When Did the Serpent Become a Deceptive Satan? A Theological Reconsideration of Adam's Deceptive Narrative in Genesis 3:1-6

Philemon Ibrahim

ABSTRACT

In Christian theological discourse, Genesis 3 is frequently interpreted as the foundational narrative of human transgression, commonly identified as the fall. Many scholars approach this chapter through the lens of original sin, emphasizing its implications for humanity's relational dynamic with the divine. However, this perspective can inadvertently obscure the literary and historical context of the text itself. Systematic theologians may derive value from associating the narrative of the fall with overarching theological themes; nonetheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that the texts of the Old Testament, including Genesis, ought to be understood within their own contextual frameworks. Furthermore, the conceptualization of "ha-satan" evolving into the figure of Satan represents a later interpretative framework that diverges from the original context of Genesis 3. Analyzing the text through a literary-historical lens elucidates that the serpent is characterized as a cunning agent, positioned as an antagonist in a pivotal moment of decision-making for Eve. This serpent engages her in a theological discourse that ultimately precipitates the downfall of both Adam and Eve. However, it is essential to recognize that this figure does not embody Satan in the manner that later theological traditions would come to delineate. Rather, the serpent in Genesis manifests as a more nuanced entity, symbolizing the allure of deception and the temptation toward self-determination. The narrative progresses

beyond a simplistic moral injunction regarding obedience; it invites a deeper exploration of human agency and the resultant consequences of choice. Consequently, while engaging with Genesis 3, it is crucial to appreciate its literary context and the role of the serpent without imposing later theological constructs that may obfuscate its original intent.

INTRODUCTION

The Bible should be conceptualized not merely as a singular text but as a multifaceted library, encompassing a diverse compendium of books authored within various historical contexts, theological frameworks, and philosophical paradigms, all unified under the overarching theme of one God. Consequently, biblical scholars approach the interpretation of Scripture through diverse theological and philosophical perspectives, leading to the articulation of various methodologies for studying Genesis 3, including figurative, literal, and historical approaches. Each of these methodologies has been employed by scholars to critically analyze the narrative surrounding the serpent in this pivotal chapter. The account of the serpent and Eve constitutes a significant component of the theological primeval history,[321] which commences with the creation narrative and culminates in the dispersal at Babel, thereby encapsulating what is formally referred to as the Urgeschichte (Genesis 1:1–11:9).[322]

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[321] Scholars argue that Genesis 1-11 presents a narrative encompassing the history of the entire world that transcends mere scientific or imaginative discourse, spanning a period of thousands of years. This section of Scripture is referred to as "primeval history," and it serves to contextualize the intended message for the people of God, revealing their own history within the scope of a broader, cosmic history. This perspective is articulated by Thomas L. Brodie in his work, "Genesis as Dialogue" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 143.

[322] Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Literary Form of Genesis 1–11,” in New Perspectives on the Old Testament (ed. J. Barton Payne; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1970), 48–65 and you can read further by looking at the works of these scholars: Michael A. Fishbane, Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 38–9; T.C. Vriezen and A.S. van der Woude, Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish

Nevertheless, there exists a compelling need for both disorientation and reorientation regarding the relationship between the serpent and Satan in Genesis 3.[323] Contemporary scholars often neglect the serpent's role, opting instead to emphasize the identity of Satan as the deceiver of Adam and Eve. An investigation into this theological disorientation and reorientation is essential, as it may challenge and confront existing beliefs and frameworks of understanding. Human proclivity to ascribe significance to elements lacking explicit clarity is evident in interpretations of the biblical text. For instance, the Hebrew term "peri" does not specifically denote an apple; rather, it signifies any fruit hanging from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Despite this, certain scholars advocate for the identification of this fruit as an apple, perhaps influenced by culinary preferences, thereby constraining the interpretive possibilities of the text. Consequently, within the purview of Genesis 3, "peri" could validly refer to any fruit, rather than being strictly limited to an apple. This raises critical questions regarding the interpretation of the serpent in Genesis 3: How is this craftiness imbued creature to be understood? Is the serpent to be equated with Satan, or is there substantial biblical evidence to support the identification of the Genesis serpent as the Satan recognized within contemporary Christian tradition? Furthermore, what if Satan merely exploited the serpent's cunning to deceive Eve?[324] While myriad responses to

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Literature (trans. Brian Doyle; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 183–98. For other opinions on the arrangement of the primeval history, see Gerhard von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary (trans. John H. Marks; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 22–3; Rolf Rendtorff, “Genesis 8:21 und die Urgeschichte des Jahwisten,” Kerygma and Dogma 7 (1961): 69–78.

