

‘BE YOU A LYRE FOR ME’: IDENTITY OR MANIPULATION IN EDEN*

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The words of the title above, according to the Books of Adam and Eve, were spoken by Satan, not to Eve, but to the serpent. Playing on its ego, Satan convinces the serpent to provide a body and a voice for him. This story is reminiscent of the legend of the Blind Man and the Lame Man, an image for the soul and the body, in both Jewish and Christian transmission of the Apocryphon of Ezekiel and repeated in Rabbinic literature (Stone, Wright and Satran 2000, 9-19).

The Story of the Blind Man and the Lame Man is about the relationship of soul and body, spoken of as a ‘horse and rider’ (citing Exod 15:1; so Mekhilta Shirta [trans. Goldin 1971, 103]). Here, we are interested in a different horse and rider, the serpent and Satan, the two dubious characters found in the Garden. Or are they both there? The serpent certainly is, as any reader of Genesis knows. Is Satan there too? Not explicitly in the biblical versions in any case, and there is the crux of this essay.

We will look first at some Armenian Christian sources dealing with these two mischief-makers, and then consider the Rabbinic tradition. We do not seek derivation but comparison, and if we start from the Armenian sources, this will be evident. This is not a paper in Armenology, and we shall not make a great amount of technical detail explicit. Details of the various Armenian authors may readily be retrieved from R. Thomson’s *Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature* (1995). The Armenians were, to judge from the richness of their discussion of the topic, fascinated by this conundrum. But the Rabbinic sources are strikingly different and, somewhat surprisingly, the issue of Satan and the serpent is scarcely dealt with by them at all. That is more than intriguing.

The biblical story does not mention Satan as the agent of the protoplasts’ sin, but only the serpent, and nor do the earlier, pre-Rabbinic Jewish sources, excepting the Wisdom of Solomon and Life of Adam and Eve (if indeed it is a Jewish source). The only Rabbinic source to address the issue of Satan and the serpent is Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer of the late first millennium CE. The basic question that emerges from this is ‘why’? Did the role of Adam’s sin take on cosmic dimensions in the Christian sources because of its connection to the economy of salvation, which is not an issue in the Jewish material, and certainly not for the Rabbis? If so, then Satan’s role, even if already present in earlier material, would have taken on redoubled significance for Christians.

By the fifth century CE, at the inception of Armenian written culture, Armenian Christianity took Satan’s role in the fall for granted. So, how were Satan and the serpent

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related, where did Satan originate, and why did he deceive Adam and Eve according to this literature? Descriptions of Satan occur in many sources (Stone 2002, 17-21),¹ and it is beyond the limits of this paper to present even an overview of them. An example, however, of the way Satan and his host were perceived is the following.

A late medieval tale from 1428 CE on the origin of Satan and his hosts describes him as commander of the fallen angels and builder of Hell. The demons say that they were angels who fell since they were unwilling to glorify God, and that they were responsible for Adam's expulsion. This tale contains the chief elements of the narrative: prideful rebellion before creation and the fall; the honour given to Adam; the building of Hell;² the deception and expulsion of Adam; and the imprisonment in Hell of his soul and those of all the saints up to John the Baptist. This story, embedded in a magical text, is complete and coherent, in small compass.³

The serpent is characterized in various ways. The encyclopaedic theologian, Grigor (Gregory) of Tat'ew, in the fourteenth century, says that the serpent was the beginning of death. His forked tongue speaks in two ways, false and true (Grigor Tat'ewac'i 1993, 1:218-219). Moreover, evoking ancient associations, he says the serpent symbolizes deceptive, lascivious desire (Grigor Tat'ewac'i 1998b, 211). Such overall condemnations of the serpent are quite frequent. The serpent, snake and dragon have been objects of much research, and we shall not set it all forth here. Even the writing on the specific Edenic serpent is voluminous. Our interest is focused, however, not on the serpent itself, but on the ways in which the relationship between Satan and the serpent was depicted. Were they the same being, or two different beings and, if different, how related? This is what we have set out to investigate.

The Serpent and Satan

Early Armenian literature used diverse metaphors to describe the relationship between Satan and the serpent. A fifth century source says that the serpent was a pack animal upon which Satan rode (Agathangelos §141)⁴ and a fourteenth century author says that the serpent was Satan's arms and legs (Grigor Tat'ewac'i 1993, 218-219).⁵ Both of these writers, separated by nearly a millennium, see the serpent in the same way, as Satan's tool.

