenges Eve on what she has told Satan about her activities in Paradise.[36]

---

[32] *Apoc. Mos.* 16:1-5; Johnson, "Life," 277.

[33] The words "you are prostrate to the very least" seem to suggest that the serpent already had its current physical form. However, when the curses are related in *Apoc. Mos.* 26:1-3 the text states that the serpent shall be deprived of its hand and feet. See below, "The Serpent's Physical Form."

[34] This is what is referred to in *Apoc. Mos.* by the words, "just as we were cast out through him." See earlier, ch. 2, fn. 24, regarding the characterization of Satan. This is one of the three accounts of Satan's origins according to E. Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, 48. Despite the midrashic or Pharisaic form of *Apoc. Mos.*, the roles of Satan and the devil here resemble the devil and Satan's kingdom first seen in Mark 3:23-27 of the Christian Bible, rather than the *satan* of the Hebrew Bible (Pagels, ibid., xvii).

[35] *Apoc. Mos.* 17:1; Johnson, "Life," 277.

[36] Louis Ginzberg (*Legends*, vol. 5, 121, n. 117) states that the *Apocalypse of Moses* "represents the transition from the older literal conception of the biblical report concerning the fall to the allegorical interpretation which identifies the serpent with Satan." He claims that Philo is the only one who explains the narrative allegorically. In contrast, the Rabbis, Josephus, and the Pseudepigraphic writers (the Books of *Enoch*, *Jubilees*, etc.) take this biblical narrative literally. Furthermore, he claims that it is not until philosophic studies influenced Jewish thought in the Arabic period that one finds the allegorical interpretation of the paradise narrative in rabbinic circles. However, the evidence does not seem to be as clearly defined as Ginzberg presents it. Many other Pseudepigraphic texts do present the view that the serpent was affected by another being, if not the other being itself.

The *Ethiopic* and *Slavonic Apocalypses of Enoch* (*1* and *2 Enoch*)

Similar events are alluded to in other Pseudepigraphic texts dating from approximately the second century BCE to the first or second century CE. In enumerating the names and misdeeds of the fallen angels, the *Ethiopic Apocalypse of Enoch* (*1 Enoch*) lists the angel who interacted with Eve. Despite Eve's claim that "The serpent duped me, and I ate," it is not a natural serpent who is blamed for misleading Eve. "The third was named Gader'el; this one is he who showed the children of the people all the blows of death, who misled Eve, who showed the children of people (how to make) the instruments of death . . . ."[37] Although referred to by a different name, it is still an angelic being who has been demoted from his former glory who is ultimately responsible for the sin.

2 Enoch explains the devil's history and its motivation in causing Adam to sin in a manner which is similar to the *Apocalyse of Moses*' version.

> 31:3And the devil understood how I wished to create another world, so that everything could be subjected to Adam on earth, to rule and reign over it. 4The devil is of the lowest places. And he will become a demon, because he fled from heaven; Sotona, because his name was Satanail. 5In this way he became different from the angels. His nature did not change <but> his thought did, since his consciousness of righteous and sinful things changed. 6And he became aware of his

---

One should also consider *Life of Adam and Eve*, 37-39, where the serpent's curse from Gen. 3:14-15 is narrativized. "And Seth and his mother went toward the gates of Paradise; and while they were walking, behold suddenly there came a serpent, a beast, and attacked and bit Seth . . . . Then Seth said to the beast, "May the Lord God rebuke you. Stop; be quiet; close your mouth, cursed enemy of truth, chaotic destroyer. Stand back from the image of God until the day when the Lord God shall order you to be brought to judgement" (Johnson, "Life," 272, 274)."This enmity is not simply a universal problem that resulted from *the Fall*, rather it had an important particularistic aspect that is limited to the lifetime of Adam and Eve alone. It is not all women and their seed who will experience this specific type of enmity, but rather the woman, Eve and her offspring, Seth." [Gary A. Anderson, "The Penitence Narrative in the Life of Adam and Eve," *HUCA* 63 (1992), 1-38. Reprint in *Literature on Adam and Eve: Collected Essays*, eds., G. Anderson, M. Stone, J. Tromp, Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 33]. Anderson emphasizes the origins of this narrative in a close reading of the biblical text. John R. Levison claims that the serpent in *Life of Adam* represents both the animal world and Satan, reflecting two levels of meaning. See his *Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism: From Sirach to 2 Baruch*, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 163-190.

[37] *1 Enoch* 69:9. [E. Isaac, "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch," in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1]. The name Gader'el alludes to the angel who crossed a barrier (*gader*). It's origins may be reflected in the play on words in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 10:11 that connects Eden's serpent to Eccl. 10:8 (ופרץ גדר ישכנו נחש, "He who breaches a stone fence will be bitten by a snake"). See Tabick, "Snake in the Grass," 157.

> condemnation and of the sin which he sinned previously. And that is why he thought up the scheme against Adam. In such a form he entered paradise, and corrupted Eve.[38]

The *Slavonic* and *Greek Apocalypses of Baruch* (*2* and *3 Baruch*)

The Slavonic and Greek texts of *Baruch* lay blame on the same character, calling it Satanael.[39] The Slavonic version explicitly states that Satanael used the serpent as a garment.

> But when the first-created Adam sinned, having listened to Satanael, when he covered himself with the serpent. . .[40]

As in the *Apocalypse of Moses*, the narrative in Genesis is a conflict between Satanael and the humans. The serpent is the subject of a sort of demonic possession and has no real personal vendeta.

> And the angel said to me, "Listen, Baruch. In the first place, the tree was the vine, but secondly, the tree (is) sinful desire which Satanael spread over Eve and Adam, and because of this God has cursed the vine because Satanael had planted it, and by that he deceived the protoplast Adam and Eve.[41]

The *Greek Apocalypse of Baruch* alludes to a multi-layered understanding of the text, in which the Tree of Knowledge is identified as the vine, but also as sinful desire caused by Satanael. Like Philo's reading of the text, two levels of interpretation are acknowledged and both are allowed to coexist, although both levels are more closely connected in the Greek text of Baruch than in Philo. The first interpretation accounts for the events of the narrative by assuming that the vine is the focus of attention, but the power of its fruit or wine to corrupt may lead to the second role of the tree. The tree's role as sinful desire can exist independently of the interpretation that it was a vine, but in *3 Baruch* it is still attributed to Satanael's involvement. Satanael has spread sinful desire

---

[38] *2 Enoch* 31:3-6 [F. I. Andersen, "2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch," in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, 154].

[39] The –el suffix reflects the tradition that Satan was originally one of the angels.

[40] *2 Baruch* 9:7. [J. H. Charlesworth, "2 Baruch," in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1].

[41] *3 Bar.* 4:8. [H.E. Gaylord, Jr., trans., "3 (Greek Apocalypse of) Baruch," in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, 663-679].

over Adam and Eve, but he has done so by planting the vine and luring the humans toward it.[42]

The connection between the serpent, the Tree of Knowledge and sinful desire, which recurs in numerous later sources, might be due to the proximity of the themes of nakedness, the tree and the serpent, in addition to the physical desire for the fruit that the serpent stirs up in Eve. Although the concept of sinful desire is not raised in *3 Baruch* as part of a philosophical allegory, it still has much in common with Philo's intepretation of the serpent as a symbol of pleasure or lust for physical pleasure. The close connection between both interpretations in *3 Baruch* raises the question whether the other texts that only mention one possibility would nevertheless accept the existence of another. Moreover, there is a possibility that Satanael, or the same figure by another name, was understood on a symbolic level as well.[43]

The above Pseudepigraphic sources share one or more motifs. They all submit that the serpent that tempted Eve and Adam was not a plain serpent acting on its own. All refer to a devil-like character that once belonged to the class of angels. The name of this character differs from one text to another, ranging from the lower-case devil possibly in conjunction with Satan, to Satanael, Satanail, Sotona, and Gader'el. These names refer to the personality or role of this figure, on its own, or in reference to God: it is the tempter, the one who has crossed the barrier between the heavenly and human realms.[44]

---

[42] Might "the tree (is) sinful desire which Satanael spread over Eve and Adam" be the equivalent of שבשעה שבא הנחש על אדם וחוה הטיל בהם זוהמה (TB Shabbat 145b-146a)? A further avenue of research is the question whether the "sinful desire" referred to here is the equivalent of the rabbinic idea of יצר הרע, the evil inclination.

[43] In later interpretation, Satan is the personification of the evil inclination rather than a being in its own right. See Rashi's eleventh century commentary on the Talmud where he repeatedly explains that Satan is a reference to the evil inclination. Similarly, see also Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 23.

[44] See Russell, *The Devil*, 188 n. 17, for a detailed discussion of the different names of the Devil, their origins and meanings. He notes that although the figures at first have different origins and functions, they gradually coalesce into one being that personifies "the origin and essence of evil."

Apocalypse of Abraham

Apocalypse of Abraham refers to a demonic character by yet another name—Azazel—although its connection to these other beings is not necessarily one of identity.[45] In the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, in a vision seen by Abraham, God tells him that he is seeing the events of the garden of Eden, and He explains who is involved. "And he said, "This is the world of men, this is Adam and this is their thought on earth, this is Eve. And he who is between them is the impiety of their behavior unto perdition, Azazel himself."[46] Azazel is described as having a dragon-like appearance.

> And behind the tree was standing (something) like a dragon in form, but having hands and feet like a man's, on his back six wings on the right and six on the left. And he was holding the grapes of the tree and feeding them to the two I saw entwined with each other.[47]

The context does not allow one to clearly grasp what Azazel is. It seems to be described first as a concept rather than a character. However, the text then describes a physical being. The vision does not include a serpent in addition to Azazel, and so it may be presumed that they are the same character. The physical description of Azazel may reflect an interpretation of the biblical text in which *naḥāš* is understood more generally as "reptile," since dragons are presumably reptiles. *Hanāḥāš* might then refer to "The Reptile," the well known, dragon-like, Azazel. This particular dragon had the hands and feet of a human and six wings on each side of its body.

The Serpent's Physical Form

A dragon-like figure resembling the one described in *Apocalypse of Abraham* appears in other Pseudepigraphic literature. A similar picture is drawn of the serpent's body before the punishment in the *Apocalypse of Moses*, if one infers details regarding its appearance from its curses. There, as a consenting individual who allowed the devil to use its mouth, the serpent is fairly punished.

---

[45] *Apoc. Ab.* probably dates to the end of the first century, C. E., and may have originally been a Hebrew text.. [R. Rubinkiewicz, "Apocalypse of Abraham," in Charlesworth, ed., *Pseudepigrapha*, 1:681-705]. Azazel is also connected to this narrative in the Bible commentary of Naḥmanides.

[46] *Apoc. Ab.*, v. 10-11.

[47] *Apoc. Ab.*, v. 7.

> "Since you have done this and become an ungrateful vessel, so far as to lead astray the careless of the heart, accursed are you beyond all wild beasts. You shall be deprived of the food which you used to eat, and shall eat dust every day of your life. You shall crawl on your belly and you shall be deprived of your hands as well as your feet. There shall be left for you neither ear nor wing nor one limb of all that with which you enticed (them) in your depravity and caused them to be cast out of Paradise."[48]

Contrary to any earlier impression, the serpent is said to lose several limbs as a consequence of its actions. Among these are the loss of its hands, feet, wings, and ears. All, except the ears, are referred to in *Apocalypse of Abraham* as well. Clearly, not only is the serpent unlike any recognizable snake, it does not even resemble another legged reptile.

The image of a winged serpent may be explained through some of the inner-biblical associations described in chapter 2. In claiming identity between the terms *nāḥāš* and *śārāp*, Zakovitz draws a parallel between the garden of Eden's serpent and Isaiah's vision in the Temple of a twelve-winged creature, there called a *śārāp*. This image may also be connected with the term *śārāp meʿôpēp*, a flying serpent.[49]

Pseudepigrapha, Satan, and Judaism

"None of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical books written in Hebrew or Aramaic was composed as biblical exegesis citing and expounding verses."[50] However, Charlesworth states that "the Pseudepigrapha are shaped within the crucible of biblical exegesis," demonstrating the developments that took place in early Judaism relating to the character and function of the patriarchs and prophets and "shin[ing] light on the centrality of Tanakh in Early Judaism."[51] They show that biblical stories were treated

---

[48] *Apoc. Mos.* 26:1-3; Johnson, "Life," 283, 285.

[49] Y. Zakovitz, "*Neḥashim*," 25-37. See Isaiah 6 for his vision in the Temple and 14:29, 30:6 for the term *śārāp meʿôpēp*.

[50] James H. Charlesworth, "In the Crucible: The Pseudepigrapha as Biblical Interpretation," in J. H. Charlesworth and Craig A. Evans, eds., *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation*, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 14, Studies in Scripture and Early Judaism and Christianity 2 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), 23, n. 16; M. E. Stone, *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran, sectarian writings, Philo, Josephus* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[51] Charlesworth, ibid., 23, 29.

seriously as revealed truths and that even the additional facts and details they provide were considered to be part of the true story, indicating that "the spirit for interpretation allowed the Jewish exegete to alter, ignore, expand and even rewrite the sacred scripture."[52]

Yet, while Charlesworth sees the Pseudepigrapha as "essential for any attempt to portray early Jewish life and theology," Stone highlights their importance in providing a context for the understanding of the origins of Christianity.[53] The association between the serpent and a devil-like character that is common in the Pseudepigrapha must be placed within this divide between Judaism and Christianity. Not only are the books of the Pseudepigrapha ignored by rabbinic Judaism but, as the following chapter will demonstrate, so are these non-literal interpretations. Furthermore, Satan, with whom the serpent is associated, does not play the same role within classic Judaism as it does in Christianity.

Pagels claims that the figure of Satan proliferates in Jewish sources, from ca. 165 BCE to 100 CE, particularly among groups she characterizes as "dissident Jews."[54]

> [O]ne primary function of the image of Satan is to articulate patterns of group identification distinct from the traditional Israelite pattern—the identification of the people of Israel, God's chosen nation, against "the nations and their gods." . . . [T]he image of Satan tended to develop at the time that it did among specific groups for whom this traditional pattern of identification was breaking down. In particular . . . those who developed and elaborated the image of Satan were Jews involved in struggling not only against the nations, but also, and in some cases primarily, against *other Jews*, often against a dominant majority. . . .
> Such dissidents . . . often came to denounce their Jewish opponents, one and all, as apostates, and so to accuse them of having been seduced by the power of evil, called by many names: Satan, Belial, Mastema, Prince of Darkness.[55]

If Pagels' hypothesis that "the figure of Satan correlates with intra-Jewish conflict"[56] is correct, it has consequences for the way one accounts for the patterns of Jewish interpretation of the serpent's identity. One of Pagels' checks on her hypothesis,

---

[52] Ibid., 39.

[53] Ibid., 23.

[54] Elaine Pagels, "The Social History of Satan," 105-6.

[55] Ibid., 108.

[56] Ibid.

"that, conversely, the figure of Satan does not appear in the work of Jewish writers of the same period who identified with the majority of Jews and who continue to maintain the traditional identification of Israel versus 'the nations,'"[57] also correlates with the patterns of interpretation regarding the serpent. These issues will be clarified in the upcoming chapter on rabbinic interpretation and will also be dealt with in the final conclusions of this thesis in Chapter 10.

[57] Ibid., 108-9.

CHAPTER 4
RABBINIC INTERPRETATION

Introduction

For the vast majority of biblical commentators in this thesis, the sources brought forth in this chapter represent the first evidence of post-biblical interpretation of the serpent's identity. Although the texts in the previous chapter are considered "Jewish" by modern scholars, they remained a tradition separate and distinct from what became the textual corpus of rabbinic Judaism. For reasons that are not clear, this division also runs as deep as the content relating to the serpent. The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, preserved by various Christian groups, contain references to a serpent that is associated with the devil, a dragon-like creature or similar mythical being. These associations are also found in the NT and, later, in the Quran.

In stark contrast, these associations are nowhere to be found in classical literature of the tannaitic and amoraic period and first resurface only in a Muslim-era midrash. Considering that the remainder of the Hebrew Bible contains no overt references to the garden of Eden's serpent, it is well over a millennium before there is any clear evidence in traditional rabbinic sources of a scenario or interpretation that involves something other than some sort of serpent. This fact is astounding considering that such interpretations are found among the earliest textual evidence available to us and that they do eventually play a very significant role in the history of Jewish interpretation of the Bible.

Targum Onqelos

Targum Onqelos, the standard Aramaic translation of the Bible, is dated to the first half of the second century C.E. through a variety of methods, and it generally

follows the Hebrew text of the Bible very closely.[1] The translation of Gen. 3:1 and the serpent's curses are quite literal, except for the second half of 3:15.

> 1. Now the serpent was more *cunning* than any *wild beast* which the Lord God had made . . .
> 14. So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all the cattle and more than all the wild beasts; on your belly you shall crawl, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15. And I will place enmity between you and (between) the woman, and between your *children* and (between) her *children; it will remember what you did to it in ancient time and you will sustain* (your hatred) *for it to the end* {of time}."[2]

Onqelos's choice of translation for the curse is curious and raises the question of why it was felt necessary. If this is a veiled reference to an ageless battle with a non-serpent being, no sources choose to pick up on it.[3]

The Syriac Translation: Peshitta

The Syriac translation of the Bible, preserved by eastern Christians, is thought to have Jewish origins. Weitzman argues that the Peshitta of the whole Hebrew Bible is the product of a non-rabbinic Jewish group, a closed community estranged from Judaism as a whole.[4] He dates the translation of the earlier books of the Bible to c. 150 CE.[5] Its translation of the relevant verses of Gen. 3 is quite literal, such that it does not differ from

---

[1] See Bernard Grossfield, *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Appratus, and Notes*, The Aramaic Bible, vol. 6 (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1982), 30-2, for a discussion of the date and provenance of *Targum Onqelos*.

[2] Ibid., 45-46. The main text in Sperber's edition uses ערים in 3:1, while other texts have חכים. [Alexander Sperber, ed., *The Bible in Aramaic Based on Old Manuscripts and Printed Texts*, vol. 1: The Pentateuch (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959)]. At 3:15, Grossfield's notes indicate that the root *šwp* is understood as the root *šʾp*, with the meaning of "long for" or "remember" and the Hebrew for "head" and "heel" are given their secondary meaning of "beginning" and "end" of time.

[3] Mordechai Zvi ha-Levi Levenstein, in *Sefer Nefesh ha-Ger* (1906; repr. Jerusalem: Makor Publishing, 1972), the commentary on *Targum Onqelos*, explains that Onqelos understood this clause as a fable and translated it according to the moral, that man should guard against the evil inclination, represented by the serpent. However, this connection between the evil inclination and the serpent is only explicitly stated in later sources and not in the classical rabbinic texts.

[4] M. P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction*, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 56 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246.

[5] Ibid., 258.

the Hebrew text in any way that is significant or revealing for interpretation of the serpent's identity.[6]

Palestinian Targums

The Palestinian Targums, including *Targum Neofiti*, the *Fragmentary Targum*, and partial Cairo Geniza texts, appear to be continuous with translation in fourth-century Palestine, or earlier.[7] As with *Targum Onqelos*, it is in the translation of the serpent's curses that there may be hints of a non-literal interpretation. The following is the serpent's curse according to *Targum Neofiti*.

> [14]And the Lord God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, you will be more accursed, *O serpent*, than all the cattle and than all the wild beasts that are on the surface of the fields. On your belly *you will crawl* and dust will be *your food* all the days of your life. [15]And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between *your sons and her sons. And it will come about that when her sons observe the Law and do the commandments they will aim at you and smite you on your head and kill you. But when they forsake the commandments of the Law* you will aim and *bite him* on his heel *and make him ill. For her sons, however, there will be a remedy, but for you, O serpent, there will not be a remedy, since they are to make appeasement in the end, in the day of King Messiah.*[8]

The same ideas appear in the *Fragmentary Targums* with only slight variations.[9] The elaboration on the Hebrew text of 3:15 is the result of double or triple translation of key roots within the verse such that more than one idea is expresssed in each clause.[10]

---

[6] See Ch. Heller, *Peshitta: In Hebrew Characters With Elucidatory Notes*, Part I: Genesis (Berlin: Druckerei Gutenberg, 1928), 3-4.

[7] "The arguments appear strongest for an early date for the Targum of Codex Neofiti 1." See Martin McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible: The Targums (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 45, regarding the dating of *Neofiti* and other Palestinian Targums.

[8] Ibid., 61.

[9] *Tg. Ps.-J.* to 3:15 is also highly similar (see later in this chapter, "*Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*" for more on this). Due to their similarity, rather than reproducing all the texts here, I refer the reader to Michael Klein, *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch: According to Their Extant Sources*, Analecta Biblica 76 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), 7, 91; Michael Maher, trans., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible, vol. 1B (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 27-8; Martin McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1*, 61 and note *u* in apparatus. Michael Klein's *Geniza Manuscripts of Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, 2 vols., (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press; Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1986), plate 5, contains Gen. 2:24-3:6, but is quite literal and of no relevance for the serpent's identity.

[10] See McNamara, ibid., 61, n. 12. On the subject of double and triple translations, see also B. Barry Levy, *Targum Neophyti 1: A Textual Study*, vol. 1 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 52-3.

However, despite making the relationship between man and serpent conditional on man's observance of the Law and referring to the days of the Messiah, Shinan suggests that the Targums do not necessitate a non-literal interpretation of the serpent's identity. Rather than suggesting that the Targums describe the struggle between man and Satan or man and the evil inclination, Shinan claims the reference is to regular serpents, with man's relation to the Law dictating his relationship with serpents.[11]

Tosefta, *Abot de Rabbi Nathan*, and *Genesis Rabbah*

The earliest midrashic rabbinic sources that refer to the serpent of Genesis 3 probably date to the third century.[12] *Tosefta*, *Abot de Rabbi Nathan*, *Genesis Rabbah*, and *b. Soṭah*, all contain one of the basic texts about the serpent, its motivations and the consequences it suffered. Although *t. Sotah*[13] is the earliest of these texts, its version of the exegesis is more fully developed and so may in fact represent a later source. For the sake of convenience, the text of *Genesis Rabbah* is examined first.

> R. Issi and R. Hoshaya in the name of R. Hiyya the Elder said four things: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him [the serpent]: 'I made thee that thou shouldest be king over all cattle and beasts, but though wouldst not have it; therefore, More cursed art though, etc.; I made thee that thou shouldest go upright like man, but thou wouldst not; hence, Upon they belly shalt thou go; I made thee that thou shouldest eat the food of man, but thou wouldst not; hence, And earth shalt thou eat; thou didst desire to kill the man [Adam] and take his wife: therefore, I will put an enmity between thee and the woman.' Thus what he desired was not given him, and what he possessed was taken

---

[11] Avigdor Shinan, *The Aggadah in the Aramaic Targums to the Pentateuch*, 2 vols., (Jerusalem: Makor Publishing Ltd., 1979), 213. This interpretation agrees with the many cases in the rabbinic literature where serpents are assumed to carry out God's decrees, killing those who are destined for death. See the discussion of this topic in Tabick, "The Snake in the Grass," 156-157.

[12] According to Strack and Stemberger, the *Tosefta* was completed in the late third or fourth centuries [*Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans., Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 176]. The core of *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* is from no later than the early third century, although the final version is attributed to the seventh to ninth centuries. Version B is considered more primitive than version A (ibid., 247). *Genesis Rabbah* must be dated after 400, with final redaction in the first half of the fifth century (ibid., 304). All these texts are Palestinian. Rabbi Hiyya the Elder belongs to the fifth generation of Tannaites while Rabbi Hoshayah is a first generation Palestinian Amora (ibid., 90, 92). Rabbi Issi is either a first generation Babylonian, or third generation Palestinian Amora (ibid., 94, 98).

[13] *Tosefta Sotah*, end of chapter 4. In *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* 1:6 the serpent's thought process is outlined. "What was the wicked serpent contemplating at that time? He thought: I shall go and kill Adam and wed his wife, and I shall be king over the whole world. I shall walk with upright posture and eat all the world's dainties." Judah Goldin, trans., *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 10. See also *b. Sotah* 9b.

> from him. And we find the same in the case of Cain, Korah, Balaam, Doeg, Gehazi, Absalom, Adonijah, Uzziah, and Hamman: what they desired was not given to them, and what they possessed was taken from them.[14]

The midrash reveals that the primary sources of information about the serpent and its motives are the words with which the serpent is introduced, the curses it receives from God and possibly the context of the narrative. According to these rabbinic sources, the serpent was an animal that was wiser than any of the other animals and wished to kill Adam and marry Eve. This is the plot of the narrative of Genesis 3 as it relates to the serpent, and the midrash would have us think that God wished the serpent to have a different destiny. The principle "What he desired was not given him, and what he possessed was taken from him" characterizes the serpent's lot. The original plan was for the serpent to be king over the other animals; this is what the phrase "Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts" is intended to convey. God also intended for the serpent to have an upright stature and to eat and drink the same food as man. The serpent wished to marry Eve and plotted to kill Adam. In the end, it lost its original place in the creation and does not succeed in its plans. Tit for tat, the serpent becomes more cursed than all the animals, must crawl on its belly, eat dust, and suffer the hatred of the woman and her progeny rather than receive her love.

Clearly, the serpent has been drastically altered by the consequences of its sin. Initially, it was a creature on a level that was quite close to man, but this originally well endowed serpent ceased to exist as such by the end of the narrative as a consequence of its actions. The midrashic identity of the serpent can be described as literal. A serpent entered into conversation with Eve and this same serpent was cursed, greatly changing it by the end of Gen. 3.

Tosefta Sotah 4:16 develops this idea further by comparing the serpent with the sotah, the woman suspected of adultery. The sotah's situation is summarized as follows: "The sotah gave her attention to one who was not appropriate for her. What she desired

---

[14] *Gen. Rab.* 20:5. H. Freedman and M. Simon, eds., trans., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis I* (London: The Soncino Press, 1939), 163. See J. Theodor and C. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965) for the Hebrew text.

was not given to her, and what she had in hand was taken away from her."[15] The adulteress is understood to have been punished "measure for measure," in a fitting manner; she is forbidden both to her partner in adultery and to her husband. The same measure for measure principle is said to apply to the situations of the serpent and the characters outlined in *Genesis Rabbah* (and Ahitofel). All had set their eyes on something or someone that was not fitting for them; what they desired was not give to them, what they already had was taken from them. It is only the serpent's case that is explained in detail, and through the explanation one comes to understand its character and motive. The original, human-like nature of the serpent is highlighted by its role in the series of comparisons that the midrash makes. The scenario of the serpent in Eden is expounded to illustrate a principle, a principle learned from the human example of the sotah and illustrated through other human examples. But the serpent is not human, and that seems to have been the source of its troubles.