[323] According to Brueggmann, “The serpent is a device to introduce the new agenda.” He asserts

that “whatever the serpent meant in earlier versions of the story, in the present narrative it has no

independent significance. It is a technique to move the plot of the story.” Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 47.

[324] The idea that Satan took advantage of the craftiness of the serpent to deceive Eve highlights a profound theme in the biblical narrative about the nature of temptation and human fallibility. The serpent, often seen

these inquiries may exist, this paper serves as a clarion call to reevaluate our convictions. Recent scholarship increasingly posits that the figure of Satan is conspicuously absent from Genesis 3 and, indeed, from the entirety of the Old Testament corpus. The understanding of Satan prevalent in later theological constructs does not align with the original narrative intent articulated by the early authors. These narrators appeared to conceive of a more anthropomorphized and angelic delineation of Satan, distinct from the divinized and demonic figure that emerged in subsequent theological traditions. Thus, discussions surrounding the existence of Satan in the context of Genesis 3 become problematic; a divinized, demonic Satan does not exist within the worldview or relationship with God as understood by the original narrators. Accepting the scholarly consensus that the serpent should not be construed as Satan presents a formidable challenge. Nonetheless, the imposition of erroneous concepts onto nuanced theological issues poses a risk of distorting broader theological tenets. Among the principal characters in Genesis 3—God, Adam, Eve, and the serpent—the latter has received considerable scholarly scrutiny and frequent misinterpretation. The serpent is not only the first

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as a manifestation of evil or a tool of Satan, represents the seductive nature of sin. In this context, it's essential to recognize that while Eve was deceived, the responsibility for her actions ultimately lies with her choices. This dynamic mirrors our contemporary tendency to deflect blame for our misdeeds onto external forces, as if saying, "The devil made me do it." Such justifications reveal an important aspect of human nature: the struggle between our desires and the moral standards we are called to uphold. The biblical story doesn't just recount the events of creation and temptation; it also serves as a reflection on the complexity of human choice and accountability. The narrative suggests that while external influences, like the serpent's deceit, can play a role in leading us astray, we still possess the agency to choose between right and wrong. This dilemma has been a recurring theme throughout history, prompting discussions about free will, responsibility, and the various ways we seek to rationalize our actions. Ultimately, the tale of Eve also serves as a cautionary reminder that we must remain vigilant against temptation, recognizing the subtle ways it can infiltrate our thoughts and decisions. Just as Eve was confronted with a choice, we too face daily decisions that reflect our values and integrity, reminding us that we are accountable for our actions, regardless of the influences around us.

creature introduced in this narrative but also the initial entity to engage in the interpretation of God's word to humanity. Thus, the serpent signifies the inception of interpretative inquiries, representing the first instance of eisegesis rather than exegesis. When the nature of the serpent is misinterpreted, scholars inadvertently align themselves with its eisegetical tendencies, as it sought to entice Eve with the promise of divine transformation. To avoid such eisegesis or misinterpretation of God's word, it is imperative to correctly apprehend the serpent's nature as it is articulated in Scripture. A failure to adequately define this serpent may perpetuate the conundrum surrounding its interpretation and, consequently, lead to misinterpretations of its nature and identity in contemporary theological discourse.

THE DISORIENTATION AND REORIENTATION OF *THE SATAN* AND *SATAN* IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The perception of Satan as a distinct and malevolent entity in the Old Testament requires critical analysis, especially regarding whether ancient Israelites held a conception of Satan consistent with contemporary interpretations. It is plausible to assert that the Old Testament does not support the existence of Satan in the manner that later theological frameworks propose. Despite the numerous adversities and catastrophes experienced by the people of Israel, there is a notable absence of references to a devil or Satan as a primary causative agent. Instead, the sources of their tribulations appear to stem primarily from divine providence and human adversaries, as observed in texts such as Lamentations, Jeremiah, Job, and the Psalms. The Hebrew term "satan" often denotes human adversaries, as illustrated in passages including 1 Samuel 19:22, 1 Kings 5:4, 11:14, 23, 25, and Psalms 109:6. Additionally, the term can refer to an angel of Yahweh engaged in opposition to a false prophet, as seen in Numbers 22:22-