¹ The literature on Satan is extensive. Much is assembled in the three volumes by Russell 1977, 1981 and 1984; also see Forsyth 1987.

² On Satan's kingdom in Hell, see Zak'aria Catholicos (C 9) below.

³ 'And we envied his honour, and we gave (him) to eat of the fruit /55/ which He ordered him not to eat, and we brought him out of paradise, and we deceived all his descendants to idol worship, to various sorts of sins. Our commander, Satayēl, built /60/ a palace and named it "Hell."' (Loeff 2002, 35-36).

⁴ In PRE 13 we read, '[i]ts appearance was something like that of the camel, and he [i.e., Sammael = Satan] mounted and rode upon it' (trans. Friedlander 1981, 92).

⁵ թեւ could also be translated 'wings.' Grigor Tat'ewac'i (1740a, 324-325) says that the serpent is the feet of the Enemy (a title of Satan).

From a quite different perspective, the fifth century writer Eznik (§§46, 48 and 60) and many after him simply regard them as identical.⁶ Their relationship is the subject of discussion in subsequent centuries and we shall focus first on the metaphors used for it in Armenian literature. In any case, often the selection of ‘Satan’ or ‘serpent,’ seen as very closely related, is determined by the literary context rather than by any deliberate, theologically driven choice.

Exegetes discerned in Ps 91:13 terminology analogous to the Genesis language. The verse reads, suggestively from the perspective of Genesis, ‘You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.’ A fourteenth century *Commentary on Matthew* says, ‘And besides, it (i.e., Scripture) calls Satan “adder,” according to David, “You shall tread on the (...) adder”’ (Yovhannēs Erznkac‘i Corcorec‘i 1825, 281). It is intriguing to see this verse, from the well known apotropaic Psalm 91, exegetically related to the trampling of Satan. Surely intertextual with Ps 91:13 are Ps 73(74):13-14, which speaks of God trampling the head of the *višap* dragon-snake (‘[13] You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. [14] You crushed the heads of Leviathan’), and perhaps Gen 3:14-15 which speaks of the crushing (laying in wait for) the head of the ‘serpent.’ Thus, the exegesis of Ps 91:13 introduces the term ‘adder’ into the arsenal of Satan’s identifications. The background of the biblical material, especially of Ps 73(74):13-14 lies in old, mythological themes. The Armenian biblical translation has added to them, as we shall show below, a pre-Christian Armenian mythical association with the water dragon-snake known as a *višap*, which joins this procession of satanic reptiles.

In the twelfth century, the distinguished churchman and poet Catholicos Grigor Pahlavuni dubbed Tlay, i.e., ‘the Child,’ says that ‘Satan goes into the serpent’ (Palian 1912, 177-179). He is speaking as if Satan possessed the serpent in the way of demonic possession (cf. also Murdoch 1967, 133). Satan’s domination of the serpent in this fashion is even more explicit in a statement in the later apocryphal work called Adam, Eve and the Incarnation. It says that Satan entered the belly of the serpent and spoke from the serpent’s belly ‘with a human voice’ (§2; Stone 1996b, 22-23). This evokes descriptions of ventriloquism, which is frequently an aspect of demonic possession.⁷ Elsewhere, the serpent was said to be recipient and instrument of the Evil One: the term ‘recipient’ most probably referring to possession (Grigor Tat‘ewac‘i 1998a, 324-325).⁸ An isolated ninth century source, T‘ovma Arcruni, says that Satan ‘nested’ (բնակեալ) in the serpent (Vardanyan 1985, 22: perhaps a serpent’s nest), another image that implies indwelling or possession. In a society in which demonic possession is a known

⁶ M. Alexandre (1988, 297), observes that Cyril of Alexandria says that Satan is transformed into the serpent and speaks as such (*Contr. Julianum* III [PG 76:632 B-C]). Pirqa de Rabbi Eliezer identifies it with Sammael (chaps. 13-14), as does the Zohar 1.37a, while Nahmanides in his commentary to Lev 16:8 identifies it with Satan. Note that the serpent is Azazel in Apocalypse of Abraham 13:23. On the names, see n.23 below and compare also Satayēl in n.3 above.

⁷ For descriptions of demonic possession see Eshel 1999, 136-144; cf. Riley 1995, 453.

⁸ Tat‘ewac‘i does not make explicit the metaphor that stands behind ‘recipient.’

phenomenon and in which Satan was believed to be prince of demons, possession is an obvious way of describing the relationship between Satan and the serpent.