The information about the serpent is gleaned from the biblical text through specific modes of interpretation. The serpent, shrewdest or wisest of all the animals, is consequently subordinate only to humans. The serpent is introduced immediately following statements in 2:24 describing the joining of man and wife and then, in 2:25, the information that both are naked yet not ashamed. The serpent chooses to speak to the woman only. The midrash follows a somewhat logical process of reasoning. As well, the reappearance of the word *mikol* in the curse formula (3:14, 15), in conjunction with the content of the curses themselves, suggest that one draw comparisons with the pre-sin situation of the serpent. "It was taught in R. Meir's name: According to the greatness of the serpent so was his downfall: because he was *more subtle than all*, he was *more cursed than all*."[16] In contrast with interpretations assumed from the Pseudepigrapha, this rabbinic profile of the serpent is heavily set upon the biblical text itself. The conclusions

---

[15] Saul Lieberman, ed., *The Tosefta: The Order of Nashim: Sotah Gittin Kiddushin* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1973), 174-6; S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta*, Part 8, Order Nashim (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1973), 653, [my translation].

[16] *Gen. Rab.* 19:1, Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 148.

that are drawn are explicitly or implicitly derived from the language, content, or context of the narrative in Genesis 3.

> And they were not ashamed. Now the serpent was more subtle, etc. Now surely Scripture should have stated, *And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin* (Gen. III, 21) [immediately after the former verse]? Said R. Joshua b. Karhah: It teaches you through what sin that wicked creature inveigled them, viz. because he saw them engaged in their natural functions, he [the serpent] conceived a passion for her. R. Javod of Kefar Hanan said: It is thus written in order not to conclude with the passage on the serpent.[17]

The logical continuation of a statement about the man and woman's nakedness in the garden of Eden should have been a statement about God's making clothing for them, information contained in 3:21. However, the proximity between the lack of shame about their nakedness and the narrative involving the serpent suggests to the midrash that these themes are connected. It is Rabbi Joshua ben Korha's opinion that the juxtaposition accounts for why the serpent came to the humans: the serpent saw the human couple engaged in sexual relations and desired the woman. Rabbi Jacob offers an alternate explanation which does not require a thematic connection. In both cases, the serpent under discussion is not satanic or possessed, although it oversteps its bounds in pursuing its attraction to Eve.

Genesis Rabbah then moves into a discussion of the appearance of the serpent.

> Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field. R. Hoshaya the Elder said: He stood out distinguished [erect] like a reed, and he had feet. R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar said: He was an unbeliever. R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: He was like a camel. He deprived the world of much good, for had this not happened, one could have sent his merchandise through him, and he would have gone and returned. [18]

A connection is made between the serpent's shrewdness and its resemblance to humans. Theodore has defined דיקרטיס ("distinguished," in Rabbi Hoshaya the Elder's opinion) as distinguished and excellent, from a Greek term that was used for appointed rulers.[19] He suggests that the connection between the shrewdness of the serpent and its upright stature may lie in a verse from the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:8): "At the blast of Your nostrils

---

[17] *Gen. Rab.* 18:6 on 2:25. Freedman and Simon, 147; Theodor and Albeck, 168-9.

[18] *Gen. Rab.* 19, on 3:1. Freedman and Simon, 149; Theodor and Albeck, 171.

[19] Theodor and Albeck, 171.

the waters piled up, the floods stood straight like a wall."[20] ע-ר-מ of Ex. 15:8, meaning "piled up," or "heaped up," is followed by the image of a straight standing wall. The midrash might reflect a reading of ע-ר-מ of Gen. 3:1 with its primary meaning of wisdom or cunning connected to its other meanings.[21]

However, Roitman has suggested that Rabbi Hoshaya's opinion may be that the very fact of the serpent's shrewdness necessitates its physical resemblance to humans.[22] He suggests that Rabbi Hoshaya saw a direct connection between the serpent's wisdom and its physical aspect. Furthermore, he shows that that assumption, or even requirement, resembles a biological teaching which was known among philosophers of the period, dating back at least to Aristotle.[23] The godly nature of humans—specifically, their intellectual abilities—necessitated their physical form, that they have hands and feet. Rabbi Hoshaya, a first-generation Palestinian Amora, is elsewhere mentioned in connection with philosophers.[24] He may have known this teaching and been directly influenced by it in his comment regarding the serpent's form before the curse.

Rabbi Jeremiah ben Eleazar's opinion, that the serpent was an unbeliever, an *apikoros*, connects the serpent's shrewdness with the words it uses to deceive Eve. In saying "You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad," the serpent

---

[20] וברוח אפיך נערמו מים נצבו כמו נד נזלים.

[21] Ibid. The connection between the meanings of the root ע-ר-מ in Gen. 3:1 and Ex. 15:8 is reinforced by their translation with identical roots in *Targum Onqelos*. Here he translates וחויא הוה חכים; at Ex. 15:8 he translates מיא חכימו. However, see earlier, fn. 2, regarding the *Targum Onqelos* variants.

[22] Adolfo D. Roitman, "'Crawl Upon Your Belly,'" 157-182.

[23] "Man, instead of forelegs and forefeet, has arms and hands. Man is the only animal that stands upright, and this is because his nature and essence is divine. Now the business of that which is most divine is to think and be intelligent; and this would not be easy if there were a great deal of the body at the top weighing it down, for weight hampers the motion of the intellect and of the general sense. Thus, when the bodily part and the weight of it became excessive, the body itself must lurch forward towards the ground; and then, for safety's sake, Nature provided forefeet instead of arms and hands – as has happened in quadrupeds. All animals which walk must have two hind feet, and those I have just mentioned became quadrupeds because their soul could not sustain the weight bearing it down. A. L. Peck, trans., *Aristotle: Parts of Animals*, (London-Cambridge, Mass. 1955), quoted in Roitman.

[24] See *Gen. Rab.* 11:6, 1:1. W. Bacher, "The Church Father Origen and Rabbi Hoshaya," *JQR*, 3 (1891), 359, claimed that Rabbi Hoshaya learned Philo from Origen.

demonstrates its skepticism of and contention with God. This is not a statement about the physical form of the serpent, but the attribution of a title such as *apikoros* to a serpent suggests it had human-like intellectual qualities.[25]

Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar presents the opinion that the serpent resembled a camel, going on to say that this camel-like serpent would have been used as a messenger by humans, had it not sinned and lost its form and abilities in being punished. Roitman asserts that this rabbinic opinion is a direct response to the dragon images associated with the serpent in Pseudepigraphic literature.[26] The sages viewed the dragon as an idolatrous image, and Roitman contends that Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar's description of the serpent intentionally switched the popular dragon image with that of a camel as part of a polemic against those groups that saw the serpent as a mythological dragon. The camel, as the largest known animal in the region, was a natural substitute for the mythical dragon. Roitman also connects the dragon to images of Satan. (Thus, serpent = dragon = Satan).[27]

Genesis Rabbah later describes how, when God cursed the serpent, the ministering angels descended and cut off the hands and feet of the serpent, and its voice filled the entire earth.[28]

In stark contrast to many of the Pseudepigraphic texts, the earliest rabbinic texts that deal with the serpent in the Garden of Eden (the *Tosefta* and *Genesis Rabbah*) do not present a mythological or demonic serpent as the character introduced in Gen. 3:1. The serpent is a natural animal, created by God among the other animals. It is distinguished in being akin to humans in its intelligence, ability to speak and physical form, such that it is attracted to the female of the human species and can consider having a sexual

---

[25] The other possibility is that the original meaning of *apikoros* is intended, rather than that of "unbeliever." It is possible that Rabbi Jeremiah ben Eleazar meant that the serpent was an Epicurean, a believer in the philosophy of Epicurus that pleasure is the "only good and end of morality."

[26] See *Apoc. Mos.* and *Apoc. Ab.*; Roitman, 166-167.

[27] Roitman, "'Crawl Upon Your Belly,'" 166. Chronologically, *Life of Adam and Eve* and *Apocalypse of Abraham* attest to the popularity of the dragon identification at the end of the first century, while Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar lived in the second century. If Roitman's hypotheses are correct, the dragon association was likely still widespread enough to elicit a reaction from the Sages.

[28] *Gen. Rab.* 20:5. Freedman and Simon, 162.

relationship with her, taking the place of the human male. In being punished for its actions, the original serpent is lowered from its original state into the form which it now has. The serpent's nature is changed, but at no point did it act out of reasons beyond physical desire for the woman. There is no undertone of a cosmic battle or grudge involving satanic beings, nor is there an association between the serpent and any mythical or mythological being.

Non-Literal Rabbinic Interpretations

The same is not true for all rabbinic texts. The events in the garden of Eden have profound results for Adam and Eve and for mankind in general. Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden because of their sin of eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The expulsion represents the end of man's sojourn in paradise and the removal of the possibility for return. *b. Shabbat* 145b-146a presents the thesis that the covenant at Sinai repaired some of the damage caused by the serpent.

> Why are idolators lustful? Because they did not stand at Mount Sinai. For when the serpent came upon Eve he injected a lust into her; the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai, their lustfulness departed; the idolators, who did not stand at Mount Sinai, their lustfulness did not depart.[29]

This talmudic statement seems to imply that not only was the serpent acting out of lust for the woman when it approached her but that it also passed it on to her. Unless the lust was incurred by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge or by the curses given to the humans, its "injection" suggests that sexual relations are thought to have actually occurred between the serpent and the woman.

Whatever the circumstances, this statement once again testifies to a sexual and moral interpretation of the narrative. The first couple was given one negative commandment by God – the prohibition of eating from the Tree of Knowledge – which they promptly transgressed. At Sinai, the Israelites were given a covenant, which entailed adherence to numerous commandments. The Israelites promptly accepted the terms of the covenant in stating, "All that the Lord has spoken we will faithfully do!" (Ex. 24:7, literally, "we will do and we will obey"). The Talmud suggests that the events

---

[29] I. Epstein, ed., *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Shabbath*, vol. 2, trans., H. Freedman (London: The Soncino Press, 1972).

at Mount Sinai in some way returned the state of affairs of the Israelites to their pre-expulsion state, removing their lust. Somehow, in the rabbinic understanding of Gen. 3, lust connects the serpent, the humans, and the fate of mankind.

Elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud, a link is made between Satan, the evil inclination, and the angel of death. This text becomes important for interpretating the identity of the serpent in later Bible commentaries. "Resh Lakish said: Satan, the evil prompter, and the Angel of Death are all one."[30] This statement is made in the midst of a discussion about the book of Job. The *satan* (*hasāṭān*), who appears in the first chapter of Job, is shown to be each of these above beings through interpretations based on direct biblical quotations. The serpent found in Genesis is not mentioned in this text, yet the text will be referred to often in the later history of interpretation.

As well, a scenario that is partly reminiscent of some Pseudepigraphal texts is found in *b. Sanhedrin* 59b: "R. Judah b. Bathyra said: Adam, the first man, was reclining in the Garden of Eden with ministering angels at his service, roasting meat and cooling wine for him. Then the serpent came and, seeing him in all his glory, at once grew envious of him." The angels are said to be attending to man, but the text never says whether the serpent is something other than a serpent.[31]

Literal Interpretations

Numerous rabbinic sources flesh out what would have happened to the serpent had it not sinned. These scenarios reveal a portrait of an original serpent that may have been smart for an animal but that nevertheless was nothing more than an animal.

> Rabbi says: If the serpent had not been cursed, he would have been of great utility to the world because man would have introduced him into use instead of the horse, mule and donkey and he would have carried out manure for man to the gardens and orchards. Rabbi Simeon b. Eleazar says: If the serpent had not been cursed, he would have been of great utility to the world because a man would have brought two serpents for himself and would have sent one to the north and one to

---

[30] *Baba Batra* 16a. This text is often understood in a conceptual manner. Satan is that which causes one to do evil, rather than the one who causes evil. [Maurice Simon, trans. *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Baba Batra* (London; Jerusalem; New York: Soncino Press, 1976)].

[31] This scenario resembles *Life of Adam and Eve*, in which the angels are praising man, but there it leads to the fall of Satan.

> the south, and in thirty days they would have brought him silver and gold and precious stones and pearls.
> R. Simeon ben Menasia says: Alas that a great servant was lost to the world! For had the serpent not been reduced to disgrace, everyone in Israel might have had two serpents in his home, one toward the west and another toward the east; and they could have brought back costly sardonyx, precious stones, pearls, and every kind of precious object in the world. No creature could have harmed them. Not only that but they could have been used instead of camels or donkeys or mules to carry out fertilizer to the orchards and gardens.[32]

It is to man's disadvantage that the serpent was punished, because, through the serpent's punishment, man lost what otherwise would have been a valuable domesticated animal. Blidstein suggests that these sorts of comments are "precisely (and comically) directed at those who overemphasize the serpent's greatness."[33] The serpent is shown to have been talented and great "but in a humiliating sense" because it would have hauled manure.[34]

A literal interpretation of the serpent's identity is also assumed in *b. Bekhorot*'s discussion about the gestation periods of various animals (8a). There "more cursed shall you be than all cattle and all the wild beasts" (Gen. 3:14) is taken to mean that the serpent will be pregnant longer than any other animal, for seven years.

Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*

A very different picture of the serpent emerges from *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, a Palestinian text of the eighth or ninth century.[35] The author of *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* appears to be acquainted with Pseudepigraphic texts such as *Jubilees* and *1* and *2 Enoch*,

---

[32] Goldin, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, 10; *b. Sanhedrin* 59b. Version B has a slightly different text, attributing the comment to two different people. See Saldarini, trans., *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, 32-3 and n. 40. For the Hebrew text of both versions, see S. Schechter, ed., *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan* (Hildesheim; New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1979), 3. Jason Kalman has suggested that underlying this use of the serpent as a messenger may be a connection between the terms "serpent" (נחש) and "angel" (מלאך) through the term שרף (personal communication). The basic meaning of מלאך is "messenger"; the meaning of "angel" derives from the angel's function as messenger of God. Angels also have particular business (מלאכה) or a task to accomplish. See לאך, מלאך, and מלאכה in *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, 521, and Koehler-Baumgartner, 513, 585, 586. For the connection between serpents and angels see later, ch. 5, "Saadiah Gaon," and ch. 6, "Menaḥem ibn Saruq" and "Jonah ibn Janaḥ."

[33] Gerald J. Blidstein, *In the Rabbis' Garden: Adam and Eve in the Midrash*, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997), 20.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 356.

or with the sources of these books.[36] *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* is also closely associated with *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and probably was one of the sources used for the translation. The *Zohar* is also believed to have used many of the interpretations and doctrines found in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*.[37]

In terms of interpretations of the identity of the serpent, *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* represents a lone rabbinic voice that associates the actions and words of the serpent with the plottings of a satanic angel. As such, it acts as a link between Greco-Roman, non-rabbinic, interpretations and later modes of biblical interpretation, particularly as they relate to the serpent of Genesis.[38]

Chapter 13 of *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* begins by quoting Avot 4:28, "Envy, cupidity, and ambition remove man (Adam) from the world." These three sins are then shown to have been responsible for the sin and punishment of Adam and Eve. As in the *Apocalypse of Moses*, the ministering angels are driven to jealousy by the creation of man and seek his demise. "If we do not take counsel against this man so that he sin before his Creator, we cannot prevail against him."[39]

> Sammael was the great prince in heaven; the Chajjoth had four wings and the Seraphim had six wings, and Sammael had twelve wings. What did Sammael do? He took his band and descended and saw all the creatures which the Holy One, blessed be He, had created in His world and he found among them none so skilled to do evil as the serpent, as it is said, "Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field" (*ibid.* iii. 1). Its appearance was something like that of the camel, and he mounted and rode upon it. The Torah began to cry aloud, saying, Why, O Sammael! now that the world is created, is it the time to rebel against the Omnipresent? Is it like a time when thou shouldst lift up thyself on high? The Lord of the world "will laugh at the horse and its rider" (Job xxxix. 18).[40]

The serpent is compared to a person in whom there was an evil spirit. The person does not intend to speak the words or do the deeds he does. He acts "only according to the idea of the evil spirit, which (rules) over him. So (was it with) the serpent. All the

---

[36] Gerald Friedlander, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (London 1916; repr. New York: Hermon Press, 1981), xxii.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Friedlander, Ibid., xiii, states that *PRE* is "unorthodox in revealing certain mysteries which were reputed to have been taught in the school of Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai, the teacher of our Rabbi Eliezer."

[39] Ibid., 91.

[40] Ibid., 92.

deeds which it did, and all the words which it spake, it did not speak except by the intention of Sammael."[41]

The pretext for the first sin lies in a battle of jealousy, which the angels wage against Adam and his wife. Samael, as leader of the angels, takes the active role in plotting to defeat the humans. It is only as a result of this sin of his that the role of "great prince" is taken away from him and given to Michael. The serpent, in its original form, is only a vehicle used by the angels to lead the humans to failure. The serpent has the form of a camel, as in the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar, cited in *Genesis Rabbah*.[42] The subtlety attributed to the serpent in 3:1 gives it the necessary skills to carry out the evil plan, yet it has no personal stake in the plot. The serpent is nevertheless punished for its actions and its physical form is changed.

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, as has already been suggested, incorporates important interpretative changes into its Aramaic translation of the garden of Eden narrative.[43]

> [25]And the two of them were *wise, Adam* and his wife, but they did not *remain in their glory.*
> [3:1]Now the serpent was more skilled *in evil* than all the beasts of the field which *the Lord* God had made. . . . [6]And the woman saw *Sammael the angel of death and she was afraid.* . . . [7]Then the eyes of both of them were *enlightened* and they knew that they were naked *because they were stripped of the clothing of fingernails in which they had been created, and they saw their shame.* . . .
> [14]Then the Lord God *brought the three of them to judgement*, and he said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all beasts of the field. Upon your belly shall you go about, *and your feet shall be cut off, and you will cast off your skin once every seven years, and the poison of death will be in your mouth*, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. . . .[44]

---

[41] Ibid., 93.

[42] According to Roitman, "'Crawl Upon Your Belly,'" 168-9, this is because *PRE* has employed the opinion found in *Gen. Rab.*, but by this time, it has already lost its original polemical understanding. The camel, originally employed specifically to counter mythological interpretations (dragons), is picked up and utilized in a text filled with mythological interpretations. Alternatively, the camel interpretation in *PRE* may simply represent an ancient interpretation regarding the serpent, also seen in *Gen. Rab.*

[43] *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* is based on a Palestinian targum similar to *Neofiti*, but has incorporated a lot of midrashic material such that it is similar to the genre of "rewritten Bible." Its author is believed to have written outside the sphere of rabbinic influence. In its final form, this targum cannot be dated before the seventh or eighth century. See Michael Maher, trans., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible, vol. 1B (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 8, 10. 11-2.

[44] Ibid., 25-9. See John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 125-30, for parallels and comparisons between *Tg. Ps.-J.* and other sources.

In both 2:25 and 3:1, *Pseudo-Jonathan* departs from the standard interpretations of the root ע-ר-מ. The man and woman were not naked but were clothed in clothing of fingernails (3:7, 21). Instead, *ʿărûmmîm* is taken as if it were the plural of *ʿārûm*, wise. The original state of the humans was one of glorious wisdom, but they did not remain in that state for long.[45] In 3:1, *ʿārûm* takes on the meaning that *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* associates with it, "skilled in evil." Furthermore, 3:6 refers to Samael, the angel of death.

In translating the curses to the serpent, *Pseudo-Jonathan* adds that the serpent's feet will be cut off, that it will shed its skin every seven years, and that the poison of death will be in its mouth, but also that the struggle between it and the humans shall continue until the days of Messiah, as in other Palestinian Targums. The serpent is a physical creature but is also representative of more than that. *Pseudo-Jonathan* describes a serpent with evil skills and associates its abilities with the angel of death and Samael. Here perhaps is the first rabbinic evidence of the equation of the serpent with Satan (Samael), the evil inclination, and the angel of death.[46] Although all the elements are present in various earlier texts, this translation likely indicates a gradual process by which they become more closely associated and accepted as part of a more complex and multi-layered interpretation of the biblical text.

Summary

Whereas the literal interpretation of the identity of the serpent appears to be dominant in rabbinic literature, almost to the complete exclusion of any other possibility, the other interpretations are not lost. Although they take their final form centuries after the Talmud, *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* indicate the presence

---

[45] See comment re: ולא יתבוששו found in *Gen. Rab.* 18:6; they did not remain for even six hours, לית בו שש. This seems to be the source for *Tg. Ps.-J.*'s "did not remain in their glory." The references to "glory" as well as to the clothing of fingernails both involve a midrashic reading of *ʾôr* as *ʾôr*, and vice versa. A similar phenomenon occurs with Moses' "horns" in Ex. 34:29. For a discussion of this topic see W. H. Propp, "The Skin of Moses' Face – Transfigured or Disfigured," *CBQ* 49 (1987): 375-386; Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, 26, n. 12; Gary A. Anderson, "The Punishment of Adam and Eve in The *Life of Adam and Eve*, in *Literature on Adam and Eve: Collected Essays*, eds. Gary Anderson, Michael Stone and Johannes Tromp, Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha 15, 57-81. Leiden: Brill, 2000. *Gen. Rab.* 20:12 states that the Torah of Rabbi Meir contained the word *ʾôr* instead of *ʾôr*. Anderson's article is an interesting discussion of Adam and Eve's clothing in Jewish and Christian sources.

[46] See *Baba Batra* 16a and discussion above, "Non-Literal Rabbinic Interpretations."

or the resurgence of an alternative interpretation regarding the serpent's identity. Ideas known from earlier texts that were not preserved as part of the traditional rabbinic texts become part of the rabbinic corpus once they are inlcuded in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*. One can only speculate on the paths which those interpretations traveled in the centuries for which there is no literary evidence of their existence or perpetuation among the traditional Jewish community.

The significance of this contrasting interpretation of the serpent's identity depends on the theory by which one explains its absence from the classical rabbinic sources. If the identification of the serpent as Satan was seen as a Christian interpretation, the rabbinic interpretations may have excluded the idea as part of a polemic or to avoid using a seemingly Christian interpretation. However, if as Pagels suggests, the idea of Satan only developed among "dissident Jews," the original absence from rabbinic texts of the identification of the serpent as Satan further supports Pagels' hypothesis. Continuing this line of reasoning, the remarkable aspect of the history of interpretation thus far is not the absence of the mythical interpretation interpretation in rabbinic texts, but rather, its reappearance at a later date. For, if Pagels is correct, the idea that the serpent is associated with Satan is not a mainstream Jewish idea. This was known in the classical rabbinic period but was "forgotten" later; the serpent is only interpreted literally in classical rabbinic sources but *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*'s non-literal interpretation is later accepted.

There is also a third possibility, that the mythological interpretation is in fact part of an ancient esoteric teaching, adopted by the "dissident" pre-Christian groups, and finally made available to the mainstream Jewish public through *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*. This possibility will be explored in later chapters.

CHAPTER 5
THE IDENTITY OF THE SERPENT IN GEONIC LITERATURE

Introduction

In terms of format, biblical interpretations regarding the identity of the serpent undergo great change in the literature of the geonic period. In content, the available geonic commentaries of Saadiah Gaon, Samuel ben Ḥofni and Hai Gaon, continue the literal interpretations found in the early midrashim and the Talmuds, although they are not explicitly reliant upon them.[1] As such, they present new ways of reading the biblical texts, reaching similar conclusions, but for different reasons.

The geonic era began in the second half of the sixth century, although detailed and direct knowledge of the period dates to about a century later. Particularly once the centre of the Islamic world was transferred to Abbasid Baghdad, the period was characterized by a "good deal of cultural openness and exchange at the broad popular level and within intellectual circles."[2] In a cultural milieu with the shared language of Arabic, earlier intellectual traditions that were translated into Arabic, such as Greek philosophy, influenced both Arabic and Jewish studies. Most importantly, this affected rationalistic theology and scriptural exegesis, shaping the course of Jewish religious and intellectual activity.

Within the realm of Jewish intellectual activity, the geonic period presents a shift in the genre of literary evidence relative to the earlier rabbinic period. In the early geonic era, responsa are the only form of literary activity, with the vast majority of these devoted to Jewish law and talmudic exegesis. Few responsa contain questions regarding biblical

---

[1] Robert Brody in *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*, explains that the geonim accepted numerous aggadic traditions as authoritative, but Saadiah ben Josef and Samuel ben Ḥofni freely rejected certain non-legal rabbinic statements. It "seems clear that these Geonim considered many (perhaps most) aggadic comments to represent individual interpretations rather than authoritative traditions, although it is difficult to define the criteria which guided them in differentiating between these two categories, aside from a subjective assessment of extent to which comments represent serious attempts at exegesis rather than fanciful homiletics." (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998), 312-313.

[2] Brody, *Babylonian Geonim*, xxi.

exegesis. However, the tenure of Saadiah Gaon represents a turning point in matters of biblical exegesis. He authored a number of works devoted exclusively to biblical interpretation. Saadiah's literary activities then became a model for Samuel ben Ḥofni, who authored similar works. Hai Gaon wrote on biblical topics as well, although he did so only in the context of responsa.[3]

Although the extant geonic texts dealing with the identity of the serpent are limited, they reveal a form of biblical exegesis which is perhaps among the most principled and self-aware. In contrast with many earlier and later interpreters and interpretations, the geonim reveal the methodological guidelines by which they operate. They are acutely aware of the principles that lead them to their style of biblical exegesis, and they are transparent about them. Through their written words, they notify their readership why an interpretation must be as they present it. The three available sources present a common perspective that is the necessary outcome of their values and assumptions. Only one conclusion can be reached regarding the serpent's identity, because it is the result of a shared logical process of deduction and an external set of values to which it is believed the biblical text is required to adhere.

Furthermore, the evidence from geonic writings and other contemporary sources suggests that the literary evidence from the rabbinic period does not accurately or completely portray the common Jewish assumptions about the identity of the serpent. Although only minimal evidence is available, it seems that the "Jewish" interpretation of the serpent's identity is not monolithic and is not necessarily fairly represented by the main rabbinic texts of the previous chapter.[4]

---

[3] Brody, *Babylonian Geonim*, 300-304. Saadiah (882-942) was gaon of Sura from 928-942. Samuel ben Ḥofni was also gaon in Sura from approximately 997 until his death in 1013. Hai ben Sherira was gaon of Pumbedita from 1004 until his death in 1034. See ibid., 341-345, for a complete chronology of the geonim.

[4] By this I mean those texts that precede *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*.

Saadiah ben Josef Gaon

Aside from the earlier responsa, Saadiah's works are distinctive in being among the first written by a known Jewish author.[5] Writing in Judeo-Arabic, biblical interpretations are scattered throughout Saadiah's writings, but he also translated the entire Torah and wrote a commentary on at least half of it.[6] Futhermore, his works contain elaborate introductions and overviews of the biblical books and their principle themes. Sometimes, they also contain methodological discussions.