32.[325] The texts of Zechariah 3:1-2 and Job 1-2 introduce "the Satan" (or the Adversary),[326] but these references do not align with the later concept of Satan as the arch-enemy of God.[327] Rather, they depict an earlier form of the figure. In the context of Job, "the Satan" operates as one of the sons of God within the divine assembly, carrying out a role that is coherent with God's overall authority. Therefore, the figure designated as "ha-Satan" in this context cannot simply be equated with later portrayals of Satan as a rebellious antagonist. Moreover, the term "satan"[328] appears without the definite article in only one instance within the Hebrew Bible: 1 Chronicles 21:1. Scholars have posited that the Chronicler intentionally reinterpreted this narrative to present an unblemished relationship between God and David. In this passage, it is noted that "a satan stood up against Israel and provoked David to number the people" (1 Chronicles 21:6-7). This modification reflects significant theological shifts in late postexilic Judaism, wherein there was an emerging tendency to externalize evil from God, coinciding with the personification of evil in the figure of a satan, influenced by the socio-religious and sociopolitical contexts of the time.[329] The Chronicler's alteration—changing the instigation for the census from "Yahweh's wrath against Israel" in 2 Samuel 24:1 to "Satan stood up against Israel"—signifies a substantial theological realignment, emphasizing that evil

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[325] Heiser, says, "The Hebrew word *śāṭān*, commonly transformed into the personal name "Satan," is actually no such thing: this Hebrew term is not a proper personal noun and therefore does not point to the specific figure we know from the New Testament as Satan."Heiser, Demons, 62.

[326] "There is no hint that this task or the obedience of the *śāṭān* is to be wicked or out of place at a meeting of the divine council. Report he does, but it is at that point the *śāṭān* challenges God's assessment of Job (and, therefore, either God's omniscience or his truthfulness), leading to the events of the rest of the book. God's character must be validated." Peggy Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: śāṭān in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). In fact, the *nāḥāš* of Genesis 3 is never called *śāṭān* anywhere in the Hebrew Bible.

[327]Heiser,, *Demons*, 62.

[328] Mark S Smith, *The Genesis of Good and Evil: The Fall(out) and Original Sin in the Bible* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2019), 27.

[329] Jonker, "'Satan Made Me Do It!" 357.

could no longer be attributed directly to God. This adjustment adeptly addresses the theological quandary of 2 Samuel 24, wherein Yahweh commands the census yet subsequently punishes David for its execution.[330] Thus, 1 Chronicles 21:1 stands as the first and only instance in the Hebrew Bible where Satan is personified as a distinct entity.[331] This portrayal within Genesis 3 contributes to a broader narrative discourse surrounding temptation and the nature of evil. The depiction of the serpent in the Garden of Eden frequently aligns with subsequent narratives of temptation in the New Testament, especially the portrayal of the tempter during Jesus' wilderness experience (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13).[332] While there is discourse suggesting that the serpent's dialogue in Genesis 3 serves as a precursor to the New Testament understanding of temptation, it remains crucial to underscore that the Old Testament does not present an understanding of Satan as an adversarial force opposing God. In conclusion, it is essential for systematic theologians and contemporary scholars to acknowledge that the role attributed to the term "satan" within Old Testament literature does not equate to a distinct entity in opposition to God. The conception of the devil as an adversarial figure is largely absent from the understanding of the authors of the Old Testament. As such, it appears that the theological understanding of evil and its eventual personification underwent significant evolution, reflecting a maturation of thought within the Israelite community over time.

SOME CONSIDERABLE TEXTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF SATAN

What about Isaiah 14?

The Christian tradition frequently misinterprets the narrative surrounding Satan, particularly in its application of Isaiah 14

[330] Jonker, "'Satan Made Me Do It!" 357.

[331] Jonker, "'Satan Made Me Do It!" 357.