The title of this paper quotes Satan's words to the serpent when he is inveigling it to serve as his vehicle or his arms and legs (Life of Adam and Eve 44.16.4). St. Nersēs the Graceful from the twelfth century calls the serpent Satan's instrument or tool of lawlessness (Nersēs Šnorhali in Bałdasaryan 1995, 161). In the texts we are studying, this is the first time that it is called an 'instrument' or 'tool' (cf. Grigor Tat'ewac'i 1998a, 324-325) but this idea, which has forerunners in ancient patristic sources,⁹ is not explored much further. Intriguingly, in addition, 'instrument' also has a musical aspect. According to the Armenian Adam books, Satan plays upon the serpent like on a lyre.¹⁰ This metaphor implies the same sort of dominance by Satan, as does possession.

In a passage of Ehišē's *Commentary on Joshua and Judges* 3:10, we find what is basically an allegorical interpretation of the Genesis story:

The serpent became pregnant with the forms of the invisible evil and he became the male nature through the mediation of the fruit of the tree. He seduced and stripped naked the five senses of the female part. He instructed the woman's mind in stupidity and caused (her) forgetfulness of the commandments of God. Before she entered the war, she was vanquished by the looking, of which you must be wary.¹¹

Sexual imagery permeates the passage. The serpent first ate and then conceives or becomes pregnant with the forms of evil (presumably due to its possession by Satan) and in this the serpent is female. This pregnant, female serpent then becomes male and overcomes the female part (= Eve) and stripped her senses naked (again a sexual evocation) causing the abeyance of the intellect (therefore 'stupidity'). The serpent is said to use the fruit as its instrument for Eve's transformation. Once the serpent overcame the woman Eve, using the fruit as a tool, it is said to become male. This implies the superiority of the male, and the serpent plays the male role in contrast to Eve. The role of the five senses through which Satan deceived Eve, comes to the fore in the thirteenth century and is further stressed a century later by Grigor Tat'ewac'i (1998a,

⁹ According to some of the Greek and Latin fathers the serpent was the instrument (o[rganon]) of the enemy of truth (Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Quaest.Gen.* XXXII; Theophilus, *ad Autolyicum* II.28; Irenaeus, *Dem.* 16; et al., cited by Alexandre, *ibid.*). Ephrem's poem (see n.10) is reminiscent of the Story of the Blind Man and the Lame Man, attributed to Pseudo-Ezekiel: this story and its Rabbinic parallels are discussed in Stone, Wright and Satran 2000, 9-19. It seems likely that a comparative study of Satan's relationship to the serpent and the soul's relationship to the body and the metaphors used to describe the two relationships would yield important insights into ancient anthropology. See also the next note.

¹⁰ The language used in the *Penitence of Adam* is that the serpent is a lyre upon which Satan plays: '[b]e you, in your form, a lyre for me and I will pronounce speech through your mouth' (*Penitence of Adam* [44]16:4b). Ephrem, *Hymns of Paradise* 8:2 talks of the soul without the body as being 'without its mate, the body, its instrument and lyre' (trans. Brock 1990, 132).

¹¹ The exact date of this composition is uncertain, depending on its authenticity which is debated. It may be of the fifth century and is certainly early.

324-325).¹² Eve is particularly susceptible through her five senses. This reflects specific attitudes to men and women and the connection of the five senses with Eve is old, going back as far as Philo (e.g., *Quaest.Gen.* I.49).

It is an open question whether, behind this formulation, lay the myth according to which Satan had intercourse with Eve and begat Cain. It is certainly possible that the passage of Ełišē is a retelling of some such myth, although it would be an isolated instance in the Armenian literature we have examined.¹³

When we examine the material presented above, we are struck by the variety of language and metaphor used to describe the relationship of Satan and the serpent. Beyond simple equivalence, seven different types of language describe this relationship: pack animal, sexual, nesting, possession, instrument, associate and dwelling.¹⁴ Even more surprising is the temporal distribution. The relationship between Satan and the serpent, except for one instance, is not mentioned from the sixth to the eleventh centuries. We have no explanation for this.

The Višap-Dragon and its Identification with Satan

In this and the succeeding sections, we shall discuss a number of specific aspects of our main theme. The *višap*-dragon was an Armenian, pre-Christian water monster (see Ališan 1910, 163-165; Russell 1987, 205-211), and its name is included in the Armenian biblical translation at a number of points. It is also connected with Satan and the serpent. Thus, for example, Aaron's and the magicians' serpents (תִּנְתִּי - dravkwn) in Exod 7:9, 10, and 12 are translated *višap*. In Job 26:13(12) it translates Greek 'to;kh:to"' and Hebrew 'Rahab,' one name of the primordial sea dragon of pre-Israelite mythology. Moreover, this is the term for the dragon in Rev 12:4, 7, 9, 13, etc. Thus, in the Armenian version of Rev 12:9 we read: 'The great *višap*-dragon was thrown down, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.' Such uses as these led to the *višap*'s identification with the Genesis serpent and with Satan.