Saadiah Gaon explains his approach to the Bible and to biblical exegesis both in his philosophical work, the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, and in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah. In both places, he presents the same opinion.[7]

> A reasonable person must always understand the Torah according to the outward meaning of its words, i.e., that which is well known and widespread among the speakers of the language – since the purpose of composing any book is to convey its meaning perfectly to the reader's heart – except for those places in which sense perception or intellectual perception contradicts the well-known understanding of an expression, or where the well-known understanding of an expression contradicts another, unequivocal verse or a tradition. But if the exegete sees that retaining the simple meaning of an expression will cause him to profess one of these four things which I have mentioned, let him know that this expression is not to be understood according to its simple meaning, but contains one or more metaphors; and when he knows which type of metaphor is involved...in order to bring (the expression) to (agree with) its unambiguous (equivalent,...) this Scripture will be brought into accord with the senses and the intellect, with other verses and with tradition.[8]

The Bible is to be understood literally, as long as the literal meaning does not contradict what is known by the observation of the senses, by reason, or by another biblical text, or when an authentic rabbinic tradition has attached a specific interpretation to the verse. The identity of the serpent must be analyzed according to these criteria. That is, the commonly understood meaning of the word *naḥāš* is serpent. The question is whether the fact that the serpent is described as the smartest of the beasts of the field,

---

[5] This is in contrast with the major earlier texts, which are mainly compilations of earlier or material with the authors and their contributions less clear.

[6] Interpretations are especially found in his philosophical work, the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. Saadiah also authored translations and commentaries of other biblical books. See Brody, 300-315, for a complete discussion of biblical exegesis among the geonim and references to their other works.

[7] See also earlier in this chapter, fn.1, regarding the attitude of the geonim to the midrashim.

[8] Brody, *Babylonian Geonim*, 305, translating from Zucker, *Saadya's Commentary on Genesis* (Hebrew), 17-18, 191.

that it is said to converse with the woman, and that it seems intent on leading the humans to sin, necessitates a non-literal interpretation of what the serpent is. Does the information provided in the biblical text require one to resort to a metaphorical interpretation to bring what the text says into line with the senses, intellect, tradition and the rest of the Bible?

Saadiah begins his discussion of Genesis 3:1 by explaining that this verse is connected with the preceding verse, Gen. 2:25, in which it is stated, "The two of them were naked..." because it is after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the incident that Gen.3:1 begins to relate, that "they perceived that they were naked" (Gen. 3:7). The text assumes that Adam and Eve were not ashamed of their nakedness and did not recognize that they were indecent until they had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and their understanding was broadened.[9] Saadiah does not point to a sexual undertone to explain the connection between the verses and the serpent's motivation.

Following a section that is missing in extant manuscripts, Saadiah begins a response seemingly directed at those who identified the serpent with a satanic angel. His response suggests that this identification based itself on the fact that both serpents and angels are called *sārāp* in the Hebrew Bible.[10]

> It is necessary to provide several responses to this: a. the description *sĕrāpîm,* which is common to serpents and angels, does not necessitate that they be equal in their names as well. Rather, it is very likely that all things that are described with one adjective are each called by a different name... Besides which this matter would force one to attribute to angels jealousy and moments of anger and lust and the desire to mislead... (this is something which is impossible)... as I stand to explain in the matter of the Satan in the book of Job when I refute the opinion of those who think that the Satan there is the name of an angel. Aside from this, they would be forced to interpret the punishment to the serpent as an allegory, and in accordance with this the punishments to Adam and Eve would also be allegories, and the tree and the garden would also be merely allegories, and the whole matter wouldn't cease to bother them until they had been forced to remove all the events of Genesis from their literal meaning and to say that they are merely allegories.[11]

---

[9] Saadiah Gaon, *Saadya's Commentary on Genesis* (Hebrew), ed. and trans., Moshe Zucker (New York: 1984), 283.

[10] The beginning of the paragraph is missing in the available text, but from the wording of the continuation of the text, "It is necessary to provide several responses to this," it is clear that in the missing portion of the manuscript Saadiah must have introduced this other interpretation.

[11] Ibid., 283-284, [my translation].

Saadiah goes on to explain that what caused people to disagree on this matter was their inability to believe that the serpent could speak, let alone that it could receive reward or punishment. "For this matter (reward and punishment) is fitting only for one that has been commanded and warned, and if the matter is so, it necessitates [the conclusion] that all animals were also commanded, warned and received reward and punishment."[12] In fact, this logical argument is attributed to Saadiah Gaon in the thirteenth century Bible commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra. "Rabbi Saadiah Gaon says since we know that only humans are intelligent and capable of speaking, we must conclude that neither the serpent nor Balaam's ass spoke. He argues that in reality an angel spoke for them."[13] Saadiah's commentary reveals that although he may agree that speech and intellect were found in man alone, he definitely does not conclude that an angel spoke for the serpent. In fact, he is quite opposed to this interpretation.

To which commentary or interpretation did Saadiah feel compelled to respond? The interpretation says that an angel spoke and not the serpent. Furthermore, jealousy, anger, lust, and the desire to mislead all possibly play a role in explaining why a particular angel might have become involved in the narrative of Genesis 3. Thirdly, this interpretation is somehow supported by linking the terms *nāḥāš* and *śārāp*.

These descriptors point either to the Pseudepigraphic version of events, such as is depicted in *Apocalypse of Moses*, or else to the seventh- or eighth-century *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*. Saadiah cannot be responding to classical rabbinic sources, because they made no reference to angels and instead relied upon an original serpent with great abilities. In *Apocalypse of Moses* (*Life of Adam and Eve*) or *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, Satan or Samael is an angel who is jealous of man and is demoted and sent to earth. There, the serpent is used so that Satan/Samael can speak to Eve.

Saadiah's commentary may indicate that a lack of such an interpretation in rabbinic texts need not indicate the corresponding lack of the interpretation among the

---

[12] Ibid., 283.

[13] Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Abraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)*, vol. 1. H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, trans. (New York: Menorah Publishing Company, Inc. 1988), 65. Ibn Ezra obviously had a tradition about Saadiah's opinion that is different from the text available to us today. It is not clear whether Ibn Ezra had access to a manuscript or whether he was relying on an oral tradition attributed to Saadiah. See also ch. 6, fn. 19.

general Jewish public. He may be responding to *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, but one can only speculate on the road that this interpretation of the serpent's identity traveled in its centuries of literary silence.[14] Saadiah's refutation of this reappearing interpretation on textual grounds suggests that it more than a mere folk tale. That is, Saadiah's refutation sounds less like educating ignorant masses than waging a linguistic and textual battle, which suggests this interpretation has almost "academic" support. In fact, Saadiah's response may provide a further support to the tendency to view the Pseudepigrapha as Bible interpretation,[15] by illuminating the textual link between the Pseudepigraphic version of events and the details of the biblical text. Zakovitz has argued the case for drawing connections between *nāḥaš* and *śārāp* in the Hebrew Bible.[16] In doing so, he has noted the correspondence between the physical description of the *śārāp* in Isaiah's vision and the Pseudepigraphic descriptions of a winged serpent in the Genesis narrative.[17] Saadiah's explicit reference to those who connect *nāḥaš* with *śārāp* and claim that an angel spoke for the serpent strengthens Zakovitz's hypothesis regarding the serpent and almost proves their evolution into a textually supported tradition, if not the origins of the Pseudepigraphic version in text-based Bible interpretation.

Whether the identification of the serpent with a satanic angel persisted throughout the centuries of its literary silence or filtered back into Jewish interpretation from Christian or Muslim sources cannot be ascertained.[18] In the Quran's description of the events in the garden of Eden, the serpent is not even mentioned.

---

[14] The Babylonian geonim are the first to quote *PRE* and so it is possible that Saadiah had the text or at least knew of it. *PRE* is quoted in the Siddur of Rav Amram (c. 850), the She'eltot of Rav Aḥai Gaon and by Natronai Gaon (Friedlander, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, xviii).

[15] See J. H. Charlesworth, "In the Crucible," 20-43.

[16] Y. Zakovitz, "*Neḥashim*," 25-37, but he does not mention Saadiah in his article.

[17] This includes *Apoc. Mos.*

[18] The clear connection in the Christian Bible between a heavenly dragon-being sent to earth and the serpent has already been described (see ch. 2, fn. 24). The Quran's description of events in the garden of Eden is very much like the version found in the *Apocalypse of Moses* but is even more radical in that it does not even mention the serpent. Upon creation of man on earth, God orders the angels to bow before Adam. All the angels comply, except for Iblīs. "(Iblīs) said: 'I am not one to prostrate myself to man, whom Thou didst create from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape.' (God) said: 'Then get thee out from here; for thou art rejected, accursed'" (15:33-34). Iblīs, the devil, is also given the common name of Satan. It

> We said: "O Adam! dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden; and eat of the bountiful things therein as (where and when) ye will; but approach not this tree or ye run into harm and transgression." Then did Satan make them slip from the (Garden), and get them out of the state (of felicity) in which they had been.[19]

Where the origins of the ideas in each of these sources lie and whether they play a role in the history of Jewish interpretation are questions which must ultimately be answered, but they are beyond the scope of this thesis. They do however prove that even if none of the tradition that the serpent was a devil-like or dragon-like figure was preserved within Judaism, it was present in the most basic texts of the Christians and Muslims and could have continued to influence Jewish thinking.

Returning to Saadiah's interpretation of the serpent's identity, he agrees that the common serpent could not possibly have been commanded and then punished. He offers an alternative solution to the entire problem.

> God... created many serpents and when he wanted to put man [Adam] to the test he changed the nature of one of the serpents and gave him human form and imposed upon him positive and negative commandments and reward and punishment, and warned him that if he would rebel He would return him to his initial state, as He had said to man, (Gen. 3:19) "For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.
>
> Therefore I have said in my translation of *hāyāh ʿārûm... hāyāh lēḥākam* [became wise]... and the verb *hāyāh* comes with the meaning of becoming [*hithavut*]... and the word *ʿārûm* means much conventional wisdom....[20]

Saadiah explains that God changed the serpent in the same manner as on other occasions in which He changed the nature of something in order to carry out a sign or miracle through it, such as turning the Nile into blood or Aaron's staff into a serpent.[21] On these occasions, God removed those defining qualities of the object and replaced them with the characteristics of the new substance or object.

---

appears with the name Satan, luring Adam and Even into sin (2:35-36). [Abdullah Yusuf ʿAli, *The Holy Qur ʾan: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Chicago: The Islamic Center, 1978)]. An actual serpent only appears in the Quran's descriptions of Moses' staff when it is turned into a serpent as a sign before Pharaoh. See the Quran references for the three roots used for "Serpent" in Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur ʾan* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1983), *hyy, *jnn, *thʿb.

[19] Quran 2:35-36.

[20] Saadiah, *Commentary on Genesis*, 283-284.

[21] Ex. 7:10, 12.

> The creator removed from it the characteristics of the serpent and exchanged them with characteristics of human beings. Therefore it is said here "was the shrewdest" [*turned into* the shrewdest] as it is said [Ex. 7:20] "[and all the water of the Nile] was turned into blood," [Ex. 7:10] "and it turned into a serpent." And even though it was converted into a new being, it retained its original name, as with Aaron's rod in Ex. 7:12.[22]

The question of why God would change the serpent for this purpose prompts a brief discussion of what wisdom could possibly be involved in God's testing man when He knows he will fail and be punished. Saadiah's opinion is that man has been given the wisdom to act properly; what he does with these tools is his own decision. And so, God tests man in order to be able to reward him. Zucker point out that this discussion seems to be part of Saadiah's response to the challenges of Hiwi al-Balkhi.[23]

Limited by the unacceptability of allegory on the one hand and the impossibility of punishing a creature that has not been commanded in any way, Saadiah's response is to accept a miraculous change in the nature of one particular snake for the purpose of testing man. A miraculous intervention in the creation causing a fundamental morphological and intellectual change at this moment is an acceptable solution to the greater problem of the textual or philosophical impossibilities of the other solutions considered.[24] One very clearly sees where Saadiah's values lie in understanding this contrast between what is considered possible and impossible. Ultimately, Saadiah promotes an interpretation in which the serpent is not an allegory for something else and does not work in conjunction with another being. This was true of most rabbinic midrash texts as well. Despite the very different interpretations found in Christian and Muslim versions of the event, Saadiah's interpretation represents a continuation of what seems to be the literal tradition of rabbinic Judaism regarding the serpent.

---

[22] Saadiah, *Commentary on Genesis*, 284-285.

[23] Ibid., 285, n. 418.

[24] Of the geonic attitudes toward miracles, Samuel ben Ḥofni's was the most radical, limiting the use of miracles to prophets when they "served to authenticate their prophetic mission." Saadiah did not restrict miracles in this manner and weakened the link between miracles and prophecy. "Nevertheless, his rationalist approach led him to impose on the miraculous a philosophical framework, which necessitated interpreting the details of various miraculous accounts nonliterally." Hai Gaon disapproved of the extent to which rationalism affected both Saadiah's and Samuel ben Ḥofni's opinions of miracles. See Brody, *Babylonian Geonim*, 297-298. See also later in this chapter, "Samuel ben Ḥofni Gaon," for more on his position on miracles and fn. 34, for further discussion of Hai's opinion about miracles.

Samuel ben Ḥofni Gaon

Samuel ben Ḥofni Gaon, successor to Saadiah as gaon of Sura, was also one of the most prolific writers of the gaonic period. Like Saadiah, he too translated part of the Torah and wrote a commentary on it in Arabic.[25] His interpretation of the serpent's identity is preserved to some extent in Abraham ibn Ezra's Bible commentary. Both available versions of Ibn Ezra's commentary present Samuel ben Ḥofni's position as a negative response to Saadiah's. However, since Ibn Ezra's presentation of Saadiah's opinion is incorrect, Samuel ben Ḥofni's position is actually similar to Saadiah's.

In the standard version of Ibn Ezra's commentary, Saadiah's words are given and then it is stated, "And Samuel bar Ḥofni responded to them." The alternate version of Ibn Ezra's commentary offers slightly more detail. Samuel ben Ḥofni opts for a literal interpretation that involves the serpent speaking, without resorting to help from an angel.

> *The shrewdest of all the wild beasts*: The Gaon said that the serpent did not speak, only an angel spoke through its mouth. And others said that Satan, who is an angel, spoke through its mouth. And the Gaon's proof is that it is not right for the serpent to speak in the language of men, for its essence is acquiescence. Furthermore, the organs of speech are not prepared in it to speak. And Rav Samuel ben Ḥofni said that the serpent spoke.[26]

A more elaborate picture of Samuel ben Ḥofni's opinion on the matter can be deduced from other parts of his commentary. In his explanation of Gen. 48:19, he presents his position regarding miracles for prophets. He argues against those who would deny that the sun was stopped in Josh. 10:13. He claims there that everyone agrees that God could have caused everything to stand still, and so there is no reason not to believe what the text clearly says. "This too is his opinion here regarding the speech of the serpent, that the All-Able also made it so that the serpent would speak.[27]

---

[25] *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 14:807; Brody, *Babylonian Geonim*, 302, and references to texts in n. 8.

[26] Abraham Ibn Ezra, "Alternate Commentary on Genesis" (Hebrew), ed., David Weiser, in *Torat Ḥayyim – Sefer Bereshit*, series ed., M. L. Katzenelbogen (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook), 316 [my translation].

[27] Samuel ben Ḥofni, *The Biblical Commentary of Rav Samuel ben Hofni Gaon* (Hebrew), ed., Aharon Greenbaum (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1978), 40-41, n. 17 [My translation]. Greenbaum also says that this would have been his opinion regarding Balaam's ass (in disagreement with Saadiah), but not at I Sam. 28:25 regarding the necromancer of En Dor (again in disagreement with Saadiah). His position is that the woman tricked Saul. Ḥofni either follows the idea of the Mutazillites that God makes miracles to

Hai Gaon

The last gaon from whom there remains evidence of interpretation relating to the serpent is Hai. His manner of responding to a letter from a North African Jewish community provides a very modest and self-aware interpretation about the serpent's identity. Unlike the responses of most other commentators, his response is remarkable in admitting the impossibility of reaching a definite answer on the subject and in acknowledging those details of the events that can never be retrieved. As such, his interpretation is not only an exegesis of the biblical text, but a commentary on commentators and the act of exegesis as well.

> Along with this, you have asked [that I inform you of my] opinion in the matter of the serpent and its speech to Eve and the speech of the exalted Lord to [the serpent], and that [I] bring [my] evidence in this [matter], associate it with the matter of Balaam's ass and inform [you] how it happened that it spoke, and the matter of the necromancing woman.[28]
>
> These matters deserve to be spoken about at length. However, what is possible to mention in this document are the essentials of the subject, its sides, and the main evidence for this, in short. Know . . . that the matter of the serpent is very difficult. And the truth of the subject, as to what was, in part and principle, at the time of the creation and the temptation, neither we nor our fellow-men have the capacity to know, other than to call to mind the expressions mentioned in Scripture and to submit them to the mind. That which the mind permits out of the plain sense of Scripture we accept, and if the subject can withstand two modes [of explanation] or more, one must not object to any one of them. Rather, whatever is closer takes precedence.[29]

Despite being on the verge of offering an interpretation, Hai acknowledges that neither he, nor anyone else, can access "the truth" of the matter. The act of exegesis is acknowledged as a process that is one step removed from the real answers that a person may wish for. Like Saadiah, Hai presents the realm of possible explanations as being limited by reason. He differs from Saadiah in acknowledging that the text can withstand

---

support the words of prophets, or else doesn't accept the opinion that forces other than God exist. See the discussion in Brody, *Babylonian Geonim*, 297, on the same subject.

[28] See Num. 22:28 for Balaam's ass and I Sam. 28:25 regarding the necromancer.

[29] Simhah Assaf, *Gaonica: Gaonic Responsa and Fragments of Halachic Literature from the Geniza and Other Sources* (Hebrew), Toratan Shel Geonim Rishonim, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Darom, 1933), microfiche, 155 [my translation]. The same responsum is also available in a less complete form in S. A. Verthaimer, ed., *Sefer Kehilat Shelomoh* (Jerusalem: Presses of R. Moshe Luntz, 1899), microfiche, 13. This was a response to a letter from Kabas, a North African city, east of Tunis, north of Kairouan.

more than one reasonable interpretation, but he proceeds to offer his opinion of what the most correct interpretation is. He too opts for a literal reading.

> What can be considered from Scripture is that this serpent said what it did, as is mentioned in the Torah. And one is to learn from this that it had the ability to express [itself], although we don't know if it used to express [itself] and speak as a human being, or in a different manner. But since we find that the Lord . . . declared it guilty and punished it we know that it was commanded, because punishment only falls upon one who is deserving of it. And only the one who is commanded and warned and has [nevertheless] sinned is deserving of punishment.
>
> Regarding the Torah's words that "the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts," it is possible that the inten[ded meaning] was this serpent alone, and it is possible that the inten[ded meaning] was the entire species that was [made that way] at the time of creation.[30]
>
> Concerning what was done to [the serpent], that it says, "on your belly shall you crawl and dust shall you eat," [this] applies to the entire species, including the serpent, whether it was male or female, because this is not the punishment. The punishment is solely what it says, "more cursed shall you be than all cattle." Know that all which the Lord does is not for nought and similarly, suffering will only come with justice or because a person is deserving, or in order to awaken man . . .[31]

Hai Gaon presents his interpretation as if the biblical text cannot allow any other possibility. The Bible's words are clear and they force one to accept them. God's actions are also definitely just, and so one must simply accept that the serpent, which spoke, deserved the punishment it received. These lead to the question of whether this particular serpent was remarkable, or whether all serpents were that way. Both these possibilities are feasible. Regardless, the physical changes that are decreed upon the serpent apply to the entire species of serpents and are not considered a punishment. Others have departed from the plain meaning of the text because of beliefs that are external to the Torah text, yet Hai Gaon rejects their opinion and repeatedly focuses on the words of Scripture. [32]

---

[30] Note that the text breaks off at this point in Verthaimer's edition and the conclusion of his responsum is missing.

[31] Assaf, ibid., 155-6.

[32] In a portion of the text following a section that is quite incomplete, Hai apparently deals with an interpretation that is the result of a Muslim (Mutazillite) philosophical belief about the nature of miracles. Miracles are a change of form in the order of creation, acts which cannot be performed by man and which are intended to support the prophet who has been sent with a prophecy. According to this belief, the serpent's speech could not have been a miracle and instead the explanation must be "that at that time the laws of nature were not yet [firmly] established in the eyes of Adam and Eve and therefore the serpent's speech was not something out of the ordinary. It is also possible that the serpent was created according to the form of the serpents and was then transferred to a different form, more distinguished than [the original] and afterward was returned to its [original] shape when it sinned." [Assaf, ibid., 156-7].

> That which the evidence testifies to, is that the serpent was commanded and warned and distanced from stumbling-blocks in what it was commanded and warned about. One is not able to relate in this manner to Balaam's ass because . . . we do not know whether it was commanded. Not only this, we also know that the serpent had the ability to learn one thing from another, such that this characteristic was destroyed with the sin. . . .
>
> Since this speech is possible in both [cases] when they have the same external form, as we see them, the words of those who say that the Lord . . . generated the speech in the air where the ass stood are nullified because the Scripture is explicit, "the Lord opened the ass's mouth etc." . . .[33]

Hai's responsum provides a refreshing example of the balance that exists between value systems and the realm of possibilities available in interpreting a biblical text.[34] The only source of information about the biblical narrative that, in his opinion, can be relied upon is the text of the Torah itself. The plain sense of the words of Scripture cannot be ignored or denied because of a different belief system that creates tension with what the text appears to be saying. Similarly, Hai Gaon's responsa "demonstrate his familiarity with the existence of a vast mystical literature and a well-known if not necessarily wide-spread mystical praxis, but the Gaon is clearly at pains to distance himself from this world, if not from esoteric knowledge in general."[35] The question of the serpent's identity may only be answered from the framework of a belief that God is just and that the Torah is true.

Summary

Each of the geonim for whom there exists evidence of interpretations of the serpent's identity opts for a literal reading. No characters that are not mentioned in the text are involved. Even though no mention is made of God opening the serpent's mouth, all somehow accept that, with God's involvement, the serpent's speech would have been possible. Each gaon arrives at his interpretation through an independent process of reasoning. None refers to the earlier rabbinic texts on this matter. Lastly, the literal

---

[33] Ibid., 157.

[34] Hai's approach here is in keeping with his rational approach to miracles. See his responsum on the subject quoted in S. Z. Halberstam, ed., *Perush Sefer Yetzirah le-R' Yehudah Barceloni*, additional notes by D. Kaufmann (Berlin: Chevrat Meqizei Nirdamim, 1885; repr. Jerusalem: Makor Publishing, 1970). (The responsum has been translated into English by B. Barry Levy, "Responsum of Rav Hai Gaon").

[35] Brody, *Babylonian Geonim*, 147.

interpretation they offer stands in the face of a growing number of non-literal sources.[36] Their uniformity of opinion is all the more remarkable because of these facts.

[36] Just what constitutes a literal interpretation is complicated by the geonic opinions that discuss God miraculously allowing the serpent to speak. The term "literal" is used here to describe interpretations that allow for the simple facts of the Genesis narrative, that a serpent spoke to Eve. The involvement of God and miracles explain how or why the serpent was able to speak, but do not change the fact that it was in fact a serpent that spoke. God's involvement acknowledges that the events described in Genesis are unusual and not congruent with the natural abilities of serpents.

CHAPTER 6
HEBREW LINGUISTIC SCIENCE AND PATTERNS OF BIBLE EXEGESIS IN SEFARAD

Introduction

The tenth-century comments and commentaries of the Babylonian geonim, the subject of the preceding chapter, were not the only Bible-related endeavours of the period, nor were they the most influential. Certain developments that were to affect Bible study greatly culminated in the tenth century, while others, affected by these and other earlier events, only began then. The realm of Jewish Bible interpretation was expanded technically, in terms of the tools that were available with which to approach the text, and geographically, in terms of a shift in the location of the centers of Jewish learning from Babylonia and Palestine toward Sefarad and Ashkenaz.

Several factors had the cumulative effect of focussing attention on the text and language of the Bible, leading to a flourishing of biblical studies from the tenth to thirteenth centuries. Within the Jewish community, the rise of the Karaite movement challenged the biblical-interpretive basis of rabbinic Judaism. With their focus on Scripture and rejection of certain traditional interpretations, the Karaites forced the mainstream Jewish community to refocus on Scripture itself, which had often been subordinated to the study of the rabbinic texts, Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash.

The peak of the work of the Masoretes is considered to have occurred with the completion of the Aleppo Codex. Produced by Aharon ben Asher in 915, it is the oldest known manuscript that contained the complete Bible and the fully developed Masorah and vocalization. Manuscript evidence indicates that vocalization systems were already developed and being used by the seventh century and that codices became a common format for texts in that century as well, although scrolls continued to be used for the Torah reading in synagogues. The Babylonian and Tiberian systems for vocalizing the text preserved the oral tradition about the correct reading of the text. Along with this, the Massorah (*magna* and *parva*), the "great mnemotechnic apparatus to guard the text from

error" which was invented by the Palestinian masoretes won authoritative acceptance.[1] The fully developed Bible codices, whether vocalized by the Palestinian or Babylonian system, eventually allowed for the scientific study of the language of the Bible through the development of biblical Hebrew grammars and dictionaries.

Advances in the study of biblical Hebrew were influenced by conditions within the Jewish community, but were also part of an overall tendency in the surrounding Islamic society. It is commonly assumed that the central role of the Quran within Islam and the belief that the Quran's language represented the perfection of Arabic led to a similar emphasis within Jewish society for the text that played an equivalent role within Judaism, the Bible. The scientific study of Arabic began before that of Hebrew, and some of the main advances were achieved when it was realized that some principles that were true for Arabic applied equally for Hebrew. While Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit grammars had already existed for centuries, it was only through contact with Arabic that Hebrew grammar took any organized form. As well, the adoption of Arabic as the secular tongue of Jews in the Islamic empire provided Jews with knowledge of another Semitic language, in addition to biblical and mishnaic Hebrew and (biblical, targumic, and talmudic) Aramaic. This too may have served to further stimulate an emphasis on the language of the Bible and through it, an eventual emphasis on the literal meaning of the text.[2]

These advances in Bible study affected the issue of the serpent's identity in focussing attention on the text of the Bible. For a time, the emphasis remained the literal level of interpretation. Eventually, the study of other sciences also affected Bible study and promoted allegorical interpretations.[3]

---

[1] N. M. Sarna, "Hebrew and Bible Studies in Medieval Spain," in R. D. Barnett, ed., *The Sephardi Heritage, vol. 1* (Ilford, England: Vallentine, Mitchell & Company), repr. in N. M. Sarna, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 84 [references are to repr. edition].

[2] Further contributing factors included the patronage of scholars, particularly in Cordoba, Spain, and the general culture which valued language and the ability to use it in good form (poetry). This too was influenced by non-Jewish society, with the Caliphs of Cordoba, 'Abd ar-Rahman III and 'Al-Hakam II (912-61, 961-76), who cultivated "linguistic studies through the import and patronage of scholars." [Sarna, "Hebrew and Bible Studies," 85].