[332] Smith, *The Genesis of Good and Evil*, 28

as a possible backstory that defines his obstinacy and malevolence. This passage presents considerable interpretative challenges. While it is commonplace for Christians to engage with Isaiah 14 through the prism of a divinized Satan or fallen angel, it is essential to recognize that the Old Testament authors did not possess the conceptual framework of Satan as understood in a Greco-Roman context. In contemporary readings, the term "Lucifer" is often equated with the devil, leading many interpreters to bypass critical contextual analysis. The Hebrew term "helel," typically rendered as "Lucifer" (meaning "light-bringer" or "morning star"), specifically pertains to the king of Babylon within Isaiah 14. The phrase "Helel ben shachar" translates to "son of the morning" or "morning star." The evolution of "helel" into "Lucifer" occurred in the Latin Vulgate, which significantly contributed to the prevailing misinterpretation. Isaiah 14:13 articulates an earthly monarch's ambition to ascend to heaven, reflecting the Babylonian king's aspiration to usurp divine authority. This aspiration culminates in his being cast down to "Sheol," a term that denotes the grave rather than a metaphysical hell. Verse 11 further illustrates the king's demotion by stating, "your pomp has brought you down to Sheol," and employs imagery of degradation akin to that assigned to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. Thus, this passage primarily critiques the hubris and obstinacy of the Babylonian king, who posed a significant threat to Judah, rather than serving as a commentary on Satan. Early church fathers, such as Tertullian and Origen, were among the first to assert that "Lucifer" referred to Satan; however, the historical context of Isaiah 14 centers around the specific fate of the Babylonian king.[333] It is also pertinent to note that, while the text refers to the king of Babylon, there may be a historical correlation with Sennacherib, the Assyrian king who was overthrown by Babylon circa 689 BC. Some scholars might find the designation of "king of Babylon" to be perplexing; however, this title was occasionally conferred upon Assyrian rulers as a

[333] Smith, The Genesis of Good and Evil, 28

mark of respect during Babylonian New Year celebrations, acknowledging the tribute these kings rendered to the Babylonian deity Marduk. In summation, a proper exegesis of Isaiah 14 necessitates a focus on its historical and literary context, rather than projecting retrospective interpretations of Satan onto the text.

What About Ezekiel?

The figure of Satan is conspicuously absent from the passage under examination; instead, the primary emphasis lies on the "prince of Tyre" (Ezekiel 28:1). Both Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel depict a human sovereign who aspires to dominion comparable to the divine, to the extent of perceiving himself as a god (Ezekiel 28:2). The expulsion language employed in these texts serves to underscore Adam's removal from the Garden of God and his resultant loss of immortality, rather than alluding to the serpent's descent to earth or the underworld (Isaiah 14:11, 15; Ezekiel 28:16).[334] The argument presents an interpretation that considers Adam as analogous to the king of the garden, consistent with the portrayal of ancient Near Eastern monarchs, who were often deemed divine owing to their status as God's representatives on earth. In this regard, the monarch of Tyre, and by analogy Adam, transgresses his role and seeks to govern as a deity (Isaiah 14:13–14) within the divine council.[335] Diverse interpretative frameworks exist for analyzing these passages, including Adam-centric interpretations and those that align the text with a devil-centric reading in relation to the king of Tyre. The text makes assertions regarding the king's "perfection in beauty" (Ezekiel 27:3-4, 11), his fullness of wisdom (Ezekiel 28:3-4), and his prideful claim to divinity (Ezekiel 28:6), while simultaneously affirming his humanity (Ezekiel 28:8-10) within the "garden of God" (Ezekiel 28:13).[336]

[334] Heiser, **Demons**, 63-64.

[335] Heiser, Demons, 64.

[336] The ancient near easterners often considered their kings as gods. There, it is not a surprise thing the king of Tyre is thinking that he is a god. To understand why and how these ane kings are viewed as gods, see john

The mere presence in the garden does not imply that this ruler is Satan, as it is not only Satan who resided in the Garden of Eden; Adam and Eve were likewise inhabitants of this divine space. Moreover, the characterization of the figure in question as a cherub who is "perfect in beauty" does not correlate with the biblical serpent or the figure of Satan. It is imperative to acknowledge that Ezekiel employs elaborate imagery throughout his prophetic writings; for example, he metaphorically depicts Pharaoh as a tree in Eden (Ezekiel 31:1-18) and as a sea monster (Ezekiel 29:3-5). Consequently, Ezekiel is addressing the arrogance of a human ruler rather than delineating the nature of Satan. The text also underscores that the prince of Tyre is, indeed, a man—a mortal—destined to meet a gruesome end, rather than facing the eternal torment associated with hellfire (Ezekiel 28:8-10). If Satan is conceptualized as an angelic being, this characterization does not align with the passage's portrayal, which does not reference an immortal entity. Rather, this narrative reflects Ezekiel's prophetic vision—a pronouncement of divine judgment anticipated through Nebuchadnezzar, aimed at Israel's adversaries, among whom the king of Tyre is a primary antagonist. Furthermore, it appears that the understanding of Satan evolved within the Israelite tradition, resulting in a perception of Satan as a distinct, adversarial spiritual entity opposed to God and His divine will. This developmental trajectory suggests that the evolving theological perspective among the Israelites prompted reinterpretations of these ancient narratives, culminating in the characterization of Satan as an antagonistic spiritual being. By the third to second centuries, the notion of Satan as the proper name for the devil emerged, portraying him as a supernatural force opposing God, ultimately conflating with the identity of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. This transformation represents a pronounced

gray, "Canaanite Kingship in Theory and Practice," *Vetus Testamentum*" *2* (1952):193-200.

theological evolution concerning the conception of evil within the biblical tradition.