Early on, Satan is called 'rebel dragon' based on the incident in Rev 12:17 and a seventh-eighth century author refers to the 'dragon serpent' (*višap oĵ*) who wishes to become 'god of the material world.'¹⁵ This latter role, 'god of the material world,' is, of

¹² He says that the serpent makes five circular movements symbolizing the five senses (Yovhannēs Erznkac'i 1998, 324-5).

¹³ *Hypostasis of the Archons (The Reality of the Rulers)* NHC II.4.91.11ff in Layton 1992, 72; Saltair na Rann in Seymour 1922, 129; see line 1957-1958 in Green and Kelly 1976, 91 and Murdoch 1976, 133; Schwartz 2004, 447-448; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.5.3 in Layton 1992, 197.

¹⁴ We readily admit that our evidence is partial. We only collected statements directly relating to Gen 1-3. It is more than likely that an even greater number of metaphors was used. Moreover, the frequency should only be taken as indicative, and numerous instances may occur in other contexts than the Genesis stories.

¹⁵ 'So our human nature wanted to hear the story of the dragon serpent who wished to become the god of the material world which God created by his wonderful wisdom': see Č'arak'eān 1964, 183.

course, Satan's.¹⁶ This might just be a restatement of Lucifer's ambition to become God (Isa 14:13-14) but perhaps the serpent-dragon in the material world is deliberately modelled after Satan-Lucifer who aspired higher. In the eighth century, we find the idea that the dragon is Satan and is said to have fallen. Clearly, the fall from glory, here predicated of the dragon, is Satan's (Yovhannēs K'orepiskopos 1966, 24). The identification of the two seems certain. Once clearly established, this identification recurs, and so, in the ninth century, T'ovma Arcruni calls the serpent that pours bitter advice into Eve's ear *višap* 'dragon.'¹⁷

Satan Deceives the Serpent

The author of the tenth century biblical epic poem *To Manuč'ē*, Grigor Magistros, says that Satan deceived the serpent into conniving in his attack on Adam and Eve (Grigor Magistros 1868, 7). This event is narrated in the primary Adam books (*Penitence of Adam* 44.16.3), where Satan plays on the serpent's pride to gain his co-operation in deceiving Adam and Eve, just as his own pride motivated him to hate Adam (Anderson and Stone 1999, 50E). The same view, that Satan deceived the serpent, occurs in later authors as well (Kirakos Erznkac'i [C 13-14]; apud K'yurtyan 1965, 97).¹⁸

In his 'Poem on the Lord Coming to Lazarus' the tenth century poet Grigor Narekac'i seems to distinguish between the 'first serpent (*or*: dragon, i.e., *višap*)' and Adam's Deceiver, who is the serpent identified as Satan,¹⁹ leader of the host of demons. This identification follows from the parallelism that characterizes this poem. Subsequent writers, however, seem to identify Satan and the serpent (see, for example, Vardan Arewelc'i 1797, 455-456 and Karapet Bahšec'i apud Akinean 1937, 328).

In Karapet Bahšec'i's *Sermon Preached on the Occasion of the Nativity and Baptism* we find the expression, 'liberating the first Adam from the curse of the first one' (Sahakyan 1986, 132). In context, the phrase 'the curse of the first one' refers to Satan, yet there is no biblical curse of Satan, only of the serpent. Either these two figures fell together in the Armenian source, or else an apocryphal tradition added a curse of

¹⁶ Compare 'ruler of this world' in John 12:31, 14:30 and 16:11.

¹⁷ T'ovma Arcruni 1985, 18-22; see Constan 2003, 273-313 on the *conceptio per aurem* of which this may be a reversal.

¹⁸ Kirakos Erznkac'i says: 'Having taken of the animals the serpent as partner in his plans' (K'yurtyan 1965, 97). The same sort of relationship is implied by Kostandin Erznkac'i (C 14) when he says, 'because of envy of tempter, they were deceived by serpent' (Srapyan 1962, 220-223). This is, of course, reminiscent of Wisdom of Solomon 2:24. Satan envied, but it was the serpent that acted on his behalf (Kostaneanc' 1910, 276).