[3] The height of the allegorical trend is seen in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed.* However, the seeds leading to that sort of interpretation are already evident in the commentary of Solomon ibn Gabirol.

Menaḥem ibn Saruq

Menaḥem ben Jacob ibn Saruq (910-970) was the first Spanish grammarian of stature and benefited from the patronage of Ḥasdai ibn Shaprut in Cordoba. Menaḥem's *Maḥberet*, the first complete dictionary written in Hebrew, was also the first biblical dictionary written by a Spanish-Jewish scholar. The *Maḥberet* "was the first attempt to classify the entire biblical thesaurus on the basis of characteristic consonants and to group together roots according to the varying meanings they can bear, as illustrated by scriptural citations."[4] The lexicon and introductory grammar were not the absolute firsts though, and in fact showed little advance over earlier works by non-Spanish authors.[5] Ibn Saruq restricted himself to biblical Hebrew and did not resort to Arabic to elucidate meanings, diminishing the objectivity of some of his definitions. The work nevertheless played a large role in advancing the new Spanish focus on Hebrew language and grammar. The fact that the *Maḥberet* was written in Hebrew also allowed it to be understood by the Jews of Ashkenaz, in contrast with the vast majority of later grammatical works that were composed in Arabic, with only some eventually being translated, and others disappearing.

Dictionaries of biblical Hebrew can indicate interpretations of various biblical passages, even if the work is not meant to be a Bible commentary. With regard to the identity of the serpent, entries for the words *nāḥāš* and *śārāp* indicate whether the author thought these terms could have a symbolic or allegorical meaning and whether they should be connected with each other.[6] If the serpent of Gen. 3:1 is grouped with other clearly normal serpents found elsewhere in the Bible, this might be construed as indicating the author's belief that the serpent in the garden of Eden was an actual animal.

---

[4] Sarna, "Hebrew and Bible Studies," 92.

[5] Ibid. These include Saadiah ben Josef and Judah ibn Quraish.

[6] Based on Saadiah's commentary, the *nāḥāš*/ *śārāp* connection seems to be the main textual link upon which the non-literal, mythical and allegorical interpretations are based. See above, ch. 5, "Saadiah ben Josef Gaon."

> Serpent (נחש) – divides into three divisions. The first: "I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me" (Gen. 30:27), "that a man like me practices divination" (Gen. 44:16), "a soothsayer, a diviner" (Deut. 18:10) – this is a matter of sorcery. The second: "burnished bronze" (Eze. 1:7), "Is my flesh bronze?" (Job 6:12), "put in fetters" (II Sam 3:34). The third: "*seraph* serpents and scorpions" (Deut. 8:15) – a type of poisonous snake and viper.[7]

Gen. 3:1 is not quoted as an example for any of the three categories presented by Menaḥem ibn Saruq. Given the options, it would seem to be most likely that the author would place Eden's serpent in the third category. However, although the *Maḥberet* is known to be incomplete, perhaps one should wonder whether verses from Genesis 3 were purposely neglected. No mention is made of occurrences where *nāḥāš* is clearly used in conjunction with another term to denote a mythical creature. In contrast with this is the *Maḥberet*'s definition of *śārāp*. The *Maḥberet* first provides examples of occurrences in which *śārāp* is a sort of serpent, but then states that the root can also signify angels, incense, or fire.[8]

Jonah ibn Janaḥ

The work of Jonah ibn Janaḥ later in the same century (985-1040) is considered the pinnacle of achievement in biblical Hebrew studies. Ibn Janaḥ's grammar and dictionary were made possible by the realization of Judah ben David Ḥayyuj that the triconsonantal verb stem applied to the Hebrew language.[9] Ibn Janaḥ utilized rabbinic Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic and provided a methodical analysis of biblical Hebrew syntax. His definitions and his work in general were based on a more scientific foundation than earlier works in the field.

Unlike Menaḥem's *Maḥberet*, Jonah ibn Janaḥ's *Sefer ha-Shorashim* does explicitly include Gen. 3:1 in elucidating the definition of the root נ-ח-ש. The actual definition of the word is not explicitly outlined, because it is "known." Interestingly, Ibn Janaḥ also chooses the entry of נ-ח-ש (*nāḥāš*) to explain why it is also called שרף (*śārāp*).

---

[7] Menaḥem ben Saruq, *Maḥberet Menaḥem* (London: Hevrat Me'orere Yeshanim, 1854; repr. Jerusalem, 1967), 122, [my translation].

[8] Ibid., 181.

[9] Sarna, "Hebrew and Bible Studies," 96.

> . . . "Now the serpent was the shrewdest" [Gen. 3:1]; "*seraph* serpents and scorpions" [Deut. 8:15]; "the copper serpent" [Num. 21:9]; "serpents . . . Adders" [Jer. 8:17]—[their definition is] known. Regarding that [Scripture] says *śārāp*: it belongs to the serpents—serpents that are known among the fiery [or poisonous, serpents][10]—for when they blow on anything they burn it with their breath . . . [11]

In his definition of ף-ר-ש, Ibn Janaḥ goes into further detail about the meaning of this term. There, he states that even the philosophers call these serpents *ha-sorfim*, "the ones that burn," because they burn what they breathe on (*śĕrāpīm* derives from *sorfim*).[12] He continues by saying that the Arabs have a special name for part of this class of animals and concur with this derivation. There is also another subclass within this group, that of the flying *śārāp*.

> These too are similar to these serpents, except that they also belong to [the class of] ones that fly. The philosophers relate about some of them, that they jump a great distance—as far as the throw of a javelin—but are wingless . . . Aristotle . . . related that among the [class of] serpents are serpents with wings, with which they can fly. These are found in Ethiopia. It is possible that Scripture's story is about ones like these when it says *śārāp mĕ'ōpēp* [Isa. 14:29; 30:6]. Yet another matter is derived from this [root]: "Seraphs stood in attendance on Him" [Isa. 6:2], means angels of fire, as it says, "[something that] looked like [burning] coals of fire" [Eze. 1:13] . . .[13]

Thus, the *śārāp* can denote a class that includes among it many unusual sorts of serpents. However, the "seraphs" that Isaiah sees in his vision are not part of this class. They make up a separate branch in the meanings associated with the root ף-ר-ש.

In the definitions of *naḥaš* and *śārāp* that are of relevance, Ibn Janah distinguishes between three categories. The first is that of the serpent, with which everyone is familiar. Both *naḥaš* and *śārāp* are used to denote this class of animals. The second category, also called *śārāp*, contains sorts of serpents that are not well known but are capable of either leaping far without wings or flying with wings. The third category is not related to this serpent family; it is the category of angels that have a fiery appearance.

According to his dictionary, it seems clear that Jonah ibn Janaḥ understood the *naḥaš* of the garden of Eden to be a regular serpent. Despite this, his dictionary really

---

[10] Literally, *ha-sorfim* means the ones that burn.

[11] Jonah ibn Janaḥ, *Sepher Haschoraschim*, ed. A. Berliner (Berlin: Zvi Hirsch Itzkowski, 1896; repr. 1969), 299-300, [my translation].

[12] Note that transliteration of *ha-sorfim* and *sorfim* in this sentence follows the general purpose style.

[13] Ibid., 536

highlights the other images that are associated with the same root, images that are strikingly similar to other interpretations of Eden's serpent. Fiery angels and winged, dragon-like beings do appear in the same dictionary entries, once again calling attention to the inner-biblical associations that seem to play a role in the mythical interpretations of the serpent's identity.

Judah ben Samuel ibn Balʿam

Judah ibn Balʿam (d.c. 1090), a pupil of Ibn Janaḥ and himself the author of works on grammar as well as Bible commentary, also discusses the identity of the serpent. In remarks about Balaam's ass, in his book ספר התכרעה, Ibn Balʿam deals with Saadiah Gaon's position and disagrees with him.

> Rav Saadiah Gaon . . .said that the angel spoke next to the ass and Balaam thought that she [the ass] spoke. But this is a denial of Scripture, which says, "and the Lord opened the mouth of the ass." It is well known that this is not an expression for the speech of an angel, but rather it is an expression for what God arranged out of the ass's instruments of speech while it spoke. He also gave it extra discernment and understanding through which it knew all that it said. I know not why it should be necessary to dismiss the speech of the ass, for the serpent already set a precedent in a similar matter, and what difference is there between the serpent and the ass . . .? Why is it necessary to justify the speech of the serpent but reject the speech of the ass even though God is all-able?[14]

Ibn Balʿam clearly does not take issue with Saadiah's opinion regarding the serpent speaking in Genesis 3. The issue of Balaam's talking ass, according to his own logic, can just as easily follow the literal meaning of the text. He cannot understand why Saadiah's opinion would differ regarding the ass, when the text itself so clearly says that God opened the donkey's mouth, allowing it to speak. He contends that it is incorrect to interpret in a manner that contradicts the words of Scripture and the known meanings of those words. God, who is all-able, is capable of interacting with this world to temporarily alter a creature's abilities. This is an acceptable explanation to account for events literally described in the Bible. Although he does not mention it, Judah ibn Balʿam's interpretation is in close agreement with Samuel ben Ḥofni's.

---

[14] Samuel ben Balʿam, *Sefer ha-Hakhraʿah* (Oxford-Bodliana ms. 292), quoted in Samuel ben Ḥofni, *The Biblical Commentary*, 40-41, n. 17, [my translation].

Solomon ibn Gabirol

These literal and seemingly logical interpretations of the Genesis narrative are themselves disputed by Solomon ibn Gabirol (1021-1069?), most noted for his poetry. In a rationalist manner, Ibn Gabirol takes issue with the literal interpretation, because the text never mentions the serpent losing its ability to speak. His opinion is referred to in Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Genesis, where it is described as a retort to Samuel ben Ḥofni, who said that the serpent did in fact speak. "On the other hand, Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol, the great Spanish scholar and poet who wrote metered verse, arose and disagreed with Rabbi Samuel ben Ḥofni."[15] Ibn Gabirol's reason for the disagreement is found in the alternate version of Ibn Ezra's commentary to Genesis. "Rabbi Solomon ben Gabirol said that, if the serpent did speak, why does it no longer speak? And know, that there is no mention in Scripture that its lips should become mute."[16]

Ibn Gabirol's logical position, in opposition to the literal interpretation of Samuel ben Ḥofni, is clear from the references to it in Ibn Ezra. Unfortunately, his alternative explanation is not mentioned by Ibn Ezra. As will shortly be seen, Ibn Ezra still opts for a literal interpretation of the events despite speaking so glowingly of Ibn Gabirol. Ibn Gabirol himself is known as the first representative of the Spanish school of philosophic-allegoric biblical exegesis and his allegorical explanations for other aspects of the garden of Eden are known.[17] It is likely that, in highlighting the problems with a literal interpretation regarding the serpent's ability to speak and the related issue of its identity, Ibn Gabirol would have resolved the difficulties through an allegorical interpretation.

Abraham ben Moses Ibn Ezra

Compared with the Spanish figures dealt with thus far, Abraham ibn Ezra is not considered an innovator. Part of the value of his work is due to his thorough knowledge

---

[15] Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary*, 65.

[16] Abraham Ibn Ezra, "Alternate Commentary," 316.

[17] Sarna, "Hebrew and Bible Studies," 110. His allegorical explanations also survive in his ethical work "Improvement of the Qualities of the Soul."

in the field of grammar and exegesis. Due to him, many works were preserved and the communities of Ashkenaz were exposed to the scientific study of Hebrew. Although Ibn Ezra spent part of his life in the lands of Ashkenaz and was active later than figures such as Rashi (to which he often reacts), his commentary is best understood in the context of the developments in Sefarad.

Ibn Ezra's commentary begins by anthologizing various responses to the question of how the serpent could have spoken to the woman. In doing so, Ibn Ezra also explains the shortcomings of these explanations.

> 1. NOW THE SERPENT. Some say that the woman understood and knew the language of animals. They interpret *And the serpent said* as meaning, that the serpent spoke through signs. Others say that the serpent was in reality Satan. Now why don't they look at what Scripture states at the close of this chapter (v. 14 and 15)? How is Satan to crawl upon his belly or eat the dust of the ground? Furthermore, what meaning is there to the curse *they shall bruise thy head* if the reference is to Satan?
>
> Many err and inquire why the serpent was cursed. They ask, was the serpent fully intelligent? Was he commanded by God to refrain from beguiling the woman? Rabbi Saadiah Gaon says since we know that only humans are intelligent and capable of speaking, we must conclude that neither the serpent nor Balaam's ass spoke. He argues that in reality an angel spoke for them. However, Rabbi Samuel ben Hofni took issue with him. On the other hand, Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol, the great Spanish scholar and poet who wrote metered verse, arose and disagreed with Rabbi Samuel ben Hofni.[18]

The first opinions are rejected mainly on textual grounds. The text says that the serpent spoke and not that it "spoke through signs." The problem with the involvement of Satan is that it removes responsibility from the serpent, yet clearly the serpent is cursed. Furthermore, the curses only make sense in reference to an actual serpent. Later in the same comment, philosophical issues become involved. There are those who are uncomfortable with animals being punished because they lack intellect and have not been commanded. It is this philosophical issue which, according to Ibn Ezra, forces Saadiah to opt for the explanation that an angel spoke and not the serpent.[19] Samuel b. Ḥofni and Solomon ibn Gabirol continue to debate the issue.

---

[18] Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary*, 65.

[19] As has already been mentioned, this opinion has been erroneously attributed to Saadiah. Note that J. Gellis' *Sefer Tosafot ha-Shalem*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: "Mifal Tosafot Hashalem" Publishing, 1982) 121, #7 cites an opinion in a fourteenth century manuscript of *Minḥat Yehudah* that accepts *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*'s interpretation in the name of Saadiah Gaon.

It is only following this fairly complete history of interpretation that Ibn Ezra expresses his own interpretation of events.

> It appears to me that we are to interpret the account of the serpent literally. The serpent spoke and walked in an upright position. The One who gave intelligence to man also gave it to the serpent. Scripture itself bears witness that the serpent, although not as intelligent as man, *was more subtle* (arum) *than any beast of the field*. The meaning of *arum* (subtle) is wise, i.e., one who conducts his affairs intelligently. Now do not be surprised that Scripture uses the term *arum* (subtle, in v. 1) after *arummim* (naked in Gen. 2:25) when each of these words has a different meaning. Scripture is being poetic. Similarly, *With the jawbone of an ass* (ha-chamor), *heaps upon heaps* (chamor chamoratayim) (Judges 15:16), and *on thirty ass colts* (ayarim), *and they had thirty cities* (ayarim) (Jud. 10:4).
> Furthermore, if an angel spoke via the mouth of the serpent, then the serpent did not sin. This angel could not be God's messenger. Neither does an angel rebel against God.. . .
> The serpent did not mention the revered and feared name of God because he did not know it. . . .[20]

Ibn Ezra fully endorses a literal interpretation, even though he does not seem to answer fully all of the theoretical problems involved. The serpent was created at an intellectual level that was lower than man but higher than all other creatures. Scripture notifies the reader of this in describing the serpent as *ʿārûm*. This would have allowed it to speak. It was punished because it was worthy of being punished; it had rebelled against God, something which an angel would not do. The alternate version of Ibn Ezra's commentary may explain why the serpent is no longer capable of speech: "After God made its food dust, it descended from the level of all living beings that were created to eat all fruits and grasses."[21] Presumably, the serpent's intellectual fall proceeded from the fall in its diet to a level below all other animals. The fact that the serpent did not use the Tetragrammaton is taken as further proof that the serpent was a lowly creature, below the rank of humans.

Although Ibn Ezra had an interest in philosophy, his focus in Bible exegesis remained the plain, literal, meaning of the text. His commentary was very much the product of the intellectual activity of Spain. He was heir to a culture with a strong focus on Bible study, and he had access to the works of the geonim, the grammarians of Spain, and Rashi and his early followers in Ashkenaz. His commentary may represent the summit of non-mythical and non-allegorical interpretation of the serpent's identity.

---

[20] Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary*, 65-67.

[21] Abraham Ibn Ezra, "Alternate Commentary," 316.

Although he admits the possibility of legitimate allegory, Ibn Ezra advocated its use only when the plain meaning was exceptionally difficult, and even then the esoteric sense was only granted equal status with the exoteric sense.[22] Other trends in Sefarad and elsewhere soon developed interpretations of the serpent's identity to the extremes of esoteric allegorical interpretation.

---

[22] Frank Ephraim Talmage, *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 119.

CHAPTER 7
BIBLICAL EXEGESIS IN ASHKENAZ

Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, Rashi

Aside from occasional references to his father's interpretations and the words of Rabbeinu Gershom, little in the famous Bible commentary of Rashi (1040-1105) reveals information about the methods and style of Bible study and interpretation in Ashkenaz before his time. Of the numerous earlier works directly or indirectly related to the Bible that were produced in Sefarad or countries of North Africa and the Middle or Near East, Rashi had access only to Menaḥem ibn Saruq's *Maḥberet*, since it alone was written in Hebrew. Because of this, many works or opinions of the geonim and the later grammatical works of Ibn Janaḥ and others did not influence his commentary.

Often, Rashi's commentary is based in part on the Targum and classic rabbinic texts.[1] In fact, his commentary to Gen. 3 contains one of the scattered statements of his method for choosing those rabbinic opinions and texts he presents. He recognizes that there are numerous aggadic midrashim, arranged in works such as *Genesis Rabbah*. However, Rashi states that his purpose is only "the straightforward meaning of Scripture, and the aggadah that places the words of Scripture each in its appropriate arrangement."[2] Elsewhere, he states that "a single biblical text may yield several meanings, but (in the long run) the text may not depart from the *sensus literalis*, ('the plain, straightforward meaning')."[3] He acknowledges that there may be numerous styles of biblical

---

[1] Three quarters of his Torah commentary are drawn from rabbinic sources. [Sarna, "Rashi the Commentator," in *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 130].

[2] My translation of ואני לא באתי אלא לפשוטו של מקרא ולאגדה המישבת דברי המקרא דבר דבור על אפניו, from Rashi's comment to Gen. 3:8.

[3] From the introduction to Rashi's commentary on Song of Songs. The translation is from Sarna, "Rashi the Commentator," 133.

interpretation, but asserts that the *peshat (peshuto shel miqra)*, which he aims to present, takes preference.[4]

As in the majority of early rabbinic sources about the serpent, the issue of the serpent's identity is not debated outright in Rashi's commentary. From his commentary to Gen. 2:25, it is clear that the serpent cannot be a symbol for the evil inclination, because this is something which humans acquired only after eating from the Tree of Knowledge.[5] Gen. 3:1 elicits a comment about the serpent's motivation, not its identity, almost assuming that the serpent must be nothing more than an animal.

> *Now the serpent was (more) cunning*. What is this matter to here? It should have juxtaposed "And [God] made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and He clothed them." But [the verse] has taught you out of what notion the snake jumped at them; he saw them naked and engaging in relations, and he desired her."[6]

Rashi states the question assumed to underlie the comment in *Genesis Rabbah* 18:6: why is this matter connected with the previous one? Unlike the midrash, which offers two explanations in the names of two different rabbis, Rashi's commentary contains one solution, without attributing it to any person or noting its source is *Genesis Rabbah*.[7] The question is presented as a textual issue, that of the context of the narrative

---

[4] S. Kamin distinguishes between *peshuto shel miqra* and the exegetical method of *peshat*. She claims that Rashi engages in the former and not necessarily the latter. Furthermore, "aggadah that places the words of Scripture, each in its appropriate arrangement" is also not necessarily equivalent to *peshat* exegesis. The former usually involves information that is not contained in the text but settles a question within it. See Sarah Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization: In Respect to the Distinction Between* Peshat *and* Derash (Jerusalem: The Magness Press, The Hebrew University, 1986), 65, 135.

[5] See commentary to Gen. 2:25, s.v. ולא יתבוששו.

[6] The translation is from Y. I. Z. Herczeg, *The Torah – With Rashi's Commentary translated, annotated, ellucidated* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1995), 30. For the original comment, see Solomon ben Isaac, *The Pentateuch with Rashi Hashalem*, Ḥamishah Ḥumshei Torah Ariel, vol. 1: Bereshit - Hayye Sarah (Jerusalem: Ariel United Israel Institutes, 1988), 34-35; Chaim David Chavel, *Perush Rashi al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1982), 15-18. According to these two sources, there are no major textual variants to Rashi's comments here. At 3:14, the first printed edition has a longer comment although the addition doesn't affect the issue of the serpent's identity (see fn. 11).

[7] According to E. Z. Melammed, when matters of aggadah are brought forth in Rashi's commentary to Genesis, there is no verse for which the commentary, in whole or part, is not taken from Genesis Rabbah [*Bible Commentators* (Hebrew), vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1975), 376]. However, Rashi generally does not cite his sources by name, particularly when the source is the Midrash on that book (ibid., 374). However, this may be partly an issue of variant texts [see Deborah Abecassis, "Reconstructing Rashi's Commentary on Genesis from Citations in the Torah Commentaries of the Tosafot" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1999)].

involving the serpent. It is similarly solved in a textual manner, by inferring a connection based on the content of the verses. The text does not logically follow the statement about the human pair's nakedness with the verse about their clothing because their nakedness also explains the serpent's reason for approaching them.[8]

On the word מכל (*mikkol*), Rashi cites *Gen. Rab.* 19:1, which points out the balanced descriptions of the serpent before and after the sin. "In accordance with his cunning and his greatness was his downfall; 'more cunning than all,' 'more cursed than all.'"[9] According to its shrewdness and greatness was its fall. At Gen. 3:15, on the words "On your belly shall you crawl," Rashi writes that the serpent had legs but they were cut off.[10] On the same verse, Rashi also refers to rabbinic comments about the unusually long gestation period of serpents as an explanation for the extraneous comparison of the cursed serpent to cattle as well as to the wild animals.[11]

Rashi's comments about the serpent are all familiar, because they are all connected with earlier rabbinic texts. He has presented particular rabbinic statements as explanations for textual difficulties such as seemingly disjointed narratives and unnecessary or redundant words or phrases. The serpent presented is generally the same one that was seen from the rabbinic texts themselves. The serpent's morphology was

---

[8] As clarified by the supercommentary of Eliyahu Mizrahi, it would seem that Rashi held that the clothing mentioned in 3:21 was made before the episode with the serpent and not in response to their eating from the Tree and their subsequent shame [see *Ḥumash ha-Re'EM*, ed. S. Z. Phillip (Petaḥ Tiqvah, 1994)]. Rashi's comment explains the serpent's reason for tempting the humans and not the reason for the clothing. Kamin points out that Rashi's comment on 3:20 makes it clear that the naming of Eve as the mother of all life also occurred before the episode with the serpent, although this information is not derived from the same midrash and is actually Rashi's innovation. The result of maintaining that Gen. 3:20-21 are out of order, based on Rabbi Joshua ben Korḥa's opinion from *Gen. Rab.* and Rashi's addition about Eve's naming, is to have both sex and childbirth be disconnected from the notion of sin and connected with the essence of man. Rashi also explains in a few places that the nakedness is not literal but rather a consciousness of nakedness. Kamin suggests that this might be an expression of an anti-Christian polemic, limitting the post-sin difference in man to the plane of consciousness rather than to a change is his created nature. Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization*, 226-230.

[9] Z. Herczeg, *The Torah – With Rashi's Commentary*, 30.

[10] *Gen. Rab.* 20:5.

[11] The first printing contains extra text at this point which goes into detail about the gestation periods of different animals as well as the midrash about the serpent injecting lust into Eve. See fn. 66 to Rashi's commentary, "*Perush Rabbenu Shelomoh Yitsḥaki*," in *Torat Ḥayyim*, ed., C. D. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986), 61.

changed as a consequence of its role in leading Eve and Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, but it was nevertheless still originally simply a serpent.

As with the rabbinic texts, one is struck by the way the serpent's identity is not even addressed directly in Rashi's commentary. No mention is made of other opinions about its identity, but this is not as unusual as it may seem in the light of the geonic and Spanish interpretations just analyzed. In fact, the only post-talmudic work to which one could have expected Rashi to refer, aside from Menaḥem's *Maḥberet*, is *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*. Rashi did have *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and sometimes refers to it by name in his commentary, e.g., Gen. 17:4, 27:9; Deut. 12:17; II Kgs. 4:8; Jon. 1:7, 9.[12] The fact that Rashi makes no mention of the scenario involving Samael is therefore probably evidence of a purposeful choice and not due to a lack of familiarity. Rashi made use of only *Targum Onqelos* for the Torah and of *Targum Jonathan* for Prophets, and so he would not have referred to *Targum Ps.-Jonathan*.[13] Furthermore, in providing an abridged version of *Genesis Rabbah*, Rashi presents an even more uniform view of the subject, choosing one opinion about the serpent where the original text may have had multiple opinions.

Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor

The serpent's identity generally appears to be a non-issue among Rashi's followers.[14] The twelfth-century Torah commentary of Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor focusses on the wisdom and shrewdness in the serpent's conversation with Eve, but

---

[12] Melammed, *Bible Commentators*, 377, #14

[13] Ibid.

[14] Although Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (c.1080-c.1174) should be included in this category, no complete manuscript of his Torah commentary has been found yet. After Genesis 1:31, we have no commentary until chapter 18. We are therefore unable to know whether Rashbam discussed the serpent's identity or if his approach differed from that of other Ashkenazi Bible interpreters. His extreme devotion to the literal meaning may have had interesting consequences for his interpretation and would have provided an important contrast with Rashi's commentary as well as the commentators of Sefarad. [Samuel ben Meir, *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir's Commentary on Genesis*, Trans. Martin I. Lockshin (Lewiston, NY, 1989), 23-24]. J. Gellis's *Sefer Tosafot ha-Shalem* does include some grammatical comments attributed to Rashbam, but none of these is relevant to the identity of the serpent.

not specifically its identity.[15] However, in interpreting the serpent's curse, Bekhor Shor does explain the reasoning behind it, revealing that he assumes the curse and the serpent are to be understood literally.

> *On your belly shall you crawl.* It is the way of people who take evil counsel together that we distance them one from the other. Therefore, He said to the serpent, "On your belly shall you crawl," that your mouth shall be situated on the ground while she is standing upright so you won't have a place to consult with her. *And dirt shall you eat*, since your mouth is by the ground, the dirt will enter your mouth and you will eat it, against your will.[16]

The decision to make the serpent crawl on the ground is a practical one. Although Bekhor Shor does not deal with the question of how the serpent was able to speak in the first place, or why it no longer speaks, he nevertheless explains that the curse simply avoids the problem by physically separating the two troublemakers.