THE IDENTITY AND NATURE OF THE SERPENT IN GENESIS 3

In Genesis 3:1, the characterization of the serpent as "more crafty than any other beast of the field" has prompted various exegetical interpretations, particularly concerning the translation of the Hebrew term "aroum." While traditionally rendered as "crafty" or "cunning," some scholars contend that a more precise translation would convey "naked," highlighting a characteristic shared between the serpent and humanity in their primordial state.[337] The term "aroum" is etymologically linked to the dual form "aroummim," which describes Adam and Eve's nakedness in Genesis 2:25. The serpent's nakedness may symbolize a form of vulnerability or exposure, thereby distinguishing it from other beasts adorned with fur or protective coverings. This correlation suggests a profound connection between the serpent and the human figures, indicating an inherent relationship between their states of being. Additionally, the Hebrew term "nakhash," typically translated as "serpent," used LXX which is derived from a root that denotes brightness or shining.[338] This characteristic has historically led some translators and scholars to perceive the serpent as more than a mere animal; rather, they posit it may represent a spiritual being of higher significance—an interpretation that finds resonance with the figure of Lucifer or Satan. However, such perspectives can engender contentious debate, as they risk bordering on eisegesis—the imposition of foreign meanings onto the text that are not explicitly present in the original narrative. The Genesis account intimates that the serpent, while laden with symbolic meaning, remains

[337] Luc Anckaert & , Roger Burggraeve, "From Crisis To Meaning: Creativity In The Biblical Narrative Of Eve And The Inversion By F. Kafka", Creativity studies, Vol. 11(2018): 264.

[338] Ethelbert William Bullinger, *The Companion Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 24.

fundamentally an ordinary creature within the created order. Its "craftiness" or intelligence should thus be contextualized within the narrative framework: the serpent employs its distinctive attributes, including its form and cunning nature, to engage with humanity and ultimately lead them toward disobedience.

The serpent has long presented as an enigmatic figure within Christian theology and scholarly analysis, with interpretations emerging from postexilic commentators as well as modern theologians that align this ancient serpent with contemporary conceptions of Satan.[339] Gordon Wenham observes that early parts of the Old Testament exhibit no signs of a personal devil, suggesting that the identification of the serpent as Satan is a relatively recent theological evolution.[340] Another scholar corroborates this notion, asserting, "even with the latest dating of the J-source (seventh century BCE), there is no evidence of interpreting the serpent as Satan prior to the second century CE."[341] Furthering this argument, John Day challenges the perception of equating the serpent with Satan within the Yahwist (J) source,[342] contending that the serpent is not

[339] The rendering of serpent as satan is an editorial work of the later biblical narrators. John Collins postulates that "(The role of Satan in the tempting of the primeval couple is further developed in an extensive postbiblical literature on the life of Adam and Eve.) The figure of the devil, however, is a latecomer on the biblical scene. When Satan appears in the Hebrew Bible (in the book of Job and again in Chronicles), he is not yet quite "the devil"—in Job he appears among "the sons of God" in the heavenly court. Neither should the serpent in Genesis be interpreted as the devil.....The snake articulates the voice of temptation, but it is not yet a mythological figure such as Satan later became." John j. Collins, *Introduction To The Hebrew Bible And Deutero-Canonical Books. Third Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,2018),74.

[340] Gordon Wenham, Genesis 1-15 (Waco,TX: word books, 1987),72.

[341] Martin Emmrich, "the temptation narrative of genesis", *The Evangelical Quarterly* 73 (2001):10.

[342] The Yahwist was introduced in the eighteenth century through the works of Henning Bernhard Witter (1711) and Jean Astruc (1753). Currently, the scholarly debate surrounding the Torah presents a paradoxical situation. On one hand, there is a growing number of scholars, particularly in Europe, who are moving away from the classical Documentary Hypothesis as a framework for understanding the