¹⁹ 'He (i.e., Christ) chains the first dragon, delivers him over into the fire of Gehenna; And his (i.e., Adam's) Deceiver, along with his (i.e., Satan's) servants' from Grigor Narekac'i 'Poem on the Lord Coming to Lazarus: another Tune by Grigor Narekac'i' (1874, 139). Interestingly, Rev 12:9, reads *ōjn arājin* 'first serpent' and not *višapn arājin* 'first dragon' as does Narekac'i. Yet, Narekac'i's source must be Rev 12:9.

was known to the author of 2 Enoch 31:5-6 (Stone 2000, 43-56, esp. 47-48).²¹ It is cognate with the idea of angelic opposition to the creation of Adam, a subject that recurs in Rabbinic literature (Ginzberg 1909, 69-71).²² Some Rabbinic texts also imply the serpent's sexual jealousy of Eve, as noted above. Consequently, it is notable that 'classical' Rabbinic literature is quite silent about any relationship between Satan and the serpent.

Thus, in Wisdom of Solomon there is a virtual identity of Satan and the serpent. In the Primary Adam Books, to which we referred above, Satan says to the serpent, according to the Greek, 'be my vessel and I will speak through your mouth words to deceive them.' The word 'vessel' (skeu:ov) seems to imply the idea of possession and also in the Armenian, Georgian and Slavonic versions of the Primary Adam Book 17:1-2 the possessed serpent is able to take on the form of an angel. In the Armenian of the Primary Adam Book [44]16:4b Satan says, 'Be you, in your form, a lyre for me and I will pronounce speech through your mouth' (Anderson and Stone 1999, 50E). Here we have the same ideas as in certain of the Armenian texts in which these developments also occur: Satan is identical for all practical purposes with the serpent; Satan enters or possesses the serpent and speaks through its mouth; the serpent is Satan's instrument or tool.

The only text of Rabbinic literature, if it is such, that deals with this issue is Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer. This document is usually dated to the late first millennium CE and is known to include many traditions otherwise attested in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, but not in Tannaitic and Amoraic literature. Chapter 13 opens with the theme of angelic jealousy of Adam and Adam's superiority to the angels in his ability to name the animals.²³ The fall of the archangel Sammael²⁴ is described, together with his host. He found the serpent, and 'its likeness was like a sort of camel and he mounted it and rode it.' This relationship is likened to that of a horse and a rider (cf. Exod 15:1, 21).²⁵ This again resembles certain of the Armenian texts. The same issue arises in the case of 4QNaphtali **ref?** and Midrash Bereshit Rabbati of R. Moses the Preacher **ref?** as in the instance of Satan and the serpent in PRE. Here we encounter the mystery of the channels of transmission of Second Temple traditions (and sometimes texts) down to the early Middle Ages, when such traditions do not appear in Tannaitic and Amoraic sources (Stone 1996a, 20-36). (**ref our paper?PLEASE DO SO!**)

²¹ For this theme, see also Qur'an Suras 2.34, 7.11, 15.29-33, 38.73-76.

²² See also Ginzberg 1909, 84 and his comparison with Heb 1:6. Another old tradition may be reconstituted, which speaks of Satan's sexual intercourse with Eve, the offspring of which was Cain. His name is related to the Hebrew root *qn'*. Some such tradition is behind the odd passage on the birth of Cain in the Primary Adam Books 21:3a-c.

²³ This theme is much developed in the Armenian tradition, see Stone 2007.

²⁴ We cannot deal here fully with the complex matter of the names of Satan, a subject discussed briefly above: here Sammael is mentioned.

²⁵ A similar image, supported ultimately by this verse, is found in Rabbinic midrashim about the relationship of the soul and the body. This is mentioned above in the discussion of the Armenian sources. It occurs similarly in Pseudo-Ezekiel, and see Stone, Wright and Satran 2000, 9-19.

It seems to us worthwhile to highlight three points here. (1) The basic series of images in the Armenian texts (and many of them also occur in preceding patristic texts) resemble those in the Primary Adam books and Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer, which fact bespeaks a common tradition, that may be traced as far back as Wisdom of Solomon. (2) The absence of this material from Tannaitic and Amoraic sources is unlikely to be happenstance and it should be considered together with those sources' treatment of Enoch, the Watchers and other similar traditions. (3) As a result it seems that we should consider the likelihood that extra-Rabbinic tradents in the first millennium CE cultivated and transmitted material known otherwise only from the Second Temple period. The identity and context of such tradents remain to be isolated.

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