Sefer ha-Gan

Rabbi Aaron ha-Kohen, author of *Sefer ha-Gan* in the first half of the thirteenth century (c. 1240), was influenced by Joseph Bekhor Shor more than any other commentary or exegete. He is not considered a pure literalist, but he often explains verses in their simple sense, even though he did make use of all the exegetical methods available to him. The first two chapters of *Sefer ha-Gan*'s commentary to Genesis consist of *derash*, but many comments from the third chapter on are nearly identical to those of Bekhor Shor. This is the case with the comment on Gen. 3:14.[17] "*On your belly shall you crawl.* So that you shall not be able to advise the woman with evil counsel anymore, and because of this it is necessary that your food be earth."[18] As in Bekhor Shor's commentary, the serpent will eat dirt because it will be on its belly, so that it can no longer consult with the woman. This comment most likely accompanies the belief

---

[15] Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor, *Peirushei Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor al haTorah* (Hebrew), ed. Yehoshafat Nevo (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994),10, [my translation].

[16] Ibid., 11.

[17] J. Orlian, "*Sefer haGan: Text and Analysis of the Biblical Commentary*" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1973), 55.

[18] Ibid., 33 in Hebrew section.

that the serpent was an actual animal, because it assumes that the problems resulted from the serpent and Eve being able to converse.

These first generations of Ashkenazi Bible interpreters that followed Rashi have little to add to his comments.[19] Although the subject of the serpent's identity is not addressed outright, a literal understanding seems to underlie their comments. Their relative silence on the subject provides a stark contrast to their predecessors and contemporaries in Babylonia and Spain.

Ḥezekiah ben Manoaḥ, Ḥizzekuni

The next generation of commentators that followed the "school" of Rashi does comment on the serpent's identity. Ḥezekiah ben Manoaḥ's first words on this verse in his mid-thirteenth-century commentary are short and appear to address logistical issues rather than linguistic ones. Implicit in the commentary is the assumption that the serpent is to be understood literally. What remains to be explained is why the serpent is able to speak.

> *Now the serpent was the shrewdest*: One is obliged to say that through a previous incident it had eaten from the tree of knowledge, for the warning was not only for man.
> *He said to the woman*: The Holy One Blessed be He opened the mouth of the serpent as He opened the mouth of Balaam's ass.[20]

Ḥizzekuni's comments appear to be straightforward, logical responses to the blatant questions that any reader would ask. The serpent is not commonly known as a shrewd animal, so Ḥizzekuni chooses first to explain why the text describes it this way. His novel interpretation that the serpent had already eaten from the tree might also mean that Ḥizzekuni reads this verse as Saadiah had, such that *hāyāh* means that the snake *became* the shrewdest animal. Eating of the tree of knowledge is also a very plausible way for the serpent to obtain its knowledge about the tree and provides the means by which the serpent can definitively say that the woman will not die from eating of the tree.

---

[19] Many writings of the Tosafists were additions to Rashi's writings as glosses, explanations or criticisms (Gellis, *Sefer Tosafot ha-Shalem*, 7).

[20] Ḥezekiah ben Manoaḥ, *Perush Rabbenu Ḥizkiah b"r Manoaḥ*. ed., Charles B. Chavel, in *Torat Ḥayyim – Sefer Bereshit*, ed. M. L. Katzenelbogen (Jerusalem,:Mossad Harav Kook: 1986), 54 [my translation].

Interestingly, the serpent's ability to speak is not attributed to its newfound wisdom. Ḥizzekuni attributes the serpent's speech to direct intervention by God, similar to Balaam's ass. Other literal commentaries have sought alternate explanations, because the text neglects to mention God's involvement, but Ḥizzekuni expresses no difficulty with this issue.[21]

This example of Ḥizzekuni's Bible interpretation conforms well with the words in the introduction to his commentary where he says that he has come not to retort to Rashi's words but rather to augment them, to complement them. "*Va-ani, ein ani ke-meshiv al divre rabbenu Shelomoh, ela ke-mosif al devarav.*"[22] He sees himself as one of the same school, and his work as a continuation of Rashi's original endeavour rather than as a replacement. Rashi does not address the issue of the serpent's ability to speak or the source of its knowledge, and so Ḥizzekuni has provided a plausible *peshat* explanation.[23]

Paneaḥ Raza

Rabbi Isaac ben Yehudah ha-Levi, author of *Paneaḥ Raza*, lived at the end of the thirteenth century.[24] The commentary contains halakhic and homiletic material and many numerologies, as well as many literal interpretations.[25] It used *Sefer ha-Gan* as a source, and this makes up part of its comments to Gen. 3. "What was the reason for this punishment? So that it will not be able to stand upright anymore to whisper to the

---

[21] At Gen. 3:14, Ḥizzekuni also explains the curse in a manner that strongly resembles the comments of Bekhor Shor and *Sefer ha-Gan*. ". . . Since your mouth is by the ground the dirt will enter your mouth and you will eat it against your will." Ibid., 61.

[22] Ibid., xx.

[23] Ḥizzekuni is one of the earliest sources that demonstrates an awareness of problems in Rashi manuscripts and in places he seems to have edited or introduced changes into the text. However, his comments to Gen. 3:1 appear to be quite independent of Rashi's comments ad. loc. On the relationship between the Tosafists and the textual state of Rashi's commentary see Abecassis, "Reconstructing Rashi's Commentary."

[24] *Paneah Raza* was composed ca. 1305, making it the latest text in this thesis. It is included despite dating slightly beyond the limits of the thesis because of the close connection between it and Bekhor Shor, *Sefer ha-Gan*, and Ḥizzekuni. Its author wrote Tosafot and may have been a Frenchman. See Aba Zions, "*'Paneach Raza'* by Isaac ben Juda Halevi," (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1974), vi.

[25] Ibid., xii.

woman and suggest to her this [sort of] evil. Because of this, so it shall be that you will eat dirt."[26]

Paneaḥ Raza's other comment on the subject is an intricate *gematria* equating the words "And dirt shall you eat all the days of your life," (ועפר תאכל כל ימי חייך) with "even to the days of Messiah, moreover, eternity" (אף לימות המשיח כך עד). "He will swallow up death forever, or [it means] to say that even though all will be healed, the serpent will not be healed from its curse, as the sages said."[27] *Paneaḥ Raza* supports the idea found in the Palestinian Targums through the numerical equivalence of the words in Gen. 3:14 and the words of the message.

Judah ben Samuel he-Ḥasid

Ḥasidei Ashkenaz is the term used for the twelfth-century German Jewish school of "esoteric religious speculation and ethical thought."[28] The group's interest remained separate from many of the endeavours that characterized Jewish learning in other countries; they were not affected by the linguistic trends or the emphasis on *peshat*, nor by the theological and philosophical problems that influenced contemporary Jewish thought elsewhere.[29] Rabbi Judah he-Ḥasid (the Pious, c. 1150-1217), one of the three great writers of the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, offers an explanation of Genesis 3:1 that stands

---

[26] Isaac bar Judah Halevi, *Sefer Paneaḥ Raza*, with notes from Isaac bar Shimshon Katz (Jerusalem: Machon Torat ha-Rishonim, 1998), 31-2. It brings this interpretation anonymously, but a manuscript attributes the statement to *Sefer ha-Gan*, although it is also found in Bekhor Shor. See J. Orlian, "*Sefer haGan*," 37 of Hebrew section.

[27] Isaac bar Judah Halevi, *Sefer Paneaḥ Raza*, 32. See earlier, ch. 5, "Palestinian Targums," 37.

[28] Joseph Dan, "The Emergence of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Germany" in *Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 2, The Middle Ages, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, Inc., 1998), 22. Article originally appeared in *Mystics of the Book*, ed. R. A. Herrera (Peter Lang: New York, 1993), 57-95. Page citations are to the reprint. Modern study of the esoteric theology of Ḥasidei Ashkenaz began with Gershom Scholem's third chapter in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), 81-118.

[29] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 80; Dan states that "while Jewish-Spanish culture tried to build a religious culture on the twin pillars of tradition and (rational) wisdom, the Ashkenazi Hasidim recognized tradition alone as the source of religious truth." See Joseph Dan, "The Ashkenazi Hasidic Concept of Language," in *Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 2, The Middle Ages, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, Inc., 1998), 66. [Originally published as "The Concept of Language in Ashkenazi Hasidism," in *Hebrew in Ashkenazi*, ed. L. Glinert, 11-25 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)].

apart from both previous and subsequent interpretations. His comments may be best understood as part of the particular approach of the Ashkenazi Ḥasidim to the Bible.

> Rabbi Judah the Pious raised the question, why did the serpent envy them more than any other animal of the field? Furthermore, how did it have shrewdness more than all the other animals and beasts? And do animals even have shrewdness? And also, what is meant by *weḥanāḥāš*? Wherever it is written, *waw* adds on to an initial matter, but here what is its purpose?
>
> And he explains it thus: *weḥanāḥāš hāyā ʿārûm*, literally naked (*ʿārôm*), without hair, like Adam and his wife. *More than all the animals of the field,* for all the animals of the field are dressed in fur, but the serpent was naked, and its skin was like the skin of man. Therefore it was envious of them, and it [*ʿārûm*] refers to that which it mentions above "and they were both naked."[30]

Prompted by the repetition of the root ע-ר-מ, Judah he-Ḥasid maintained the common practice of questioning the relationship between verses Gen. 2:25 and 3:1, and he has adopted the midrashic assumption that the serpent was envious of Adam and Eve. Where he differs from other interpretations, particularly those of his contemporaries of French and Spanish origin, is in adopting an explanation of Gen. 3:1 that ignores the definitions of the words suggested by a careful study of Hebrew grammar. Judah he-Ḥasid is not alone in noticing the connection between the verses, but he is the first to suggest they have the same definition, that one is the plural of the other.[31] It is almost as if he were providing a hyper-literal reading of the verses and in doing so manages to solve the problem of why there is a connection between 2:25 and 3:1.

Aside from this lexical twist, Judah he-Ḥasid's comment is based closely on the biblical text and does not resort to external information. One wonders though whether Judah he- Ḥasid is deliberately ignoring the distinction between the meanings of these two words. It might be appropriate to question the tone of this comment, but whether meant seriously or in jest, its advantage over other interpretations is not readily obvious.

Joseph Dan's article "The Ashkenazi Ḥasidic Concept of Language" may provide some insight into the background of Judah he-Ḥasid's comment, if not its full meaning.

---

[30] Judah ben Samuel he-Hasid, *Peirushei haTorah leRav Yehudah he-Hasid*, ed. Isaak S. Lange (Jerusalem, Keren Wertzweiler, 1975), 6 [my translation]. At 3:20, Judah he- Ḥasid also writes that the serpent and Eve knew the languages of all the creatures because they both had seen (or looked at) the Tree of Knowledge.

[31] The only other instance where the same definition for the root has been used in both verses is in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, who in both cases translates *ḥakim*, wise. Judah he-Ḥasid has done precisely the opposite.

He explains that the medieval Ashkenazi Ḥasidim "saw in tradition alone their way to achieve spiritual goals, including mystical experiences." Furthermore, "Oral or written, tradition for the Ashkenazi Ḥasidim was the language of scripture and the methods of its interpretation. Religious experience and the craft of the commentator became identified."[32] The article discusses Rabbi Eleazar of Worms's *Sefer ha-Ḥokhmah* (The Book of Wisdom), which was written in the hope of preserving the esoteric traditions of his ancestors and his teacher, Judah he-Ḥasid. The book presents the belief that the entire Torah can be interpreted through seventy-three "gates of wisdom," most of which the author explains. Dan summarizes the effects of this approach, which he says is "surprisingly similar to the hermeneutical message of the classical Midrash."

> Rabbi Eleazar clearly claims in this list, speaking for other Ashkenazic scholars: When one is studying a biblical verse, one should interpret it taking into account the following: the shape of the letters of the alphabet, the external image they present; the shape of the decorations with which they are adorned; the shape and sound of the musical signs that accompany the syllables; the shape and sound of the vocalization marks that are added to every syllable; the fact that some letters are sometimes written larger or smaller than the rest; that fact that some letters may be pronounced differently than they are written; the number of times each letter is mentioned, and the number of letters that are absent from this biblical section; the number of holy names and other terms, the many possible permutations of every group of letters, the numerical value of the letters, the combinations of first and last letters, and all the other methodological "gates of wisdom." Besides that, one should be aware of the fact that every biblical verse or phrase, disregarding its literal meaning, conveys deep truths concerning two dozen subjects, theological and ethical, and a verse has not exhausted its message until its possible relevance to all these subjects has been elucidated. In other words: Every biblical verse is at once both nothing and everything. Its literal meaning may be regarded as an accidental one among the myriad other messages incorporated in it by its divine author.[33]

In light of this characterization of the Ashkenazi Ḥasidic concept of language, one can accept that Judah he-Ḥasid's interpretation of the serpent is not necessarily seeking the literal meaning of the text, nor is it bound to any laws of grammar. Nevertheless, in drawing a connection between Gen. 2:25 and 3:1, he may be following one of the seventy-three hermeneutical approaches to the text (the methodological "gates of wisdom") and presenting an insight that is every bit as important and relevant as would be the results of the remaining seventy-two possibilities.

---

[32] Dan, "The Ashkenazi Hasidic Concept of Language," 66.

[33] Ibid., 86-87.

Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, the Rokeach

Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (1165-1230), already mentioned as the preeminent student of Judah he-Ḥasid, has a Bible commentary which offers several types of interpretations in keeping with the methods he outlined in the *Book of Wisdom*. In one section, he explains that the serpent saw Adam and Eve engaging in intercourse while naked and desired the woman. The reason the serpent in particular, out of all the animals, was attracted was because it walked upright like man and also had eyes that were similar to man's.[34] Elsewhere he states that, because the serpent grew proud that it could walk upright like the woman, it eventually caused her to eat from the fruit.[35]

Most of the Rokeach's comments about the serpent are intricate *gematriot*, some based on full words, others on the acronyms of phrases. The *gematriot* link midrashic statements about the serpent and Eve to the words in the verses about them. Thus, for example, "more cursed shall you be" is equivalent to "it gives birth after seven years," the curse that is associated with these words in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Talmud.[36] Through the letter *waw* and its numerical value of six, the Rokeach also connects the narrative involving the serpent to the *sotah* and illicit intercourse mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. The punishments of the serpent and the *sotah* are also linked.[37] These interpretations support the midrashic reading of the biblical text by showing how the ideas they seem to innovate are intrinsically connected to the wording of the Bible. This sort of methodology is different from the literal and non-literal interpretations that have been encountered thus far, although the basic scenario that the Rokeach's interpretation assumes is found in the classical rabbinic texts.[38]

---

[34] Eleazar of Worms, *Perush ha-Rokeach al ha-Torah*, Part 1, Genesis (Bnei Brak: Julius Klugmann & Sons, 1978), 80-1. The comment is based on *Gen. Rab.* 18, 8:5, *b. Niddah* 24b.

[35] Ibid., 77.

[36] Ibid., 70-3. The following are some of the other *gematriot* brought in the Rokeach's commentary. האשה הנחש = נואף ונואפת; אדם וחוה ונחש = זב וזבה ומצורע; זאת = שבעלה; מה זאת עשית, מז"ע = בעילה. הנחש השיאני ואכל = שהנחש הוא בעל חוה = שהנחש הטיל בחוה זוהמא

[37] See comment on Gen. 3:14, ibid., 73.

[38] *Sefer ha-Remazim le-Rabbenu Yoel al ha-Torah*, preserved in Yemen, also belongs to the school of Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, but its comments on Genesis 3 do not indicate a different understanding of the serpent's

Rabbi Chaim Paltiel

Chaim Paltiel was a disciple of Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg (ca. 1215-1293), and his Torah commentary was written in 1300. It uses the works of both the school of Rashi and Ḥasidei Ashkenaz and also resembles *Paneaḥ Raza*.[39] On Gen. 3:14 Chaim Paltiel cites the midrash about the various gestation periods of the different animals. Interestingly, he furthers his support of a literal understanding of the narrative with a response to Christians.

> The [Christians] are heretical in saying that, because of Adam's eating, [mankind] descended to hell until the-one-who-was-hung was hung and redeemed them. Response: . . . Furthermore, is it not that man was cursed with death and other curses and similarly the serpent and the woman? But, if the sin was forgiven with the death of the-hung-one, why do people die? Similarly the curses to woman, serpent, and earth, are visible to the eye and endure. . . .[40]

In fact, the literal, plain reading of the text describes reality and so not only is the literal interpretation correct, it is also a proof against a common claim of the Christians about the role of the sin in Eden and the effects of Jesus.[41]

Other Tosafists

An assortment of other comments on Genesis by Tosafists and other Bible commentators of Ashkenaz of the eleventh to thirteen centuries reveals that the relatively literal interpretations seen thus far were not the sole products of this region and period. Midrashic accounts, *gematriot*, acronyms, and other methods are occasionally used to

---

identity. The text mentions the *gematria* that מצורע = מכל ערום היה והנחש and that the serpent had intercourse with Eve. [Pt. 1: Genesis – Exodus (Bnei Brak: Julius Klugmann & Sons, 2001), 4].

[39] Chaim Paltiel, *Perushei ha-Torah le-Rav Chaim Paltiel*, ed., Isaak S. Lange (Jerusalem: Keren Wertzweiler, 1981), 7, 10-11 in introduction.

[40] Ibid., 9, [my translation].

[41] This response to the Christians is also common in disputations. See J. D. Eisenstein, *Oẓar Vikkuḥim* (New York, 1928; repr. Jerusalem, 1969), 238. David Berger's *The Jewish Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996) does not refer to this particular interpretation or debate.

derive interpretations, but often they support non-literal interpretations. Although the *peshat* trend was influential in Ashkenaz, clearly more was going on than its most popular artifacts suggest. Some of these interpretations are best understood in the context of mystical interpretation of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The most comprehensive comment on the identity of the serpent is found in the Torah commentary of Rabbenu Efrayim. There, the serpent is equated with Satan, the evil inclination and the angel of death, and reasons are given for its various names:

> *Wĕhanāḥāš*: The *gematria*, together with the word itself is *wehasatan*, because it is the evil inclination, and it is Satan, and it is the angel of death. It is called Satan because it leads (*masteh*) man astray from the good path to an evil path, leading to the left side. And it is called *Ẓefoni* because it is hidden (*ẓafun*) in the interior of man. It does not lead him to the south side, which is the right, because the menorah is in the south, which is the right, but rather to the north (*ẓafon*), "from the North shall the evil break loose," for all evil which come to man is only from the side of the evil inclination, which is called *ẓefoni* [northern/ hidden one].[42]

The numerical values of נחש and שטן differ by 1, a problem routinely overcome by adding 1 for the value of the word itself. With this equation established, the comment then connects the serpent through the talmudic equation of *b. Baba Batra* 16a to the concepts of the evil inclination and angel of death. The equation of the serpent with Satan through *gematria* also appears in the Torah commentary of Avigdor ben Elijah ha-Kohen (c. 1200-1275) who lived in Italy and Austria.[43] In the comment of Rabbenu Efrayim, Satan is then also connected with the left side and the north, both of which represent the evil forces of the world, externally and within each person. This portion of the comment appears to be influenced by mystical comments found in *Sefer ha-Bahir*.[44] It therefore dates at least to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.

In other texts attributed to Rabbenu Efrayim ben Samson, the serpent is also connected with Jesus through *gematria* [ישו = ערום]. The comment proceeds to say that both intended to destroy the world, one in body, and the other in spirit.[45] His commentary

---

[42] Gellis, *Sefer Tosafot ha-Shalem*, 121, #2.

[43] Ibid., #3.

[44] See chapter 9.

[45] Gellis, *Sefer Tosafot ha-Shalem*, 121, #9. This identification or equivalence is interesting, because in Christian literature Jesus is seen as a force equal and opposite to the serpent. For Rabbenu Efrayim's commentary, see also Efrayim ben Shimshon, *Perush Rabenu Efrayim b. R. Shimshon u-gedole Ashkenaz*

also addresses other issues with a more literal interpretation. He explains that the talking serpent poses a difficulty, because the text never states that the serpent was created to speak. Therefore, the serpent must have spoken its own language, and Eve must have understood all languages, or the serpent spoke Hebrew because it was the common language of all creatures at the time. The other possibility is that Satan spoke with her, as the *Bahir* explains. Rabbi Isaiah ben Mali di Trani of Italy (1200-before 1260) makes reference to information found in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and states that the serpent knew seventy languages and walked upright.[46]

These sources provide a valuable contrast with the *peshat* trend in Ashkenaz. They attest to associations between the serpent and Satan, and, importantly, to the popularization of *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*'s version of events in mid-thirteenth century Ashkenaz.[47] It is striking to note that these commentators date to the same decades as Ḥezekiah ben Manoaḥ. While he and others focused only on the *peshat*, the image of Samael riding the camel-like serpent had clearly planted deep roots in Ashkenaz.

---

ha-Kadmonim ʿal ha-Torah, vol. 1, eds., Ezra Korach and Zvi Leitner (Jerusalem: Julius Klugmann and Sons, 1992), 14. His commentary includes the following *gematriot*: (a) ערום מכל = זה לרעה ולא לטובה; (b) ותתן = כי אז ראתה סמאל כנגדה; (c) ערום מכל = מצורע (according to *b. Erchin* 15b, plagues come because of the sin of לשון הרע).

[46] Gellis, *Sefer Tosafot haShalem*, 121, #6, 7.

[47] In addition to the spread of *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* itself, the popularization of this interpretation is also due to the spread of texts that utilized *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, such as *Sefer ha-Bahir* and the *Guide of the Perplexed*. See chapters 8 and 9 for further discussion of these sources and their interpretations of the serpent's identity.

CHAPTER 8

MAIMONIDES AND PHILOSOPHICAL-ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

Moses ben Maimon, Maimonides

In the philosophical work of Maimonides' (1135-1204), *The Guide of the Perplexed*, the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the role of the serpent and Eve take on an interpretation quite unlike any that had been written by a Jewish author in the preceding millennium. Not since the time of Philo is there evidence of a fully developed philosophic-allegoric interpretation of the events of the garden of Eden, written by a Jew. According to this mode of interpretation, "the Adam story is to be taken as a parable."[1]

The Guide of the Perplexed describes itself as having two purposes. The first "is to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in books of prophecy."[2] The treatise is meant to give "indications" to a religious man who accepts the Law but who also accepts the truths of philosophy, "the human intellect having drawn him on and led him to dwell within its province" and who has reached

> a state of perplexity and confusion as to whether he should follow his intellect, renounce what he knew concerning the terms in question, and consequently consider that he has renounced the foundations of the Law. Or he should hold fast to his understanding of these terms and not let himself be drawn on together with his intellect, rather turning his back on it and moving away from it, while at the same time perceiving that he had brought loss to himself and harm to his religion.[3]

The second purpose of the *Guide* is "the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such."[4] The ignorant person would assume that these possess only an external sense, while the knowledgeable

---

[1] Lawrence V. Berman, "Maimonides on the Fall of Man," *AJSreview* 5 (1980): 10.

[2] Moses ben Maimon, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Vol. 1, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963) 5 [Introduction to the First Part].

[3] *Guide*, Introduction to the First Part, 5-6.

[4] *Guide*, 6.

reader would interpret these according to the external one, but would be greatly perplexed by it. "But if we explain these parables to him or if we draw his attention to their being parables, he will take the right road and be delivered from this perplexity. That is why I have called this Treatise "The Guide of the Perplexed."[5]

The *Guide*'s interpretations of the biblical text aim to resolve perplexity caused by what seems to be truth conflicting with truth. The principle underlying Maimonides' approach is that Scripture "represents in popular form the teaching of philosophy and was [itself] composed by a philosopher."[6] "The *Account of the Beginning* is identical with natural science, and the *Account of the Chariot* with divine science."[7] When the Torah seems to contradict a truth known from philosophy, it is because one is not aware of the correct understanding of the biblical text. It is this correct understanding that the *Guide* aims to elucidate, although it does so in a cryptic manner.

The events involving the Tree of Knowledge are first discussed in *The Guide* I, 2, although the roles of Eve and the serpent are not mentioned there. The chapter is written as a response to an objection raised by a learned man, to whom it seemed that, according to the clear sense of the biblical text, "the primary purpose with regard to man was that he should be, as the other animals are, devoid of intellect, of thought, and of the capacity to distinguish between good and Evil."[8] According to the objector, it was man's disobedience "that procured him as its necessary consequence that great perfection peculiar to man, namely, his being endowed with the capacity that exists in us to make this distinction."[9] Simply put, it seems that eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil granted man intellect as punishment, a perfection he did not have before.

---

[5] Ibid., 6.

[6] Berman, "Maimonides on the Fall," 14. As Berman explains in his article, Maimonides seems to have adopted this view from Alfarabi.

[7] *Guide*, 6.

[8] Ibid., 23

[9] Ibid., 23-24.

Maimonides responds that in fact God had given man his ultimate perfection, the intellect, when he was first created. It is because of this that the text says he was created "in the image of God and in His likeness."[10] The intellect was found in Adam in its perfection and integrity, and through it he could distinguish between truth and falsehood. However, the Tree of Knowledge conferred the ability to distinguish between fine and bad. "Fine and bad belong to the things generally accepted as known, not those cognized by the intellect."[11]

> Accordingly when man was in his most perfect and excellent state, in accordance with his inborn disposition and possessed of his intellectual cognitions [. . .] he had no faculty that was engaged in any way in the consideration of generally accepted things, and he did not apprehend them. So among these generally accepted things even that which is most manifestly bad, namely, uncovering the genitals, was not bad according to him, and he did not apprehend that it was bad. However, when he disobeyed and inclined toward his desires of the imagination and the pleasures of his corporeal senses—inasmuch as it is said: *that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes*—he was punished by being deprived of that intellectual apprehension. He therefore disobeyed the commandment that was imposed upon him on account of his intellect and, becoming endowed with the faculty of apprehending generally accepted things, he became absorbed in judging things to be bad or fine. Then he knew how great his loss was, what he had been deprived of, and upon what a state he had entered."[12]

I, 2 asserts that the faculty man acquired in eating from the Tree of Knowledge caused him to neglect the true pursuits of the intellect and become absorbed by the faculty of apprehending generally accepted things. "Maimonides is concerned to show that the biblical narrative accepts the premise that man's true nature is contemplative."[13] Man's fall in the garden of Eden consisted of losing the understanding of his true priorities and becoming controlled by his passions. The sin was that "he disobeyed and inclined toward his desires of the imagination and the pleasures of his corporeal senses."[14]

In Maimonides' summary of the events in Eden in I, 2, man is cast as the only character, with no mention made of Eve and the serpent. Piecing together evidence from

---

[10] Gen. 2:24.

[11] *Guide*, 24.

[12] Ibid., 25.

[13] Berman, "Maimonides on the Fall," 12.