identified as the Devil in this narrative.[343] Instead, the equating of the serpent with Satan notably appears in apocryphal texts from the third and second centuries BCE,[344] signaling a significant interpretive shift that likely emerged during the Greco-Roman period.[345] This development has since become entrenched in Christian theological discourse, reflecting its wider acceptance within the tradition. Many scholars posit that the extraordinary cunning and intelligence attributed to the serpent preclude it from being merely an ordinary serpent; hence, it must be interpreted as representing a diabolical figure. This perspective invites the notion of an "incarnated devil," drawing parallels to the Christological understanding of the incarnation, a key tenet within Christian theology. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that the biblical text does not support the interpretation of a divine being possessing the serpent, as such a reading would constitute an unwarranted imposition on the text. The narrative explicitly indicates that it is the serpent itself that deceives Eve.[346] Genesis 3:1 designates the serpent as “one of Yahweh’s earthly creatures,” identified as a “beast of the field.” While it is recognized as the progenitor of contemporary serpents (cf. Gen 3:14-15), its status in the original pre-cursed state is characterized by an exceptional capacity for speech and a level of knowledge that surpasses that of ordinary animals,

composition of the Pentateuch. This trend includes skepticism about the existence of a distinct Yahwistic source or author (J). Notable works expressing these views include Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien's "Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations" (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), Richard Elliott Friedman's "The Bible with Sources Revealed" (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), Otto Kaiser's essay “The Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History” in "Text in Context: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Studies" (ed. A. D. H. Mayes; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Ernest Nicholson's "The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen" (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

[343] John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1-11* (LHBOTS 592; London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 35-37

[344] Day, *From Creation to Babel,* 35-37.

[345] Smith, *The Genesis of Good and Evil*, 28.

[346] Heiser, Demons, 266.

indicating attributes akin to a magical creature. This representation underscores that the serpent is not merely an ordinary animal; rather, it is endowed with intelligence that appears to exceed that of humanity. It represents the first instance within the Old Testament of an animal engaging in substantive intellectual and theological discourse with a human, preceding any similar encounter depicted by Balaam's talking donkey.[347] Within this narrative framework, the serpent acts as an agent capable of misinterpreting and eisegeting the divine words conveyed to humanity, thereby exemplifying its inherently cunning nature prior to the imposition of the curse. Ultimately, the interpretation of the serpent in Genesis 3 as a manifestation of Satan reflects a complex interplay between textual analysis and the evolution of theological understanding. This narrative not only elucidates the serpent's pivotal role in humanity's fall but also underscores broader implications regarding temptation and the nature of evil within the context of the biblical creation story. The historical trajectory of this interpretation continues to enhance the rich tapestry of theological discourse surrounding the complexities of moral responsibility and the human condition within the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The New Testament articulates a cohesive perspective regarding the figure of the serpent, directly associating it with Satan or the devil. Authors such as Paul and John do not distinguish between the ancient serpent, the dragon, and the adversarial figure of Satan, as evidenced in passages such as 2 Corinthians 11:2, 14 and Revelation 12:9, 14; 20:2. This lack of differentiation invites examination of the serpent within a broader theological framework that identifies it as a

[347] We may recall Balaam's donkey in Num 22:28-30 for the example of a talking animal in the Old Testament, with comparable supernatural awareness, a passage which has likewise been traditionally ascribed to the J source.

manifestation of evil.[348] This raises the inquiry: should the devil be regarded merely as a zoological construct? In texts such as 2 Corinthians 11:14 and Matthew 4:1–11, the characterization of the devil transcends a biological classification, emphasizing the more supernatural dimensions of this being. If one accepts the New Testament's assertion that Satan tempted Eve not solely in the guise of a serpent but as a serpent, one may be inclined to explore the relationship between zoology and demonology. This inquiry risks delving into a realm of biblical mythology, wherein the distinction between the natural and the supernatural becomes increasingly obscured. As one navigates these interpretations, it is imperative to approach them with scholarly rigor, considering the symbolic and metaphorical dimensions present within the texts. The serpent functions not merely as a narrative character; it embodies temptation, deception, and the overarching struggle between good and evil that permeates biblical discourse. Engaging with this duality can deepen our understanding of the serpent's role and the nature of temptation within the theological contexts of both the Old and New Testaments.

GOD'S COMMANDMENT: EVE AND SERPENT IN GENESIS 3

The narrative surrounding the interactions among God, Eve, and the serpent in the Genesis account presents a multifaceted exploration of interpretation and misinterpretation, which significantly influences the identities and roles of the characters involved. An initial observation concerns the discrepancy in the articulation of God's command as conveyed to Adam versus its subsequent representation by Eve in her discourse with the serpent. In Genesis 2:16-17, God's directive is clearly

[348] The translators of the nt, translated the phrase *ho ophis ho archaios* as "ancient serpent" (NIV, ESV, NET, CSB), the old serpent (KJV, DRA, ASV,NAU) or the primeval serpent. Most scholars prefer these translations but I hope you know that these translations do not give us room to ascribe this ancient serpent to the snake that talked to snake. Geerhardus Vos, biblical theology: old and new testaments (1948; reprint, Grand rapids: Eerdmans,1988),44.

articulated to Adam, allowing him to freely consume from any tree in the garden with the sole exception of one, the consumption of which would result in death. This command is issued in the singular form, underscoring a personal responsibility inherent in the divine instruction.

Conversely, when Eve responds to the serpent in Genesis 3:2-3, her interpretation introduces critical alterations. She shifts from the singular pronoun "you" to the plural "you," indicating a communal interpretation that deviates from the original divine directive. Furthermore, she appends an additional stipulation—prohibiting not only the act of eating but also the act of touching the tree—thus expanding the scope of God's command beyond its original parameters. This alteration raises pertinent questions regarding her comprehension and suggests possible underlying anxieties or reservations concerning the divine command. The role of the serpent in this interaction is equally significant and complex. Traditionally characterized as the initiator of temptation, the serpent's influence underscores a nuanced dynamic of deception. While the serpent introduces doubt, Eve's response reveals her own misunderstandings and complexities, thereby creating a scenario where both parties misinform one another. The serpent’s function as a deceiver is complicated by Eve’s misinterpretations, illustrating a reciprocal manipulation of the narrative. In examining Eve's motives, it is imperative to consider the contextual factors surrounding her engagement with the serpent. What influences might have prompted her to alter God's words, and what underlying fears or desires could be motivating her actions? Her inclusion of the prohibition against touching the tree may reflect a manifestation of anxiety regarding the potential repercussions or an assertion of agency in a conversation with a being perceived as lesser, despite its ability to speak. These discrepancies in communication invite a deeper contemplation of the implications inherent in the narrative. Such reflections challenge readers to consider the significance of interpretation and the complexities of relationships between humanity and

the divine.[349] Rather than delineating a simplistic portrayal of the serpent as the sole deceiver or Eve as merely the deceived, the discourse reveals a more intricate interaction wherein both parties contribute to a breakdown of understanding, ultimately leading to consequential outcomes. This theme of misinterpretation resonates throughout the text, highlighting the inherent fragility of human comprehension in the context of divine command.

[349] Several scholars propose that the temptations faced by Eve in the Genesis narrative can be understood through a three-fold lens that encapsulates the holistic nature of human desire: physical (nourishment), emotional (delight), and spiritual (wisdom). This perspective suggests that sin has the potential to infiltrate and corrupt every facet of an individual's being. For instance, Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham observe in *The Moody Bible Commentary* that these dimensions of temptation are significant in illustrating the comprehensive impact of sin on humanity (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014, 42). Further supporting this interpretation, Devin Hayward Dunn in his work, "Exiled from Eden: An Exegesis of Genesis 3," explores the complexities of these temptations and their implications for understanding human nature, emphasizing the multifaceted influences at play in the narrative (OT 6603: Hebrew Syntax and Exegetical Method, 2018, 11-14). Additionally, Michael A. Grisanti, in *The Book of Genesis*, elaborates on the intertwining of these desires, highlighting how they reflect the fundamental struggles inherent in the human condition (in *The Word and the World: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti, Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011, 172). This three-dimensional approach to temptation not only deepens our understanding of the text but also underscores the pervasive nature of sin, which seeks to exploit all aspects of human existence. The interplay of physical, emotional, and spiritual desires in Eve's experience serves as a cautionary tale regarding the vulnerabilities inherent in the human experience and the multifaceted nature of temptation.

Initial God's version **(2:16-17)**	Woman's version of God's version**(3:2-3)**
God commanded	God said
Freely eat from every tree	May eat
Tree of knowledge of good and evil	Eve's characterization of the tree as merely a "tree in the midst of the garden" effectively diminishes its distinctiveness and importance within the divine command. By reframing the tree in such a nondescript manner, she inadvertently strips it of its moral significance, thereby equating it with the other trees in the Garden of Eden. This linguistic choice is telling, as it reflects a tendency inherent in human nature to obscure the nature of evil when one is inclined toward it. By avoiding the specific description associated with the tree, Eve may be attempting to alleviate the weight of the command and mitigate the seriousness of the prohibition. In doing so, she inadvertently subverts the gravity of God's warning and places the tree on an equal footing with all other trees in the garden, diminishing the ethical implications of her potential choice to partake of its fruit. This act of recontextualizing the tree reveals a broader theme within the narrative regarding the human inclination to rationalize or downplay the significance of moral choices. By minimizing the distinct nature of the tree, Eve's words echo a pattern observed in human behavior, wherein individuals often shirk accountability or the gravity of their decisions by employing euphemistic language or by reframing their circumstances. Thus, the interaction underscores the complexities of temptation and the nuanced ways in which individuals grapple with moral command in the pursuit of personal desire.
You (singular)	we (plural)
Do not eat it	Do not eat or touch
surely die that day	lest you die