[14] Already quoted, *Guide*, 25.

elsewhere in the *Guide*, it seems that this is because Eve and the serpent are not real characters; they are more correctly understood as representing matter and imagination. Maimonides explains the various meanings of the terms 'man' and 'woman,' '*ish*' and '*ishah*,' in I, 6. The primary meanings are the human male and female, but Maimonides also explains their figurative use. "Thereupon the term woman was used figuratively to designate any object apt for, and fashioned with a view to being in, conjunction with some other object."[15] This does not explicitly equate *ishah* with matter, but Maimonides writes (I, 17) that the Torah as well as philosophers and learned men of various communities in ancient times concealed what they said about the first principles and presented it in riddles. "Thus Plato and his predecessors designated matter as female and form as male."[16]

In II, 30, Maimonides directly discusses the serpent and its identity in the midst of a larger discussion about Creation and the Law. He outlines what he describes as already present in the sayings of the sages and not his own innovation. "Know that those things that I shall mention to you from the dicta of the *Sages* are sayings that are of utmost perfection; their allegorical interpretation was clear to those to whom they were addressed, and they are unambiguous."[17] As he says the sages have done, Maimonides offers the reader pointers only, mentioning them "in a certain order and by means of slight indications."[18] As Munk points out in the notes to his translation of *The Guide*, throughout this discussion Maimonides repeatedly refers to but neglects to express the philosophical idea hidden in the story by the names used.[19] This underlying philosophical idea appears to be what the author refers to in saying, "How great is the

---

[15] Ibid., 31. Aside from the two meanings that I refer to here, Maimonides also states that the terms "were used figuratively to designate any male or female among the other species of living beings."

[16] Ibid., 43.

[17] Ibid., 355.

[18] Ibid.

[19] S. Munk, trans., *Le Guide des Egares*, (Paris: G. – P. Maisonneuve & Laros, 1970), 248 n. 1, 249 n. 1.

ignorance of him who does not understand that all this is necessary with a view to a certain notion."[20]

Maimonides begins his exposition about the serpent with reference to the version of events described in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* 13. If one is to understand the *Guide* as its commentators have explained, the reader has just previously been notified that the union between man and woman in Gen. 2 is in fact the union between form and matter.

> Among the things you ought to know is the following explanation, which they give in the *Midrash*. They mention that the *Serpent* had a rider, that it was of the size of a camel, that it was the rider who led *Eve* astray, and that the rider was *Sammael*. They apply this name to *Satan* . . . Thus it has become clear to you that *Sammael* is *Satan*. This name is used with a view to a certain signification, just as the name *serpent* [*naḥash*] is used with a view to a certain signification. When they speak of it coming to deceive *Eve*, they say: *Sammael was riding upon it; and the Holy One, blessed be He, was laughing at both the camel and its rider.*[21]

Maimonides' commentators indicate that the serpent represents the imaginative faculty.[22] The word *naḥash*, meaning serpent, is connected with the word of the same root meaning divination—an activity in which the imagination plays a large role.[23]

---

[20] *Guide*, 356. This statement, immediately preceding the discussion about the serpent, is said in reference to the union of man and woman described in Gen. 2:24, "And shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh." According to Munk, the commentators of the *Guide* held that Maimonides saw in this verse an allusion to the union between matter and form, which in reality are not discrete but are actually connected. This too seems to be what Maimonides referred to in figuratively defining the term *woman* in I, 6 as "any object apt for, and fashioned with a view to being in, conjunction with some other object."

[21] *Guide*, 356.

[22] See Devorah Schechterman, "*Sugiyat ha-Het ha-Kadmon ve-ha-Parshanut le-Divrei ha-Rambam be-Hagut ha-Yehudit be-Me'ot ha-Shelosh-esreh ve ha-Arba-esreh*" *Daat* 20 (1988): 65-90, for a detailed discussion of the various opinions about what the serpent, the camel, and Samael represent. The view that I have presented fits best with Crescas's commentary (1340-c. 1410). He holds that the rider and that which is ridden are one and the same symbol. Thus, Samael, the serpent and the camel are all representative of the imaginative faculty, the woman represents matter, and Adam represents intellect. However, Shem Tov ben Joseph Falaquera, the earliest commentator of the *Guide* (c. 1225-c. 1295) holds that Samael represents the appetitive faculty, the serpent the faculty of persuasion, and the camel the imagination.

Warren Zev Harvey, "Maimonides and Spinoza on the Knowledge of Good and Evil" (Hebrew), *'Iyyun* 28 (1979): 167-85 also says that the majority of commentators of the Guide believe the serpent symbolizes the imaginative faculty. A minority, including Moses of Narbonne, Yehudah Abrabanel and others, hold that the serpent symbolizes the appetitive faculty. [Imaginative faculty = evil inclination (II, 12) = Satan (III, 22) = Samael (II, 30) [doesn't=] Serpent (II, 30)].

Note that in comenting on the Guide, the commentators become Bible interpreters. Although their works are not Bible commentaries, the authors still engage in Bible interpretation, albeit second-hand.

[23] Note the fusion of definitions for the root נחש, as opposed to what seemed to be the scientific separation of definitions in the dictionaries of the tenth and eleventh centuries. See earlier, ch. 6.

Samael, "the one who blinds," represents the appetitive faculty (sensual desire or lust) that blinds man. God, laughing at the camel and its rider, is the intellect.[24]

> Among the things you ought to know and have your attention aroused to is the fact that the *Serpent* had in no respect direct relations with *Adam* and that it did not speak to him, and that such a conversation and relation only took place between him and *Eve*; it was through the intermediation of *Eve* that *Adam* was harmed and that the Serpent destroyed him. Extreme enmity only comes to be realized between the Serpent and Eve and its seed and hers. On the other hand her seed is indubitably the seed of Adam. Even more strange is the tie between Serpent and Eve, I mean between its seed and hers, a tie that is in the head and the heel. This is also clear.[25]

As in Philo's interpretation, the philosophical allegory explains the serpent's choice of Eve. The serpent speaks to the woman and not to the man, because the imaginative faculty only affects the intellect through matter, the sensitive faculty represented by Eve. Similarly, the punishment that is given to the serpent involves only the woman and not the man. Human beings, descendents of woman, can overcome the imagination through the rational faculty or intellect, which is found in the person's head ("They shall strike at your head"). Conversely, the imaginative faculty and the passions it can arouse attack a human's feet, preventing him from moving forward and developing his intellectual faculty ("And you shall strike at their heel").

> Among the amazing dicta whose external meaning is exceedingly incongruous, but in which—when you obtain a true understanding of the chapters of this Treatise—you will admire the wisdom of the parables and their correspondence to what exists, is their statement: When the Serpent came to Eve, it cast pollution into her. The pollution of [the sons of] Israel, who had been present at Mount Sinai, has come to an end. [As for] the pollution of the nations who had not been present at Mount Sinai, their pollution was not come to an end. This too you should follow up in your thought.[26]

The midrash connecting the human situation caused by the serpent, which was corrected for the Jews at Sinai,[27] fits into Maimonides' interpretation regarding the serpent. The imaginative faculty, represented by the serpent, arouses man's passions, leading him to stain and imperfection. The Torah, which the Israelites received at Sinai,

---

[24] Munk, *Le Guide*, 249 n. 1.

[25] *Guide*, 356.

[26] *Guide*, 356-7.

[27] *Shabbat* 146a; *Yevamot* 103b.

is a moral law that subdues these passions and therefore purified the Israelites.[28] Furthermore, understood correctly, the Torah provides the person with the means to bring about the ideal pre-sin state of man, to revert to his true priorities and to a contemplative life, the situation which the serpent's intervention disrupted.

Maimonides seems to hint that the fact that this biblical narrative should be understood as a parable derives from the text itself. He tells the reader to note the peculiar way in which the Bible concludes the account of the creation of the world, in Gen. 2:1, but then "makes a new start regarding the creation of Eve from Adam, and mentions the tree of life and the tree of knowledge and the tale of the serpent and all that story; and it makes out that all this happened after Adam had been placed in the Garden of Eden."[29] The first account of creation occurred in reality; the second is meant to be understood as a philosophical allegory. The first chapter tells of the creation of man; the second and third chapters tell of the state of man's soul and intellect.[30]

Rabbi David Kimḥi

The commentary of Rabbi David Kimḥi (1160?-1235?), like that of Ibn Ezra, is in part an anthology of other earlier commentaries on the subject. Also focusing on the linguistics and logistics of the biblical text, Kimḥi eventually presents his own view after reviewing the many questions involved and the numerous answers that have been offered, although he seems to be unaware of the exegetical trends in northern France.[31] Ibn Ezra is Radak's guide in the way of *peshat*,[32] but Radak acknowledges an allegorical explanation representing the ultimate truth. While he does offer an explanation that can be characterized as a *peshat*, he clearly prefers the explanation that is known from what he calls the *nistar*, the hidden understanding of the text.

---

[28] Munk, *Le Guide*, 250, n. 2.

[29] *Guide*, 355.

[30] See Schechterman, "*Sugiyat ha-Ḥet ha-Kadmon*," 71, for other opinions about where the allegory begins.

[31] Talmage, *David Kimḥi: The Man and the Commentaries*, 72-3.

[32] Ibid., 119-20.

Kimḥi begins by asking the many questions involved in the issue of the serpent's identity. How was it that the serpent spoke to the woman, and if it was a miracle, why does the text not say that, as it does concerning Balaam's ass? If, as Saadiah[33] said, an angel spoke for it, how could the serpent be punished, and why would an angel incite the woman to go against God's word? Also, why is the serpent brought up here, and why does it not speak with the man?

> And the meaning in this matter is quite confused according to what is revealed (*ha-nigleh*). But according to the hidden [meaning] (*ha-nistar*) the meaning is clear, as we will explain in a booklet that we will write for it alone on *nistar*. From the *nistar* is what the rabbis, of blessed memory, wrote in this matter, that the serpent was large like a camel and Samael was riding on it, and the Blessed Holy One was laughing at the camel and its rider. Understand this because the allegory in their words is very distinguished. They also said, that when the serpent came upon Eve he injected lust into her. The Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai, their lustfulness departed; the idolators, who did not stand at Mount Sinai, their lustfulness did not depart. All this is correct to the one who understands. But we will not explain this allegory here so that we will not reveal what is hidden, as the rabbis warned about, as we have written. However, we will write the hints as they themselves hinted, and the one who understands will understand.[34]

As Radak writes in the introduction to his Torah commentary, "even though the matters are as they sound, there is also an element of allegory in them, and that is the hidden [*nistar*]."[35] Like Maimonides, Radak refers to the description in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* of Samael riding a camel-like serpent and God laughing at them both. Reference is also made to the lust the serpent injected but which was removed from the Israelites at Sinai. He also asks why the serpent did not interact with man, although he chooses not to answer that question here. Radak's introduction also reveals that the *nistar* is to be understood as involving the thought of the intellect.[36] The details of the referents of the philosophical allegory might have differed, but Radak is clearly of the same school as Maimonides. These comments and the elements in his commentary to Gen. 3:1 that hint at the esoteric meaning suggest that Radak is referring to a philosophic-allegoric interpretation similar to what Maimonides presented in the *Guide*.

---

[33] Like Ibn Ezra, Radak also incorrectly attributes this to Saadiah

[34] David Kimḥi, *Commentary on Torah*, in *Torat Ḥayyim – Sefer Bereshit*, ed., M. L. Katzenelbogen (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986), 55 [my translation].

[35] David Kimḥi, "*Hakdamat Rabbi David Kimḥi*," in *Torat Ḥayyim*, 13 [my translation].

[36] Ibid., 12. The idea is derived from Prov. 3:21, interpreted allegorically.

Despite the place of the esoteric interpretation, Radak also provides the external explanation for the questions and problems of the biblical narrative.[37]

> The closest out of all that we have written is that the speech of the serpent was by way of a miracle through which to test the woman. Although [Scripture] didn't say, "And the Lord opened the mouth of the serpent," as it said with Balaam's ass, [it is] because there is a great [element of] *nistar* in this matter, which is essential for those who understand science. One still must question why the serpent was cursed if the Lord put the matter in its mouth. The explanation must be that the serpent thought with its slyness to be jealous of man, and God, who knew its thought, recognized it and put the matter in its mouth, as they said, "If one comes to defile himself, he is given an opening."[38] Furthermore, people knew it was justly punished.[39]

Once again, a literal interpretation can include the necessity for miraculous intervention if it, more than another explanation, accounts for the information provided in the text. Radak's explanation of the external meaning of the text resembles others that preceded it, notably that of Saadiah Gaon.[40]

Radak did actually produce the esoteric commentary on Genesis that he refers to in his comment as "a booklet that we will write for it alone on *nistar*."[41] His allegorical interpretation of Genesis applies to Gen. 2:7 – 5:1 and the esoteric meaning is said to exist together with the exotetic meaning. "Both are true."[42] Eden is an allegory for the active intellect. The Tree of Life is the human intellect, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is the material intellect.

> *3:1 Now the serpent was shrewder than all the wild beasts*. This is the material intellect. For even though the appetitive faculty exists in all wild animals, including cattle and fowl, as the Lord God

---

[37] As Talmage points out, Radak never allowed the allegorical interpretation to invade the *peshat*, even if it might be clearer. Also, he uses midrash both as *peshat* and as "a manifestation of a profound philosophical truth." *David Kimḥi*, 122, 133.

[38] *Shabbat* 104a.

[39] Kimḥi, *Commentary on Torah*, 55.

[40] Unfortunately, the Torah commentary of Abraham, the son of Maimonides, is missing the portion relevant to the subject of this thesis. It would have been interesting to see how his interpretation compared with his father's attitude toward the serpent and the opinions of others who favoured philosophical exegesis, such as Kimḥi.

[41] Previously quoted, see reference in fn. 34.

[42] "Kimhi's Allegorical Commentary on Genesis," (Hebrew), in Louis Finkelstein, ed., *The Commentary of David Kimhi on Isaiah*, Columbia University Oriental Studies, vol. xix (Columbia University Press, 1926; repr. New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966), liv [my translation].

> planted it in them, the serpent which is in man has more cunning and wisdom than all the wild animals. It contains the knowledge to tempt and seduce and it stimulates the appetitive faculty—this is its speech with the woman. . . . this is the temptation of the serpent, and this is the [meaning of the] expression *naḥash*, that it guesses [*menaḥesh*] and tries whether it can tempt one who pays attention to it. And concerning what our rabbis of blessed memory said in the matter of the serpent, it is an esoteric matter that they said (*PRE 13*) that the serpent was as large as a camel with Samael riding on it and the Holy Blessed One laughing at the camel and its rider, and they also said that when the serpent came upon Eve it injected lust into her . . .[43]

Kimḥi's allegorical interpretation is similar to those of Maimonides and Philo. Radak connects the serpent to the related meanings of the same root and explains why the symbolic serpent "speaks" to Eve specifically. Although he refers to the esoteric teachings of the rabbis on the subject, he does not explain their words clearly.

Radak's interpretation is notable in almost blending together the concepts of the material intellect and appetitive faculty with the idea of the evil inclination. As such, he blurs the line between philosophical allegory and simple symbolic interpretation, expressing the allegory in terms that are native to rabbinic teachings. His allegorical interpretation of the serpent continues with the serpent's curses. As a part of man, the serpent is responsible for man being more cursed than other animals, "because they do not have reward and punishment, but you will have punishment for all your evil deeds."[44] The "serpent" lives as long as it remains evil and overcomes man so that he eats dirt. Dirt represents the pleasures of the body, which have no permanence. When man dies, only the human intellect will live and it will eat from the Tree of Life and live for eternity.[45]

Rabbinic statements about the evil inclination in man are used to explain the words "They shall strike at your head and you shall strike at their heel." Man, the seed of woman, is evil from his youth. "And they said in *Genesis Rabbah*, for thirteen years the evil inclination is greater than the good inclination, but if he becomes wise, slowly but surely the serpent will die and the seed of man will live."[46] In fact, Radak's statement appears to be a paraphrase, and none of the extant rabbinic texts actually mention the

---

[43] Ibid., lx-lxi.

[44] Ibid., lxiv.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

serpent in discussing the evil inclination.[47] However, his quote highlights the essence of the allegory relating to the serpent. The serpent is found within man; it leads man to pursue evil deeds and the pleasures of the body, and it is referred to in rabbinic texts as the evil inclination. This is the serpent of the garden of Eden, and this is the material intellect (or appetitive faculty) known to the philosophers.

---

[47] The closest parallel is found in *Abot de Rabbi Nathan (A)*, ch. 16, "By thirteen years is the evil impulse older than the good impulse. In the mother's womb the evil impulse begins to develop and is born with a person. If he begins to profane the Sabbath, it does not prevent him; if he commits murder, it does prevent him. . . . Thirteen years later the good impulse is born." Goldin, *The Fathers*, 83; None of the variants in Schechter, *Aboth*, mentions the serpent.

CHAPTER 9
MYSTICAL EXEGESIS IN THE 12TH AND 13TH CENTURIES

Introduction

The final portion in the history of Jewish interpretation of the serpent's identity to be dealt with here is the mystical exegesis of the Bible that began in earnest in Provence and Catalonia at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth. Like philosophical exegesis, the mystical exegesis of the Bible assumes that the text contains a dual meaning, an outer, revealed meaning and a deeper, esoteric one. The mystical meaning eventually came to be regarded by the kabbalists as the "most sublime stage of biblical understanding,"[1] although this was not always true in the thirteenth century. In inheriting the search for an esoteric layer of meaning from the philosophical exegetes, mystical teachings drew on Jewish Neoplatonic and Aristotelian writers but were not confined to them or by them. "Kabbalah grew out of philosophy, or as some kabbalists would say, outgrew it."[2]

This chapter looks at the writings from the period known as the "early Kabbalah," which is the first century of kabbalistic creativity, "bracketed by two creations of mystical theosophy: the *Sefer ha-Bahir* . . . and the *Zohar*."[3] Regardless of the scholarly debates as to the origins and authors of these works, it is the dates of their appearances that are relevant here.

---

[1] Sarna, "Hebrew and Bible Studies," 113.

[2] Daniel Chanan Matt, trans., ed., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, Preface by Arthur Green (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 22.

[3] Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, 1.

Sefer ha-Bahir

The first known work of kabbalah, which provided the "basis for much of the symbolic language of many kabbalistic works of the thirteenth century,"[4] was *Sefer ha-Bahir*. The book, in its present form, is believed to originate from Germany or Provence of the twelfth or early thirteenth century.[5] However, many early manuscripts and kabbalists attribute *Sefer ha-Bahir* to the first century figure, Rabbi Neḥunia ben ha-Kanah.

In part, the *Bahir*'s interpretation of the serpent's identity resembles the content of some early Pseudepigraphic texts, but they are not the sources of its interpretation. In fact, section 200 of the *Bahir*, in which the scenario for the seduction of Eve is outlined, is a large quotation of *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* 13 with a few changes, and is unusual in being the only extensive quotation found in the whole book.[6] Some of the details derive from the talmudic era, but despite the recycling of material, the *Bahir*'s interpretation of the events of Genesis is profoundly different.

The *Bahir* begins by explaining why the serpent chose to approach Eve and not Adam. The explanation depends on a system of symbols and associations heretofore not encountered in Jewish interpretations of the serpent's identity.

> soul of female comes from the Female, soul of male comes from the Male
> This is the reason why the Serpent followed Eve. He said, "Her soul comes from the north, and I will therefore quickly seduce her."
> And how did he seduce her? He had intercourse with her.[7]

The biblical characters are associated with cosmic characters or notions. One of the most important among new concepts introduced by the *Bahir* is that the divine realm

---

[4] Daniel Abrams, ed. *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1994), Introduction.

[5] Joseph Dan, dates it to ca. 1185. "Samael and the Problem of Jewish Gnosticism," *Jewish Mysticism: Vol. 3, The Modern Period* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999), 384.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Neḥunia ben haKana, *The Bahir*, translated by Aryeh Kaplan (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1979), 80, section 199.

includes both masculine and feminine elements.[8] The female in the garden of Eden is in some way related to, and shares characteristics of, the idea of Female. Presumably, the "Serpent" is also connected with a greater notion, and its motivation and decision making processes result from that deeper layer of meaning. The serpent believes it will succeed, because the soul of the female "comes from the north." Elsewhere in the *Bahir*, evil is identified with the left, but also with the north.[9] Matter and evil are also linked, as in the philosophical interpretations.[10] The woman is therefore already partially connected with evil and the north, and this facilitates her seduction; there is proximity, if not identity, between femininity and evil.[11]

The idea that the serpent had intercourse with Eve, implied in *b. Shabbat* 145b-146a, is associated with the wording in Gen. 3:13 with which Eve blames the serpent for her actions, "The serpent duped me, and I ate." The midrash states that the Hebrew word for duped is of the same root as the language of betrothal, proving that the serpent had intercourse with Eve.[12] The *Bahir* has not yet explained what the serpent is, but it is clear that it is connected with the north and wishes for the woman to join up with him. By then providing details of the seduction from *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, it links Samael, the serpent, and evil.

> His disciples asked: Tell us how this took place.
> He replied: The wicked Samael made a bond with all the host on high against his Master. This was because the Blessed Holy One said [regarding man] *(Genesis 1:26)*, "And let him rule over the fish of the sea and the flying things of the heaven."
> [Samael] said, "How can we cause him to sin and be exiled from before God?" He descended with all his host, and sought a suitable companion on earth. He finally found the serpent, which looked like a camel, and he rode on it.[13]

---

[8] Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, 28.

[9] See *Sefer ha-Bahir*, sections 162, 163.

[10] Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, 30.

[11] Dan, "Samael and the Problem," 385. The source for the association between the north and evil may be influenced by the picture in *PRE* of the "unfinished northern corner of the universe from which demons and troubles enter the world" (ibid).

[12] נשואין, השיאני.

[13] *The Bahir*, translated by Aryeh Kaplan, 81, section 200.

Samael, a heavenly being, is motivated by jealousy of man, who is given dominion over all the animals, and he conspires to cause man to be exiled. Samael's choice of the serpent is made because it is a "suitable companion." The original version in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* 13 is more specific in saying that Samael "found among them none so skilled to do evil as the serpent."[14] The serpent's physical appearance is that of a camel, as it is in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and *Genesis Rabbah*, according to the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar.

> He then cast the wicked Samael and his group from their holy place in heaven. He cut off the feet of the serpent and cursed it more than all the other animals and beasts of the field. He also decreed that it must shed its skin every seven years.
> Samael was punished and made the guardian angel over the wicked Esau.

As punishment for their actions, Samael and his group are cast out of heaven, while the serpent's legs are cut off. The punishment has two levels since there are two levels of participation in causing the humans to sin. According to some manuscripts, Samael is also punished by becoming the guardian angel over the wicked Esau. Thus Samael's association with evil does not cease with his activities in the garden of Eden; he comes to be permanently associated with the evil forces on earth and with those biblical characters most commonly associated with evil. The *Bahir* does not use the name Samael in other sections that discuss evil. It refers to the devil only by the name Satan.

> Yet the very fact that this description of the origin of evil in the Garden of Eden was included in the *Bahir* gave that myth legitimation and a meaningful presence in the emerging schools of kabbalists in Europe . . . From that time onward, users of the *Bahir* could relate the variegated discussion of evil in the *Bahir* to the figure of Samael.[15]

Moses ben Naḥman, Naḥmanides

While the *Bahir* is the first known book of kabbalah, it is the biblical commentary of Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman, known as Naḥmanides or the Ramban, that was the first to introduce esoteric mystical exegesis into a systematic Bible commentary. However, Naḥmanides' commentary did not employ only mystical exegesis, nor did it customarily

---

[14] See Friedlander, *PRE*, 92 and earlier in this thesis, "*Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*," 46.

[15] Dan, "Samael and the Problem," 385.

value the mystical interpretation more than other modes of interpretation. In addition to the mystical approach, Naḥmanides' methods of exegesis included traditional rabbinic interpretation; attention to contextual, philologic and scientific issues; and responses to the earlier commentaries of Rashi and Ibn Ezra.

At first glance, Naḥmanides does not seem even to comment on the identity of the serpent. There is no discussion of the matter where one would expect it, either at Gen. 3:1 or later in the chapter when the serpent is cursed. However, he does eventually refer to the serpent in the context of a larger discussion at Gen. 3:22 about the garden of Eden, the Trees of Knowledge and Life and the rivers of the garden. The ideas he propounds regarding these other elements apply to what he eventually says about the serpent.

> Know and believe that the garden of Eden is on this earth as are also the tree of life and the tree of knowledge, and from there the river comes forth and is divided into four heads which are visible to us. For the Euphrates is in our land and within our border, and Pishon, according to the words of the former scholars, is the Nile of Egypt. But as these are on earth so are there also in the heavens things similarly named, and those in the heavens are the foundations of these on earth, just as the Rabbis have said: "*The king hath brought me into his chambers*—this teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, is destined to show Israel the treasures on high that are chambered in the heavens. Another interpretation of *The king hath brought me into his chambers* is that these are the chambers of the garden of Eden. It is on the basis of this that they have said: 'The work of the garden of Eden is like the work of the firmament.'" The rivers correspond to the four camps of angels on high, and it is from there that the power of the kingdoms on earth is derived . . . And the things called the tree of life and the tree of knowledge on high – their secret is high and lofty. Adam sinned with the fruit of the tree of knowledge below and on high, in deed and thought.[16]

Naḥmanides hints at the interplay between divine and human realities that is the central theme of the Jewish mystical tradition.[17] Human beings, human activity, and their physical, earthly surroundings are all imbued with and connected to corresponding heavenly or godly systems and characteristics. Rebellion on earth is paralleled by rebellion on high, and when the Bible speaks of one, it is simultaneously also speaking of the other. The Bible, or at the very least certain sections of it, is to be understood through the dual lens of both the literal reality and the mystical, heavenly, reality.[18]

---

[16] Moses Naḥmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, Genesis, translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971-76), 85.

[17] See Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, xv.

[18] In "The Gate of Reward," (שער גמול), Ramban discusses the concept of reward and punishment, including the reward of the garden of Eden, the world to come. He explains that in addition to the righteous meriting Eden, the garden of Eden is still very much a place on this earth. ". . . [T]he secret of this matter is that it is

Naḥmanides asserts that *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* understood that there was a dual meaning and that both levels are referred to in that text.[19] Similarly, the *Bahir* contains reference to the esoteric teachings of Eden. Just as the garden of Eden is to be understood on two levels, so too the serpent. Naḥmanides suggests that the problems raised by the literal meaning point one to the second layer of understanding.

> ...The serpent, moreover, has today no speaking faculty, and if it did have it at first, He would surely have mentioned in His curse that its mouth become dumb, as this would have been the most grievous curse of all. But all these things are twofold in meaning, the overt and the concealed in them both being true."[20]

The gist of Naḥmanides' statement is that the serpent cannot have spoken to Eve, because the text would have then mentioned the additional curse of its losing its ability to speak. And yet the text does state that the serpent spoke. He does not resolve this difficulty clearly but instead refers the reader to the twofold meaning of the text, one overt and the other covert, implying that the truth expressed by each of these resolves the issue. Elsewhere, he suggests that *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, which describes Samael on the camel, refers to the hidden meaning.[21]

Naḥmanides claims that the serpent's concealed identity is connected to Samael, and, through allusions to concealed meanings of the garden in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and the *Bahir*, to evil. "Nachmanides' contribution to the theological problem of the position of the powers of evil, and, at the same time, the meaning of Samael can be found in his discussion of the biblical commandment concerning sending of a goat (*seir*) to the desert to Azazel on Yom Kippur."[22] There, he identifies Azazel, the recipient of the goat, as

---

twofold in meaning. [The Scriptural narrative] about the Garden of Eden . . . are all true matters and firm subjects, [which are also] suggestive of the wonderful secret [contained therein]. The narratives are like drawings from which to understand the secret of a profound subject by means of an allegory." From *Ramban (Nachmanides): Writings and Discourses*, vol. 2, translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, Inc., 1978), 508.