Eve's reinterpretation of God's command transcends mere recapitulation; it substantiates her underlying motives. This reinterpretative act signals her premeditated intent to disobey divine instruction, facilitated by her misinterpretation and

misappropriation of God's word. In this regard, the role of the serpent can be viewed as one that assists in the realization of Eve's intentions rather than instigating them. Reuven Kimelman, in his article *The Seduction of Eve and the Exegetical Politics of Gender* posits that "the snake functions to extend the direction of Eve's thinking rather than to instigate it."[350] This perspective serves as a foundational interpretation of the serpent's role within the narrative. Together, Eve and the serpent cultivate a climate of doubt regarding the veracity of God's command. Because God's directive to Adam regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil introduces a compelling discourse on the nature of truth and the implications of Eve's modification by adding the term "touch." The text does not provide an explicit rationale for her decision to alter God's command, yet this addition serves to illuminate the complexities inherent in the integrity of divine instructions and the potential for misinterpretation. In her interaction with the serpent, Eve appears to present a distortion of the original command, which could suggest that the alteration of truth may lead to greater confusion and misunderstanding. When the serpent counters Eve's assertion by stating, “You will not really die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened” (Genesis 3:4-5), this raises critical inquiries regarding the truthfulness of the serpent's claim. Notably, Eve's consumption of the fruit did not result in immediate physical death, prompting a reevaluation of the implications of God’s pronouncement regarding death. Scholarly interpretations often grapple with the question of the nature of death as referenced in this context. While many posit that death must be understood spiritually, defending the validity of God's command, an examination of the Hebrew verb “to die” (*muth*) reveals nuanced dimensions to its meaning. The phrase *muth*

[350] Reuven Kimelman, “The Seduction of Eve and the Exegetical Politics of Gender”, *Biblical Interpretation A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* (2018.): 6. For systematic and fundamental understanding of this perspective of the woman’s motive and the temptation of the snake, we have to look at the work of Nehama Leibowitz*, Studies in the Book of Genesis, [Hebrew]* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1969), 23-24.

tamuth translates as "you shall surely die," and the usage of the infinitive absolute underscores the severity of the action. This may indicate a more gradual process of dying rather than an instantaneous demise, suggesting a multifaceted understanding of death that encompasses both spiritual separation from the divine and eventual physical mortality. Moreover, the serpent's failure is evident in its omission of critical information regarding the repercussions of disobedience, particularly the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. While it is accurate to assert that Adam and Eve faced expulsion as a consequence of their actions, it is essential to note that their curses derive directly from their disobedience.[351]

CONCLUSION

The interpretation of the serpent in Genesis 3:1-6 as an embodiment of the devil constitutes a significant example of eisegesis. This reading leads to profound misunderstandings of the text, particularly given that the narrative presents the serpent as a mere creature that God subsequently curses, without any explicit assertion in the Old Testament that designates it as a symbol of evil or malevolent forces. Such an interpretation often arises from an anachronistic reading, where the text is evaluated through the lens of later theological developments, thereby obscuring its original contextual meaning. Scholarly consensus indicates that the conception of Satan, as understood in contemporary discourse, is largely a later development within religious thought. Early writers of the Old Testament did not frame a dualistic figure representing evil akin to the characterization found in later Christian interpretations. The evolution of the Satan figure is suggested to have been influenced significantly by the dualistic worldview emerging during the Achaemenid era, which subsequently permeated Jewish thought and culminated in Hellenistic and Roman understandings. Accordingly, it is unlikely that any

[351] Devin Hayward Dunn, "Exiled from Eden An Exegesis of Genesis 3", *OT 6603: Hebrew Syntax and Exegetical Method* (2018): 15.

credible scholar of the Old Testament would endorse the perspective that equates the serpent in Genesis 3 with Satan. Embracing such an interpretation not only misrepresents the text but also undermines the narrative's original intent. A more fruitful approach is to analyze the serpent within its immediate literary and cultural context, recognizing its role in the narrative without imposing later theological frameworks on the text.