[19] Ibid., 509-510.

[20] Naḥmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, Vol. 1, 85-86

[21] Naḥmanides, *Writings*, vol. 2, 510-512.

[22] Dan, "Samael and the Problem," 387.

Samael.[23] Quoting from *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* 46, he describes Samael as "the lord of all demons, the power responsible for bloodshed and destruction, and connects him with the celestial realm as 'the soul of the sphere of Mars,' from which evil emanates to Earth."[24]

Baḥya ben Asher

Baḥya ben Asher's thirteenth-century commentary on the Torah is influenced by the *Bahir* and resembles some thirteenth-century Ashkenazi commentaries in its treatment of the serpent.[25]

> The serpent approached the woman because the devil was created with her and she is the figure of the evil inclination and she is easily seduced. And similarly, the calculation of *hanāḥāš* is the same as the calculation of *ha-satan*, plus the word [i.e. numerical value of *ha-satan* + 1 for the word itself].[26]

The serpent approaches the woman because of the affinity that exists between them, a connection among evil forces.[27] The comment is strongly influenced by the *Bahir*, and Baḥya ben Asher is known to have considered it to be an authoritative midrash. He also considered himself a follower of Naḥmanides' Kabbalah.[28]

Regarding the serpent's curses in Gen. 3:14, Rabbenu Baḥya offers multiple explanations. The *peshat* notes the parallel relationship between the serpent's status before and after the curse (*Gen. Rab.* 19:1). The midrashic explanation involves the rabbinic explanation that the serpent's period of gestation is longer than all the other

---

[23] Naḥmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. 3, 217-222.

[24] Dan, "Samael and the Problem," 389.

[25] The commentary was written in 1291 in Saragossa. [*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 4:104]. It offered literal, midrashic, rational, and kabbalistic interpretations of the Torah and also included homiletical introductions. [Baḥya ben Asher, *Bi'ur al ha-Torah*, ed. Charles B. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1966), 12-16 in introduction].

[26] Ibid., 76, [my translation].

[27] Note that the origin of the idea that the *satan* was created with the woman is in *Gen. Rab.* 17:9.

[28] *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 4:104. Following these opening lines is a discussion of a midrash about the nature of serpents (*Lev. Rab.* 26:2) that has little to do with the identity of the serpent. [Baḥya, ibid., 76].

animals (*b. Bekhorot* 8a). He then also offers a more esoteric explanation that is similar to Naḥmanides' commentary.

> *On your belly shall you crawl.* Measure for measure: He lowered them from their level and brought them down to dirt, therefore, He lowered his stature and made his food dirt. And [Scripture] didn't mention in its curses that [the serpent] become mute, because muteness was more difficult that all and it was therefore fitting to punish [the serpent] with it. However, the serpent was a figure prepared for evil, as the text testifies, "[the serpent was] shrewdest of all the wild beasts," and was a vessel to receive the power that was connected with it. For the exoteric and esoteric [aspects] in it are true. God, who lowered his stature similarly lowered the power connected to it, in that he lowered it [to a level] beneath the *sefirot* . . . .[29]

According to the first, quite literal, interpretation, the serpent's curse is on par with Adam's. Both are lowered from their previous elevated status to a level involving dirt. The fact that there is no mention made of the serpent becoming mute indicates that there is a deeper meaning to the text, according to which the serpent is connected to an evil force—Samael. Just like Naḥmanides, Baḥya ben Asher maintains that both the literal, exoteric level and the esoteric level remain true.

Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen of Castile

An even more radical approach to the serpent can be seen in "The Treatise on the Left Emanation" by Rabbi Isaac son of Rabbi Jacob ha-Kohen of Castile, which outlines the structure of evil emanatory powers that parallel the *sefirot*. There, Samael is described as, "the first prince and accuser, the commander of jealousy."[30] He is considered evil, because he "desires to unite and intimately mingle with an emanation not of his nature."[31] Unlike other mystical sources treated in this chapter, "The Treatise of the Left Emanation" clearly explains the parallel to Adam and Eve in Eden that exists in the upper world. It is also notable for being the "first text in which Samael is integrated into a universal, systematic myth" and in which "the basic concepts of kabbalistic dualism were formulated.[32] As well, it presents the myth that Samael and Lilith are a

---

[29] Ibid., 80

[30] Dan, *Early Kabbalah*, 172

[31] Ibid.

[32] Dan, "Samael and the Problem," 381.

couple and that the two of them rule the "left side," the parallel of God and the *Shekhinah* on the right side.[33]

> A form destined for Samael stirs up enmity and jealousy between the heavenly delegation and the forces of the supernal army. This form is Lilith, and she is in the image of a feminine form. Samael takes on the form of Adam and Lilith the form of Eve. They were both born in a spiritual birth as one, as a parallel to the forms of Adam and Eve above and below: two twinlike forms. Both Samael and [Lilith, called] Eve the Matron – also known as the Northern One – are emanated from beneath the Throne of Glory. It was the Sin which brought about this calamity, in order to bring her shame and disgrace to destroy her celestial offspring. The calamity was caused by the Northern One, who was created beneath the Throne of Glory and it resulted in the partial collapse and weakening of the legs of the Throne. Then, by means of Gamal'el and the primeval snake Nahashiel, the scents of each intermingled: the scent of man reached the female, and the scent of woman reached the male. Ever since then the snakes have increased and have taken on the form of biting snakes. Thus it is written, "The Lord sent fiery snakes among the people" (Numbers 21:6). This requires a full explanation in a separate treatise for it is very deep—no one can find it out.[34]

In Rabbi Isaac's work, the story of Samael and Lilith are "uplift[ed] from the level of narrative gossip . . . [into] a part of cosmic, and even divine, history."[35] A sexual awakening of sorts is caused between the females and males. In the heavens, *Malkhut* joins with Samael and Lilith joins *Tiferet*.[36] As *Nahashiel* or *Gamaliel*,[37] the serpent plays a role in the awakening and through the sin serpents become "biting snakes." "That is, evil came into its own and began to express itself."[38]

The *Zohar*

The *Zohar*, considered to be the central work of Jewish Kabbalah, is arranged in the form of a midrash on the Torah. As described by Matt, "The *Zohar* is an esoteric

---

[33] Ibid., 382.

[34] Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, "Treatise on the Left Emanation,"in Joseph Dan, *The Early Kabbalah* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 173.

[35] Joseph Dan, "Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah," *AJS* 5 (1980), 17-40. Reprint in *Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 3, ed. J. Dan. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson Inc., 1999), 260.

[36] Isaiah Tishby and Fischel Lachover, trans. and eds., *Mishnat ha-Zohar: Gufei Ma'amarei ha-Zohar*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1971), 299.

[37] The names Nahashiel and Gamaliel reflect the Hebrew for "serpent" and "camel," together with the –el ending common for angels and other heavenly beings.

[38] Dan, "The Concept of Evil," 255.

work, a commentary that requires a commentary." Its approach to exegesis stems from the belief that "all the words of Torah are sublime words, sublime secrets!"[39]

> So this story of Torah is the garment of Torah.
> Whoever thinks that the garment is the
> real Torah and not something else –
> may his spirit deflate!
> He will have no portion in the world that is coming.[40]

The Torah is said to be composed of garment, body and soul. The garments, visible even to fools, are "the stories of this world . . . the story of Torah." The commandments of the Torah are its underlying body, understood by those who know more. But, the wise ones "look only at the soul, root of all, real Torah!"[41] This multi-layered Torah is also reflected in the heavenly world because, "the world above and the world below are perfectly balanced: Israel below, the angels above."[42] The garment, body and soul of biblical understanding reflect the garment, body and soul (and soul of soul) of the world above: the heavens and their host, the Communion of Israel, and the Beauty of Israel (this is the real Torah). "The soul of the soul is the Holy Ancient One. All is connected, this one to that."[43]

The narrative involving the serpent in the garden of Eden is dealt with in the *Zohar* in many instances and in many ways. Certain portions resemble other midrashim in style and clearly deal with a textual issue. Others speak of the serpent as part of the

---

[39] Daniel Channan Matt, trans. and ed., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 43.

[40] Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*, 43, translated from Zohar 3:152a. However, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: Peshat and Sod in Zoharic Hermeutics," [in Michael Fishbane, ed., *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 187] who says that the *peshat* provides the key for unlocking kabbalistic truths. "The *peshat* therefore, is not a shell that is to be broken or a garment to be discarded, but rather a veil to be penetrated so that through it one can behold the mystical insight—in the words of the *Zohar*, to see the secret matter from within its garment."

[41] Matt, *Zohar*, 44.

[42] Ibid., 43.

[43] Ibid., 45.

forces of the other side, the *sitra aḥra*.[44] Although the *Zohar* might be replete with esoteric teachings, it also happens to be one of the few sources to present the question concerning the identity of the serpent clearly.

> "AND THE SERPENT. R. Isaac said: 'This is the evil tempter.' R. Judah said that it means literally a serpent. They consulted R. Simeon, and he said to them: 'Both are correct. It was Samael, and he appeared on a serpent, for the ideal form of the serpent is the Satan. We have learnt that at that moment Samael came down from heaven riding on this serpent, and all creatures saw his form and fled before him. They then entered into conversation with the woman, and the two brought death into the world.[45]

The debate concerning the serpent's identity, or the correct interpretation of the Genesis narrative, is attributed to the tannaitic sages Rabbi Isaac and Rabbi Judah. Rabbi Simeon resolves the dispute and provides the full and correct understanding of the serpent's identity. Both the literal and non-literal interpretations are true. The serpent is both a literal serpent and the evil inclination. The voice speaking to Eve comes from Samael, who rides the serpent, and the serpent.[46] The serpent enters into conversation with Eve both on the literal and allegorical level.[47]

The image of Samael riding the serpent is that which first appears in *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, although no mention is made of the serpent's having a camel-like appearance. The presumption that both entered into conversation with Eve resembles the Pseudepigraphic versions of the narrative in which Samael speaks to the woman through the body of a serpent or in which the Devil and Samael both speak to her.[48] Furthermore, the clearest and earliest parallel is found in *3 Baruch*, where two levels of meaning are acknowledged and the serpent is equated with sinful desire.[49]

---

[44] The discussion that follows in not necessarily a complete treatment of the serpent in the *Zohar*, but it at least tries to introduce the issue of the serpent's identity in the *Zohar*.

[45] Zohar 1:35b, Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, *The Zohar*, vol. 1, introduction by J. Abelson (London; Jerusalem; New York: The Soncino Press, 1934; repr. 1970), 133-134.

[46] See later, fn. 62, where the serpent and its rider also represent Samael riding on Lilith.

[47] See Chavel, *Writings*, vol. 2, 516, where Naḥmanides also asserts that both levels are true.

[48] See above, "The *Apocalypse of Moses*, The *Life of Adam and Eve*," 26.

[49] See above, "The *Slavonic* and *Greek Apocalypses of Baruch*," 29.

The process of identification continues shortly thereafter, as the *Zohar* connects the serpent with the angel of death. "It is written: And the serpent was subtle. This serpent is the evil tempter and the angel of death. It is because the serpent is the angel of death that it brought death to the world."[50] The seemingly non-relevant equation of *b. Baba Batra* 16a reaches its fullest development in the *Zohar*. Although the serpent is not part of the original equation of Satan = evil inclination = angel of death, it becomes a fourth element of identity at many points in the *Zohar*. The identification of the serpent as Samael and the clarification of who or what Samael represents in the *Bahir* and in the writings of Naḥmanides and Rabbi Isaac of Castille all contribute to the ease with which the serpent takes its place in the equation. The *Zohar* describes how the serpent, as the evil inclination, is "ready to enter together with the soul at the very birth of man."[51] In this way, the evil inclination displays its cunning by pleading its case "before the judge before his opponent arrives," and is known as the "cunning evil one."[52]

The allegorical interpretation continues throughout the Bible, as other characters are also understood to represent the evil inclination and to be connected with the serpent. In the verse "And Abraham went . . . and Lot went with him" (Gen. 12:4), Abraham is understood as the soul, the father of the body, while Lot is the evil inclination, who enters the body together with the soul.[53] The mixed multitude are seen as the "offspring of the original serpent that beguiled Eve" and they are "the impurity which the serpent injected into Eve. From this impurity came forth Cain, who killed Abel . . . From Cain was descended Jethro . . ."[54] The serpent is also connected with Amalek.[55] Furthermore, Samael and the serpent are connected to Esau.

---

[50] *Zohar* 35b; *The Zohar*, (Soncino), 1:134.

[51] An interpretation of לפתח חטאת רובץ (Gen. 4:7). *Zohar Hadash, Lekh Lekha*, 24a-24c, *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, quoted from Isaiaih Tishby and Fischel Lachower, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, vol. 2, translated by David Goldstein (London; Washington: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1991), 799.

[52] Zohar I: 179a-179b, quoted from Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 797.

[53] Here, the evil inclination is connected to the serpent in their both being cursed, the serpent in Gen. 3:14 and Lot through interpretation of his name. לוט means to curse. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 799.

[54] Zohar I, 28b. *The Zohar*, (Soncino), 108.

> Samael brought curses on the world through Wisdom and destroyed the first tree that God had created in the world. [. . .] Jacob . . . wrested the blessings from him, in order that Samael might not be blessed above and Esau below . . . Therefore as Samael withheld blessings from the first tree, so Jacob, who was such another tree as Adam, withheld blessings, both upper and lower, from Samael . . ."[56]

But the issue of the identity of the serpent in the *Zohar* is not merely an exegetical matter involving allegorical symbols for the evil inclination. The serpent is also understood within the framework of the kabbalistic concept of the *sefirot* and the connection between this world, the heavenly sphere, and the Bible. The *Zohar* states that "this world is like a pattern of the world above."[57] Zohar I, 49a-49b questions the nature of the heavenly parallel to the Genesis narrative.

> Rabbi Eleazar said: How can we support the view that there is an evil inclination in the world above that takes hold of the female?
>
> He said to him: We have already discussed the fact that both the good inclination and the evil inclination exist in the upper and the lower worlds, the good inclination on the right, and the evil inclination on the left, and the left in the world above takes hold of the female, so that it might be connected to her bodily, as it is said "His left hand is under my head" (Song of Songs 2:6). Therefore matters so far may be interpreted as applying to both the upper and the lower worlds. Thenceforward they are concerned with pitch, and the youngest child can interpret them.[58]

The serpent's seduction of Eve is interpreted as a reflection of relationships among the celestial *sefirot*. Tishby explains that the good and evil inclinations are the agents of *Hesed* and *Din*. "Therefore the activity of *Gevurah*, the attribute of Judgement (*Din*) in the celestial intercourse matches that of the evil inclination in human intercourse." *Gevurah*, the left arm, embraces *Shekhinah* and joins it to *Tiferet*.[59]

In addition to the serpent reflecting the relationship among the *sefirot*, its most remarkable identity is found in the full characterization of what the *satan* in the equation represents. The serpent of the garden of Eden is not just a literal serpent, the evil inclination, or the angel of death. It and the numerous other serpentine creatures of the

---

[55] Zohar I, 29a. *The Zohar*, (Soncino), 110.

[56] Zohar I, 35b. *The Zohar*, (Soncino), 134.

[57] Zohar II: 144a and elsewhere; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 2:513.

[58] Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1390. The last sentence may suggest the limits of the allegorical interpretation.

[59] Ibid., 3:1390, n. 91, 93.

Bible are representative of the *sitra aḥra*, the "other side," those forces that work against the Godly presence of *Shekhina* in this world.

According to the *Zohar*, the first chapter of Genesis describes more than just the creation of the world. "It alludes to the emanation of the *sefirot*, their emergence from the Infinite of *Ein Sof*."[60] Paralleling the emanation of each of the ten *sefirot* is the concurrent development of the *sitra aḥra*. "It is written 'In the beginning God created' (Genesis 1:1), and it is written 'And God created the sea-monsters.' Every act of the ten sayings is paralleled by the ten rivers. And there is a monster that moves for each one."[61] The great sea-monsters of Gen. 1:21 are the leviathan and its mate, representing Samael and Lilith, the male and female in the system of husks.[62] The Elusive Serpent, Twisting Serpent, and Dragon of the sea of Isaiah 27:1 all belong to this symbolic and mythical representation of the *sitra aḥra*.[63] The *naḥash* rules over these forces of evil.

> And concerning the mystery of this thing it is written "And the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field that the Lord God had made" (Genesis 3:1)—the mystery of the evil snake that comes down from above, and swims across bitter waters, and descends in order to deceive, so that [human beings] fall into its nets. This snake is eternal death, and it enters man's innermost secret parts, and is on the left side.[64]

The serpent is connected with mythical creatures that existed from the time of the creation and that belong to a realm that includes the powers that control the world, rather than the earthly, animal realm. However, it is incorrect to draw a distinction between the interpretation that connects the serpent with this mythical realm and the interpretation that identifies it as a symbol for the evil inclination. The evil inclination falls into the domain of the *sitra aḥra* and is simply one particular manifestation of its activities.

---

[60] Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 7.

[61] Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 2:503.

[62] *Zohar* I: 52a, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 2:501, also n. 242. Lilith is symbolized by a camel, such that the version from *PRE* means that Samael rode upon Lilith when it approached Eve.

[63] Zohar II, 34a-35b, Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 2:501-506.

[64] Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 2:501.

> (a) As the evil inclination it is a seducer; (b) As chief adversary (*Satan*) it is an accuser; (c) It causes death and destruction in its guise as Destroyer and Angel of Death; (d) As chief of the guardian angels of the other nations, it controls both these nations and their lands; (e) It punishes the wicked in its role as Judgement's emissary; (f) It puts man to the test, in order to purify and raise him to a higher level; (g) It surrounds the divine light like a shell that protects the nut inside.[65]

Human activities interact with both the divine and the evil such that the sins of men lend power to the forces of evil in the world. Zohar I, 171a describes the effects of neglecting the support of Torah study. "The power of the Torah is weakened . . . and the kingdom of evil is strengthened day by day . . . and he who has no legs or feet to stand upon is strengthened . . . they give him supports and legs to stand upon, and he derives strength from them."[66] The allegorical interpretation of the serpent applies not only to its identity, but also to the curses it receives. The *sitra aḥra* loses some of its powers, no longer having legs to stand on, as punishment for seducing Adam and Eve. It is a servant of God but continues the struggle to regain its power or attain more power throughout history. It is the role of humans to ensure that they do not contribute to its strength.[67]

---

[65] Ibid., 2:511-512.

[66] Ibid., 3:1145-1146.

[67] Ibid., 2:509. Note the connection to Samael who has a power struggle with God in Pseudepigraphic texts.

CHAPTER 10
CONCLUSIONS

The Patterns of Literal and Non-Literal Interpretation

In concluding this history of Jewish interpretation of the garden of Eden's serpent, the period from the Hebrew Bible until the end of the thirteenth century appears to be best characterized as the histories of its literal and non-literal interpretations. The introduction stated that in the history of interpretation of the serpent's identity, "no one interpretation has prevailed to the exclusion of others."[1] Indeed, in the earliest and latest periods covered by this thesis, there is evidence of literal, symbolic, and mythical interpretation. The varying views of Josephus, Philo and *Apocalypse of Moses*, to name a few in the early history of interpretation, are paralleled by works such as those of Ḥezekiah ben Manoaḥ, David Kimḥi, and Isaac ha-Kohen of Castile in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

However, this analysis has revealed—quite unexpectedly—that mythical and even symbolic interpretations of the serpent's identity are conspicuously absent from the classical rabbinic sources of the *Tosefta*, *Genesis Rabbah*, the Babylonian Talmud and *Abot de Rabbi Nathan*. Taking into account only those texts that were preserved among traditional Jewish circles, the early history of Jewish interpretation of the serpent's identity is in fact quite uniform and contrasts sharply with the variety of interpretations in evidence both earlier and later than this classical period. The Hebrew Bible contains no overt references to the garden of Eden's serpent, and, though the original account in Genesis may have parallels among mythologies of the Ancient Near East, it itself appears to be non-mythological. It is only with the seventh- or eight-century text of *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* that the trace of textual evidence for a non-literal rabbinic interpretation begins. Textual evidence preserved among traditional Jewish circles reveals a tradition

---

[1] See ch. 1, p. 1.

of the literal interpretation of the serpent's identity—to the exclusion of other possibilities—that spans well over one thousand years!

This phenomenon is all the more striking when one realizes that a single link would have sufficed to equate the serpent with Satan, the evil inclination and the angel of death, thereby connecting the serpent to the great body of literature related to each of these subjects. That this final link was not recorded for so many centuries begs one to question why this may have been so. I have considered three possible explanations.

Possible Explanations

According to Elaine Pagels' hypothesis,[2] the origins for the figure of Satan that became common in Christianity are to be found among dissident Jewish groups that existed in the second century BCE. The concept of Satan developed as the embodiment of an evil enemy that exists within one's own ranks: the majority group from whom these various dissenters had separated. Pagels' theory accounts for Satan's presence in the texts of these early groups and eventually in Christianity, as well as for the absence of Satan in this role in the texts of the majority—classical rabbinic texts. The mythical interpretations of the serpent that associate it with Satan-like figures depend on this pre-existing conceptualization of Satan. As this framework is lacking within rabbinic Judaism, so are mythical interpretations of the serpent. This theory, however, does not account for the absence of allegorical or symbolic interpretation in the rabbinic sources.

The second possibility is that the absence of non-literal interpretations in the classical Jewish sources is intentional. The history of interpretation may reveal the presence of a rabbinic polemic against these other sources, the groups that produced them and their supporters, or the content of the interpretations. It is not clear whether this polemic would have been specific to the issue of the serpent's identity or a more generalized polemic against the Christian notion of Satan, or else simply against allegorical and other such interpretations that remove the emphasis from the biblical text. If this is the correct option, one must then account for the reversal of this trend beginning with *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and culminating with the philosophical and mystical-

---

[2] See ch. 3, "Pseudepigrapha, Satan, and Judaism", 32.

allegorical interpretations. If the absence of non-literal interpretations was originally intentional, then their later resurgence may indicate that the original intentions had been forgotten.

Lastly, there exists a possibility that esoteric interpretations of the serpent's identity did in fact exist in the early post-biblical period. These may have found expression in the early non-literal interpretations, as well as in the later texts that were attributed to earlier figures, such as *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* and the *Zohar*. Their absence from classical rabbinic sources could reflect the belief that such interpretations must remain esoteric and hidden from the public. Why this attitude toward esoteric teachings changed at a later date is not necessarily specific to the question of the serpent's identity.

The likelihood of this last hypothesis is hampered by two critical findings indicated in this thesis. The first is that the geonic Bible commentaries, especially that of Saadiah Gaon, refute this mythical interpretation and make no reference to an esoteric understanding of the serpent. The scholarship of the geonim and their mastery of the classical sources make it unlikely that they would ignore this element of the text and its interpretation. Secondly, the development of the concept of evil outlined in the mystical sources in Chapter 9 indicates a late date for these ideas and a history that is mainly independent of earlier sources.[3] Similarly, Maimonides' philosophical allegory has much in common with Philo's, but Philo was able to advance his interpretation without making use of sources that involve Samael.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to identify which of these possibilities, if any, is correct. Nevertheless, it is important to have exposed the complicated interrelationships among the sources and to have explored avenues of explanation.

Exegetical Methods

The history of the literal interpretations of the serpent's identity reveals the changing methods of exegesis as well as the changing ideas about what constitutes the plain meaning of the text. The classical midrash texts are literal in allowing for a serpent

---

[3] This argument is a corollary of Joseph Dan's proof that the development of dualistic features within Jewish mysticism can be the product of a development among solely Jewish sources and need not indicate the influence of Gnosticism. See "Samael and the Problem."

that could have spoken to Eve. They provide details that are missing from the biblical narrative, such as the serpent's motivation. Despite offering explanations that are sometimes fantastic, these texts testify to the strong ties between rabbinic midrash and the Bible text. The rabbis were acutely aware of the particular wording of Scripture, the ordering of the verses, the spelling and meaning of words, and the repetition of similarly spelled roots in close proximity to one another, as well as the other occurrences of similar roots elsewhere in the Bible. The textual cues that are the basis for their comments continue to be a source of discussion up to this day. The overwhelming variety of textual support for a sexual undertone to the narrative, which the rabbinic texts provide, simply cannot be overlooked.

In contrast with this rabbinic and midrashic style of interpretation, the Babylonian geonim continue to provide literal interpretations of the serpent's identity, but they do so without recourse to earlier rabbinic statements. The geonim justify their approach to and assumptions about the biblical text through principles that seem to be commonly accepted but are not anchored in the Bible. Despite the differences between these sources, the few geonic texts on the topic of the serpent demonstrate great faith in the face value of the words of Scripture and almost no consideration for exegetical methods that ignore this essential feature of the text. Later still, as the grammatical aspect of the text becomes the focus of Bible study, the emphasis continues to be the literal meaning of the words of Scripture. In Ashkenaz, Rashi's commentary reverts to an attentive reading of the text, first displayed in rabbinic midrashim, paying attention to the features that were central to the classic rabbinic sources. Rashi's followers supplement their literal explanations of the serpent's identity with logical deductions.

However, other Ashkenazi commentaries reveal exegesis that moves beyond the meaning of the words of Scripture. Most of the *gematriot* about the serpent that appear in the commentaries of the Tosafot and Ḥasidei Ashkenaz are in some way connected with the versions of events related by the classical midrashim. Yet, whereas the original midrash was likely based on a textual cue, the *gematria* ignores the origins of the midrash while nevertheless connecting the same information to a particular combination of biblical words and letters and their numerical value.

A similar phenomenon occurs with non-literal interpretations. The philosophical allegories of Solomon ibn Gabirol, Maimonides, and David Kimḥi, all depend on assumptions about the meaning of Scripture that are external to the text itself. They approach the Bible with the a priori understanding that Scripture must concur with certain philosophical notions and that, if need be, it is proper to use allegorical exegesis to this end. Midrashic texts are used with the same aim. In contrast with the geonim, who ignore rabbinic texts about the serpent when answering questions about its identity, the philosophical interpreters assume that some midrashic interpretations refer to the same truths that they are explaining through philosophical allegory.

Similarly, mystical-allegorical exegesis moves beyond the simple meaning of the words of Scripture because it assumes that the biblical text also makes reference to the cosmic order of the world. As such, the literal meaning of the text does not reveal all that the Bible contains. Instead, midrashim such as *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* are thought to contain a more direct insight into the fuller truth, to reveal the esoteric meaning in a manner which is less hidden.

The history of interpretation of the serpent's identity indicates the changing source of authority for interpreters. Exegetes who focus on the literal interpretation repeatedly base themselves on the words of Scripture. However, those who focus on the non-literal interpretation also tend to base themselves on the assumption that the words of Scripture alone are not sufficient; an underlying philosophy or idea contains the truth and it, when joined with Scripture, provides the full picture. While the Bible obviously is also believed to contain the truth, it is only one who knows how to properly interpret its words that has access to the true message. This alternate source of authority opens up new ways of reading the Bible and often imbues Midrash with a measure of authority as well.

Further Comments

As a general remark on the history of interpretation, in uncovering some of the values and influences that seem to affect Bible interpretation, this history of interpretation also finds a surprising confidence in individual approaches to the text, in each interpreter's ability to offer the—or a—correct interpretation. At times, one also finds a

lack of self-awareness, a reliance on opinions and statements of the past, without indication of an interpreter's dependence on these. Only rarely does one find an interpretation that expresses an author's awareness of the influences that compel him to write as he does and uncertainty about that author's ability to offer the correct explanation.

As well, this study also reveals that a history of interpretation of the serpent's identity is of great consequence for the subject of the relationship between the Pseudepigrapha and Bible interpretation. On more than one occasion, this thesis has uncovered what may be the exegetical basis for mythical interpretations of the serpent's identity that are first encountered in the Pseudepigrapha. Interestingly, this evidence has been found particularly in literal and text-focused sources. If these sources do in fact indicate a textual basis for the mythical interpretations, they have the effect of blurring the line between Pseudepigrapha that resemble folk tales and a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew text of the Bible.

Although the serpent's identity is not a matter of much consequence within Judaism, the history of Jewish interpretation of its identity has indeed proved to be a matter of scholarly importance. The patterns of literal and non-literal interpretations appear to reflect the larger issues of the concept of Satan within Judaism and Christianity, the relationship of the Pseudepigrapha to classical Jewish sources, the possibilities of polemics within interpretations of the subject, and the development of the mystical concept of evil in the upper world. Simultaneously, this history also records the changing attitudes of Jewish interpreters toward the Bible and Midrash as sources of authoritative information, as well as the changing beliefs about the correct methods of exegesis.

The narrative involving the serpent in the garden of Eden has been a fertile ground for every style of exegesis yet, despite the multitude of attempts to establish the serpent's identity, no solution has risen above others. Nevertheless, one is enriched in having probed the issue and established the various complexities involved in answering what might have seemed like a simple question. In the final analysis, a history of interpretation is valuable in allowing one to not only see the differences among interpretations throughout history, but perhaps more importantly, to see the interrelationships between disparate opinions. By the thirteenth century, the literal,

symbolic, and mythical interpretations of the serpent's identity that had previously only appeared separately in the literature of opposing groups could finally appear as closely connected ideas in Jewish writings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abecassis, Deborah. "Reconstucting Rashi's Commentary on Genesis from Citations in the Torah Commentaries of the Tosafot." Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1999.

Aberbach, Moses and Bernard Grossfeld. *Targum Onkelos to Genesis: A Critical Analysis together with an English Translation of the Text*: [New York]: Ktav Publishing House; [Denver]: Center for Judaic Studies, University of Denver, 1982.

Abrams, Daniel, ed. *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts*. Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1994.

Alexander, Patrick H., et al., eds. *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999.

ʿAli, Abdullah Yusuf, trans. and commentary. *The Holy Qur ʾan: Text, Translation and Commentary*. Chicago: The Islamic Center, 1978.

Altschuld, Mor. "*Ha-Naḥash be-kabalah*." *Migvan De ʿot ve-Hashkafot be-Tarbut Yisrael* (Jerusalem) 8 (1998): 67-72.

Andersen, F. I. "2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch." In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth. Vol. 1. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985.

Anderson, Gary A. "The Penitence Narrative in the Life of Adam and Eve." *HUCA* 63 (1992): 1-38. Reprint in *Literature on Adam and Eve: Collected Essays*, eds. Gary Anderson, Michael Stone and Johannes Tromp, Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha 15, 3-42. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

_____. "The Punishment of Adam and Eve in The *Life of Adam and Eve*." In *Literature on Adam and Eve: Collected Essays*, eds. Gary Anderson, Michael Stone and Johannes Tromp, Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha 15, 57-81. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Anderson, Gary A., and Michael E. Stone, eds. *A Synopsis of the Books of Adam and Eve*. Early Judaism and Its Literature 17. 2nd revised edition. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999.

Ashlag, Yechezkel Yosef Halevi. *Sefer Masoret Ha-Zohar al Torah Nevi'im Ketuvim*. Bnei Brak, Israel: Or Sulam,1995.

Assaf, Simhah. *Gaonica; Gaonic Responsa and Fragments of Halachic Literature from the Geniza and Other Sources* (Hebrew). *Toratan Shel Geonim Rishonim*, vol. 1. Jerusalem: Darom, 1933. Microfiche.

Bacher, W. "The Church Father Origen and Rabbi Hoshaya." *JQR* 3 (1891): 359.

Baḥya ben Asher. *Bi'ur al ha-Torah* (Hebrew). Vol. 1. Edited by Charles B. Chavel. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1966.

_____. *Sefer Rabbeinu Baḥya al ha-Torah im Peirush Tuv Taʿam mi-Baʿal ha-Tosafot Yom Tov* (Hebrew). Bnei Brak: Avraham Shemuel ha-Levi Heler, 1992.

Bar Ilan's Judaic Library. Version 9.0. [CD-ROM]. Monsey, NY: Torah Educational Software, 2001.

Berman, Lawrence V. "Maimonides on the Fall of Man." *AJS review* 5 (1980): 1-15.

Blidstein, Gerald J. *In the Rabbis' Garden: Adam and Eve in the Midrash*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997.

Bowker, John. *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

Brody, Robert. *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and A. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000.

Cashdan, Eli, trans., *'Aboth D'Rabbi Nathan*. The Minor Tractates of the Talmud, ed. A. Cohen, vol. 1. London: The Soncino Press, 1965.

Cassuto, Umberto. *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. Part 1. Translated by Israel Abrams. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1978.

Charlesworth, James H. "2 Baruch." In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, vol. 1. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985.

_____. "In the Crucible: The Pseudepigrapha as Biblical Interpretation." In J. H. Charlesworth and C. A. Evans, eds., *The Pseudephigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation*, 20-43. Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 14, ed. J. H. Charlesworth. Studies in Scripture and Early Judaism and Christianity 2, eds. C. A. Evans, James A. Sanders. Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993.

_____., ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. 2 vols. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985.

Cohen, Jeremy. *"Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It": The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Colson, F. H. and G. H. Whitaker, trans. *Philo*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929. Reprint, 1962.

Cross, Frank Moore. *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973.

Dan, Joseph, ed. *The Early Kabbalah*. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Translated by Ronald C. Kiener. Preface by Moshe Idel. New York: Paulist Press, 1986.

Dan, Joseph. "The Ashkenazi Hasidic Concept of Language." Originally, "The Concept of Language in Ashkenazi Hasidism," in *Hebrew in Ashkenazi*, ed. L. Glinert, 11-25. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. Reprint in, *Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 2, ed. J. Dan. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, Inc., 1998.

_____. "The Emergence of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Germany." In *Mystics of the Book*, ed. R. A. Herrera, 57-95. Peter Lang: New York, 1993. Reprint, *Jewish Mysticim*, vol. 2, ed. J. Dan. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, Inc., 1998.

_____. "Samael and the Problem of Jewish Gnosticism." In *Perspectives in Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, ed. A. L. Ivry, 257-276. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998. Reprint in *Jewish Mysticism: Vol. 3, The Modern Period*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999.

_____. "Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah." *AJS* 5 (1980): 17-40. Reprint in *Jewish Mysticism: Vol. 3, The Modern Period*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999.

Day, John. *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Distefano, Michel. "An Analysis of the Salvation and Judgement Literary Form of Gen. 3:14-19." M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1989.

Efrayim ben Shimshon. *Perush Rabbenu Efrayim b. R. Shimshon u-Gedole Ashkenaz ha-Kadmonim al ha-Torah* (Hebrew). Vol. 1, *Bereishis, Shemos*. Edited by Ezra Korach and Zvi Leitner. Jerusalem: Julius Klugmann & Sons, 1992.

Eisenstein, J. D. *OẓarVikkuḥim* (Hebrew). New York, 1928. Reprint, Jerusalem, 1969.

Eleazar of Worms. *Perush ha-Rokeach al he-Torah*. Part 1: Genesis. Bnei Brak: Julius Klugmann & Sons, 1978.

Epstein, I., ed. *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Shabbath*. Vol. 2. Translated by H. Freedman. London: The Soncino Press, 1972.

Fishbane, Michael. "The Great Dragon Drama in *b. Baba Batra* 74b – 75a." In *Tehilla le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler and Jeffrey H. Tigay, 273-283. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997. Reprint, "The Great Dragon Battle and Talmudic Redaction." In *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*, 41-55. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1998.

_____. *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

_____. *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Freedman, H. and Maurice Simon, eds. *Midrash Rabbah*. Vol. 1, *Genesis I*. Trans. H. Freedman. Foreword by I. Epstein. London: The Soncino Press, 1393. Reprint, 1961.

Friedlander, Gerald, trans. and ed. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*. London, 1916. Reprint, New York: Hermon Press, 1970.

Gaster, Theodor H. *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament*. New York; Evanston: Harper and Row, 1969.

Gaylord, H. E. "3 (Greek Apocalypse of) Baruch." In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, vol. 1, 663-679. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985.

Gellis, J., ed. *Sefer Tosafot ha-Shalem: Commentary on the Bible* (Hebrew). Vol. 1, *Bereshis – Noach*. Jerusalem: "*Mifal Tosafot haShalem*" Publishing, 1982.

Gibson, J. C. L. *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar ~ Syntax*. 4th ed. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994.

Ginzberg, Louis. *The Legends of the Jews*. Vols. 1, 5. Translated by Henrietta Szold. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909, 1938. Reprint, 1968.

Goldin, Judah, trans. *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955.

Gottlieb, Efraim. "*Ha-Ramban ke-Mekubal*." In *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature* (Hebrew), ed. Joseph Hacker. Tel Aviv: The Chaim Rosenberg School for Jewish Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1976.

Graves, Robert and Raphael Patai. *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*. New York: Greenwich House, 1983.

Grossfield, Bernard, ed. *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes*. The Aramaic Bible. Vol. 6. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1982.

Harl, Marguerite, trans. and ed., *La Bible d'Alexandrie: La Genèse*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1986.

Harvey, Warren Zev. "Maimonides and Spinoza on the Knowledge of Good and Evil" (Hebrew). *'Iyyun* 28 (1979): 167-85.

Hayward, C. T. R., trans. and ed. *Saint Jerome's "Hebrew Questions on Genesis."* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Heller, Ch. *Peshitta: In Hebrew Characters with Elucidatory Notes*. Part 1: Genesis. Berlin: Druckerei Gutenberg, 1928.

Herczeg, Yisrael Isser Zvi, ed. *The Torah – With Rashi's Commentary Translated, Annotated, Ellucidated*. New York: Mesorah Publications, 1995.

Ḥezekiah ben Manoaḥ. *Perush Rabenu Ḥizkiah b"r Manoaḥ*. Edited by Charles B. Chavel. In *Torat Ḥayyim – Sefer Bereshit*, ed. M. L. Katzenelbogen. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986.

Ibn Balʿam, Judah ben Samuel. *Sefer ha-Hakhraʿah*. Oxford-Bodliana ms. 292. Quoted in Samuel ben Ḥofni, *The Biblical Commentary of Rav Samuel ben Hofni Gaon* (Hebrew), 40-41, n. 17. Edited by Aharon Greenbaum. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1978.

Ibn Ezra, Abraham. "Alternate Commentary on Genesis" (Hebrew). In *Torat Ḥayyim – Sefer Bereshit*, ed. M. L. Katzenelbogen. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986.

_____. *Abraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)*. Vol. 1. Translated by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver. New York: Menorah Publishing Company, 1988.

_____. *Perush Rabbenu Avaraham Ibn Ezra*. Ed. Asher Weiser. In *Torat Ḥayyim – Sefer Bereshit*, ed. M. L. Katzenelbogen. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986.

Ibn Janaḥ, Jonah. *Sefer ha-Rikmah*. Translated by Judah ibn Tibbon. Jerusalem: Akademiah le-Leshon ha-Ivrit, 1964.

_____. *Sepher Haschoraschim*. Ed. A. Berliner. Berlin: Zvi Hirsch Itzkowski, 1896. Reprint, 1969.

Ibn Saruq, Menaḥem ben Jacob. *Maḥberet Menaḥem*. London: Hevrat Me'orere Yeshanim, 1854. Repr. Jerusalem, 1967.

Idel, Moshe. "Midrashic versus Other Forms of Jewish Hermeneutics: Some Comparative Reflections." In *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, ed. Michael Fishbane, 45-58. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Isaac bar Judah Halevi. *Sefer Paneah Raza: With Notes from Isaac bar Shimshon Katz*. Jerusalem: Machon Torat ha-Rishonim, 1998.

Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen. "Treatise on the Left Emanation." In *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. and intro. Joseph Dan. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Translated by Ronald C. Kiener. Preface by Moshe Idel. New York: Paulist Press, 1986.

Isaac, E. "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch." In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. J. H. Charlesworth. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985.

Johnson, M. D. "Life of Adam and Eve." In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, 249-295. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985.

Joines, Karen Randolph. "The Serpent in Gen. 3." *Zeitschrift fur die Altestamentliche Wissenschaft* 87 (1975): 1-11.

Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor. *Peirushei Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor al ha-Torah* (Hebrew). Edited byYehoshafat Nevo. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994.

Josephus, Flavius. *Judean Antiquities 1-4*. Trans. and commentary L. H. Feldman. In *Flavius Josephus, Translation and Commentary*, ed. S. Mason. Vol. 3. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Judah ben Samuel he-Ḥasid. *Peirushei ha-Torah le-Rav Yehudah he-Ḥasid*. Edited by Isaak S. Lange. Jerusalem: Keren Wertzweiler, 1975.

Kamin, Sara. *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction Between* Peshat *and* Derash (Hebrew). Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1986.

Kapach, Joseph, ed. and trans. *Targum ha-Tafsir shel Rav Saadiah Gaon*. In *Torat Ḥayyim – Sefer Bereshit*, ed. M. L. Katzenelbogen. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986.

Kasher, Menaḥem M. *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation: A Millenial Anthology*. Vol. 1. Translated and edited by Harry Freedman. New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1953.

Kassis, Hanna E. *A Concordance of the Qur'an*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1983.

Kautzsch, E., ed. *Gesenius's Hebrew Grammar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.

Kimḥi, David. "Kimhi's Allegorical Commentary on Genesis," (Hebrew). In *The Commentary of David Kimhi on Isaiah*, edited by Louis Finkelstein, part 1. Columbia University Oriental Studies xix. Columbia University Press, 1926. Reprint, New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966.

_____. *Perush Rabenu David Kimḥi*. Edited by M. L. Katzenelbogen. In *Torat Ḥayyim – Bereshit*, ed. M. L. Katzenelbogen. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986.

Klein, Michael. *Geniza Manuscripts of Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*. 2 vols. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press; Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1986.

_____. *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch: According to Their Extant Sources*. Analecta Biblica 76. Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980.

Koehler, Ludwig and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Revised by Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm. Study edition. Translated and edited by M. E. J. Richardson. 2 volumes. Leiden: Brill, 2001.

Kohen, Shear-Yashuv, Betsalel Mayani, Shmuel Yaacobovits, and Chaim Shalom Segal, eds. *The Pentateuch with Rashi Hashalem* (Hebrew). Vol. 1. Jerusalem: Ariel United Israel Institutes, 1988.

Korach, Ezra, ed. *Sefer ha-Remazim le-Rabbenu Yoel al ha-Torah*. Part 1. Bnei Brak: Julius Klugmann & Sons, 2001.

Kugel, James L. *The Bible As It Was*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

_____. *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it was at the Start of the Common Era*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Kvam, Kirsten E., Linda S. Schearing and Valerie H. Ziegler, eds. *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readings on Genesis and Gender*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Levenson, Jon D. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988.

Levison, John R. *Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism: From Sirach to 2 Baruch*. Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 1. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988.

Levenstein, Mordechai Zvi ha-Levi. *Sefer Nefesh ha-Ger*. 1906. Reprint, Jerusalem: Makor Publishing, 1972.

Levy, B. Barry. *Targum Neophyti 1: A Textual Study*. Vol. 1. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986.

Lieberman, Saul, ed. *The Tosefta: The Order of Nashim – Sotah Gittin Kiddushin* (Hebrew). New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1973.

_____., ed. *Tosefta Ke-Fshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta* (Hebrew). Part 8, Order Nashim. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1973.

Maher, Michael, trans. and intro. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*. The Aramaic Bible, vol. 1B. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992.

Maimonides, Abraham ben Moses. *Perush Rabbeinu Avraham ben ha-Rambam z"l al Bereshit ve-Shemot*. Translated by Ephraim Yehudah Weisenberg. London: S. D. Sassoon, 1958.

Maimonides, Moses. *Le Guide des Egares* (French). Translated and edited by S. Munk. Paris: G. – P. Maisonneuve & Laros, 1970.

_____. *Sefer Moreh Nevuhim le-ha-Rav Rabbeinu Mosheh ben Maimon ha-Sefaradi z"l...im Arba'ah Peirushim: Efodi, Shem Tov, Kreskas, Abrabanel*. Translated by Samuel ibn Tibbon. Jerusalem: S. Monzon, 1950.

_____. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. 2 vols. Translated and edited by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.

Matt, Daniel Chanan, trans. and ed. *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Preface by Arthur Green. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983.

_____. *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

McNamara, Martin, trans. and ed. *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis*. The Aramaic Bible, vol. 1A. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992.

Melammed, E. Z. *Bible Commentators* (Hebrew). Vol. 1. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1975.

Metzger, B., and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Naḥmanides, Moses. "*Torat ha-Adam (Kolel Sha'ar ha-Gemul)*." In *Kitvei Rabbenu Moshe ben Naḥman* (Hebrew), ed. Charles B. Chavel, vol. 2. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1984.

_____. *Commentary on the Torah*. Translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel. New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971-76.

_____. *Perushe ha-Torah*. 2 vols. Ed. Charles B. Chavel. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1959-60.

_____. *Ramban (Nachmanides): Writings and Discourses*. Vol. 2. Translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel. New York: Shilo Publishing House, Inc., 1978.

Neḥunia ben ha-Kana. *The Bahir (illumination)*. Translated by Aryeh Kaplan. York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1979. Reprint, 1990.

Neusner, Jacob. *Judaism's Story of Creation: Scripture, Halakhah, Aggadah*. The Brill Reference Library of Ancient Judaism. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Orlian, J. "*Sefer haGan*: Text and Analysis of the Biblical Commentary." Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1973.

Otzen, Benedikt, Hans Gottlieb and Knud Jeppesen. *Myths in the Old Testament*. Translated by Frederick Cryer. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1980.

Pagels, Elaine. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. New York: Random House, 1988.

_____. *The Origin of Satan*. New York: Random House, 1995.

_____. "The Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy': A Preliminary Sketch." *Harvard Theological Review* 84:2 (1991): 105-28.

Paltiel, Chaim. *Perushei ha-Torah le-Rav Chaim Paltiel*. Edited by Isaak S. Lange. Jerusalem: Keren Wertzweiler, 1981.

Pines, Shlomo. "*Divrei ha-Ramban al Adam ha-Rishon be-Gan Eden le-Or Peirushim Aḥerim al Bereishit b' ve-g'*" (Hebrew). In *Galut Aḥar Golah: Meḥkarim be-Toldot Am Israel Mugashim le-Profesor Ḥayyim Beinart*, eds. Aharon Mirsky et al., 159-164. Jerusalem: Machon Ben-Zvi le-Ḥeker Kehilot Israel be-Mizraḥ, 1988.

Propp, J. H. "The Skin of Moses' Face – Transfigured or Disfigured." *CBQ* 49 (1987): 375-386.

Rippin, A. "Shaytān." In *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition.

Roitman, Adolfo D. "'Crawl Upon Your Belly' (Gen. 3:14) – The Physical Aspect of the Serpent in Early Jewish Exegesis" (Hebrew). *Tarbiz* 64, 2 (1995): 157-182.

Rubinkiewicz, R. "Apocalypse of Abraham." In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, 681-705. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985.

Rudolph, Kurt. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. Translated and edited by Robert McLachlan Wilson. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987.

Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Saadiah ben Josef Gaon. *Saadya's Commentary on Genesis* (Hebrew). Edited and translated by Moshe Zucker. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1984.

Saebo, Magne, ed. *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*. Vol. 1. Parts 1 and 2: *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996, 2000.

Saldarini, Anthony J., trans. *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan (Abot de Rabbi Nathan Version B)*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975.

Samuel ben Ḥofni. *The Biblical Commentary of Rav Samuel ben Hofni Gaon* (Hebrew). Edited by Aharon Greenbaum. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1978.

Samuel ben Meir. *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir's Commentary on Genesis*. Translated by Martin I. Lockshin. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.

Sarna, Nahum. "Abraham Ibn Ezra as an Exegete." In *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*, 139-159. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000.

_____. "Hebrew and Bible Studies in Medieval Spain." In *The Sephardi Heritage, Vol.* 1, ed. R. D. Barnett. Ilford, England: Vallentine, Mitchell & Company, 1971. Reprint, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*, 81-125. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000.

_____. "Rashi the Commentator." In *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*, 127-137. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000.

_____. "The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in Jewish Tradition." In *Understanding Scripture*, eds. C. Thoma and M. Wyschograd. Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987. Reprint, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*, 67-79. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000.

Schechter, Solomon, ed. *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan*. New York; Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1979.

Schechterman, Devorah. "*Sugiyat ha-Ḥet ha-Kadmon ve-ha-Parshanut le-Divrei ha-Rambam be-Hagut ha-Yehudit be-Me'ot ha-Shelosh-esreh ve-ha-Arba-esreh*" (Hebrew). *Daat* 20 (1988): 65-90.

Schiffman, Lawrence H. *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1991.

Scholem, Gershom. *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: Schoken Books, 1965.

_____. *Gershom Scholem's Annotated Zohar (Jozefow 1873)*. Vols. 1, 2, 4. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1992.

_____. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken, 1941.

Shinan, Avigdor. "*Ḥava ve-Ḥiviya; al ha-Ishah ve-ha-Naḥash be-Pardes ha-Agadah*" (Hebrew). *Migvan De ʿot ve-Hashkafot be-Tarbut Yisrael* 8 (1998): 49-65.

_____. *The Aggadah in the Aramaic Targums to the Pentateuch* (Hebrew). Jerusalem: Makor Publishing, Ltd., 1979.

Siegert, Folker. "Early Jewish Interpretation in a Hellenistic Style." In *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 1/1, ed. Magne Saebo. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996.

Simon, Maurice. *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Baba Batra*. New Edition. London; Jerusalem; New York: The Soncino Press, 1976.

Sklare, David E. *Samuel ben Hophni and his Cultural World: Text and Studies*. Leiden; New York: E. J. Brill, 1996.

Solomon ben Isaac. *The Pentateuch with Rashi Hashalem*. Hamishah Humshei Torah Ariel. Vol. 1. Jerusalem: Ariel United Israel Institutes, 1988.

_____. *Perush Rabbenu Shelomoh Yitshaki*. Edited by C. B. Chavel. In *Torat Ḥayyim – Bereshit*, ed. M. L. Katzenelbogen. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986.

_____. *Perush Rashi al ha-Torah: Al Pi Defus Rishon, k[etav] y[ad] Oxford u-Mahadurat Berliner*. Edited by Charles B. Chavel. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1982.

Sperber, Alexander, ed. *The Bible in Aramaic Based on Old Manuscripts and Printed Texts*. Vol. 1: The Pentateuch. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959.

Sperling, Harry and Maurice Simon. *The Zohar*. Vol. 1. Introduction by J. Abelson. London; Jerusalem; New York: The Soncino Press, 1934. Reprint, 1970.

Spiegel, Shalom. "Noah, Daniel, and Job, Touching on Canaanite Relics in the Legends of the Jews." In *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, 305-55. New York: American Academay of Jewish Research, 1945. Reprint, *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Frederich E. Greenspahn. New York; London: New York University Press, 1991.

Stone, Michael E. *A History of the Literature of Adam and Eve*. Early Judaism and Its Literature 3. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992.

_____. *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Adam and Eve*. Leiden: Brill, 1996.

Strack, H. L. and G. Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*. Translated by Markus Bockmuehl. Foreword by Jacob Neusner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

Tabick, Jacqueline. "The Snake in the Grass: The Problems of Interpreting a Symbol." *Religion* 16,2 (1986): 155-167.

Talmage, Frank Ephraim. *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Tanakh: A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. Philadelphia; Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

Theodor, J. and C. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary*. Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965.

Tishby, Isaiah and Fischel Lachover, trans. and eds. *Mishnat Ha-Zohar: Gufei Ma'amarei ha-Zohar* (The Wisdom of the Zohar: Texts from the Book of Splendour), 3d ed. Vol. 1. Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1971.

_____. *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*. Vol. 2, 3. Trans. David Goldstein. London; Washington, DC: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1991.

Torn, Karel van der, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995.

Van Gemeren, Willem A., ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.

Verthaimer, Shelomoh Aharon, ed. *Kohelet Shelomoh (Sefer Kehilat Shelomoh: bo nikhelu ve-ne'esfu she'elot u-teshuvot ha-geonim ha-kadmonim . . .)*. Jerusalem: Avraham Moshe Luntz, 1899.

Walfish, Avraham. Review of *In the Rabbis' Garden*, by Gerald J. Blidstein. *Tradition* 34, 2 (Summer 2000): 78-89.

Walfish, Barry Dov. *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Weitzman, M. P. *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction*. University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 56. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Wensinck, A. J. and L. Gardet. "Iblīs." In *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition.

Westermann, Claus. *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary*. Translated by John J. Scullion. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.

Wevers, J. W. *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993.

Williams, A. J. "The Relationship of Genesis 3:20 to the Serpent." *Zeitschrift fur die Altestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89, 3 (1977): 357-374.

Williams, Michael Allen. *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling A Dubious Category*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Wintermute, O. S. "Jubilees.: In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. J. H. Charlesworth. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985.

Wolfson, Elliot R. "Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes." In *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, 155-203. Ed. Michael Fishbane. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Zakovitz, Yair. "*Neḥashim, Mikdashim, Leḥashim ve-Nashim.*" *Migvan De ʿot ve-Hashkafot be-Tarbut Yisrael* 8 (1998): 25-37.

Zemach, Adi. "*Naḥash, Adam ve-Ḥava, Ka'in ve-Hevel.*" *Migvan De ʿot ve-Hashkafot be-Tarbut Yisrael* 8 (1998): 39-48.

Zions, Aba. "'*Paneach Raza'* by Isaac ben Juda Halevi." Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1974.