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The Serpent in Genesis 3:15 is a Snake

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Abstract. This article seeks to defend that the serpent in the Genesis 3:15 fall of humanity is a snake on the basis of: (1) the near Jewish contextual analysis, (2) Mosaic theological analysis within Biblical theology, (3) unanimity of Rabbinic texts side with this view, (4) the strength of peer interpretation among critical scholarship sides with this view, (5) the presence of this view among the Patristics, (6) no N.T. text clearly teaches otherwise, and (7) the Satan view is suspect as depending upon Zoroastrianism as it syncretised with some forms of second Temple Judaism.

My exegetical method is that of a critical realist which emphasizes precise exegesis of what the text says in context and expunges traditional assumptions that have no textual basis (Kennard 1999, pp. 117–152). Such precise exegeses are submitted to peer review of those who have written scholarly work on the passages in view. This peer reviewed critical realist exegetical commitment is what funds this article so that the reader might get the participants of the Genesis 3 text accurately to what the Biblical text develops. As an exegete I attempt to be as clear as the text is clear and as ambiguous as the text is ambiguous. Additionally, I allow the Biblical author's (e.g., Moses or John) emphasis of the use of words to frame what they mean by these terms. This use and emphasis reflects my commitment to Biblical theology. I also allow the context of a text to propose possibilities and make connections to further diminish the possibility of reading a Biblical text through one's own tradition. While I first noticed the findings of this article from the basis of this critical realist exegesis and Biblical theology, they were confirmed by modern scholars, second Temple (fifth century B.C.-second century A.D.) Jewish texts, and instanced in all Christian eras. From an examination of these historical sources I noticed that it was within the second Temple Jewish texts that the dominant Christian popular view first emerged as I will clarify in the article later.

Foundational passages, like the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 are extremely relevant to inform the

design and participants of God's creation account. If mistakes are made here they tend to affect one's interpretation of many other passages and many of the assumptions and components of a Christian world view. For example, the creation scientist needs to do his science within the parameters of good exegesis so as to empirically assess and reflect the creation as the Biblical text frames it to be.

One such datum of the Fall that needs careful handling is the nature of the serpent in Genesis 3. Many in Christendom see an age old struggle with Satan and humans heavily developed out of the O.T. (Boyd 1998) and beginning in this Genesis 3 text (Poythress 2007). However, there is no mention of Satan (שָׂטָן) in this Genesis text. Utilizing a critical realist exegetical method sensitive to Biblical theology and context results in the conclusion that the tempter serpent (שֶׁרֶפֶן) in Genesis 3 is a snake, which will crawl on its belly, not a satan figure rarely developed in the O.T.

GENESIS 3 SERPENT IN MOSAIC THEOLOGY

Use of "Serpent." Serpents (שֶׁרֶפֶן) in Mosaic theology of the Pentateuch are either: a) affirmed as good channels of the work of God (like a blessing to Dan, Moses rod, and the healing bronze snake), or b) threatening crawling animals (Gen. 3:1, 14; 49:17; Ex. 4:3; 7:15; Num. 21:6–9; Deut. 8:15; 2 Kgs 18:4; 1 Cor. 10:9). In only one Isaiah text is שֶׁרֶפֶן used of a

mythological *serpent*, Leviathan, which is in that text described as an animal living in the sea, destroyed by God (Isa. 27:1). In 11 of the 14 Mosaic instances (or 79%) שָׂטָן refers to a crawling animal or animals. Some of these are venomous (Num. 21:6–9) and the others completely destroy their opposition, swallowing it without mention of venom (Ex. 7:9–12). The other Mosaic texts take שָׂטָן as a metaphor of blessing based on such a *snake* and a bronze reproduction of such a *snake* (Gen. 49:17; Num. 21:9). So in Mosaic theology שָׂטָן should be seen as a *snake*. Evil is not invading on the back of one greater than humans, but rather a subordinate snake of the creation is choosing evil in rebellion against humans, the miniature sovereign. That is, there is no pre-existing evil, rather free-will snake choice to rebel becomes evil in the choice to rebel. So the humans and a snake choose to rebel in the same event, and God places them under the oracle of curse in response to their rebellious free choice. No Biblical text discusses whether this Genesis 3 serpent is the ancestor of all snakes or just one type of snake or a particular snake that becomes emblematic for all snakes. Also no Biblical text discusses how such likely poisonous snakes behaved on Noah’s ark (since this snake is an animal, with its descendants included among the two of every kind of animal, and the same word שָׂטָן describing some snakes before and after the flood; Gen.6:19–20).

Use of “Satan” or “Adversary.” To claim that Satan is in the Genesis temptation is to assume something which the Biblical text nowhere claims to be the case because the word שָׂטָן is no where used in the Genesis temptation account. The goal of good exegesis is to be as clear as the text is clear and as ambiguous as the text is ambiguous. So, without Satan clearly indicated in the temptation account, I do not see him there.

Instead, in the **O.T. term ‘satan’** שָׂטָן is used as a descriptive for “adversary.” 1) The term שָׂטָן is used of the *angel of the LORD* (which is likely God Himself) as the adversary to Balaam (Num. 22:22, 32). 2) The term שָׂטָן is used as an ambiguous motivator of David to number Israel in 1 Chronicles 21:1, which may be the LORD since it is the LORD in 2 Samuel 24: 1 who motivates David to number the people. By ambiguous I mean that the Biblical text does not clarify sufficiently who is the adversary in this 1 Chronicles instance, though comparing parallel texts

would likely identify the *LORD* as the adversary here (1 Chr. 21:1 with 2 Sam. 24:1). 3) שָׂטָן is used as an ambiguous accuser of Joshua the high priest because the Biblical text does not clarify sufficiently who this adversary is in this instance, though in vision he is accusing God’s priest (Zech. 3:1–2). 4) שָׂטָן is used as some sort of *heavenly being* among the Sons of God who accuses God and Job (Job 1:6–2:7). 5) שָׂטָן is used as *human adversaries* (including: David, sons of Zeruah, wicked men, Hadad, and Rezan; 1 Sam. 29:4; 2 Sam. 19:22 (Masoretic Text 23), 1 Kgs 4:4 (18); 11:14, 23, 25; Pss. 38:20 (21); 109:6, 20, 29). 40% of the instances of the word שָׂטָן throughout the whole O.T. are of humans as adversaries and a similar 40% (exclusively in the book of Job) are of a heavenly being among the sons of God. Possibly in Job alone the descriptive שָׂטָן mentioned ten times in quick succession may take on a quality of a name, which displays his character in that context. The only Mosaic instance of שָׂטָן is of the angel of the LORD or possibly God Himself. Since Genesis 3 is within this Mosaic section the nearer context views the use of שָׂטָן as more likely the angel of the LORD or God Himself. No Biblical text places a named angel Satan in the Genesis 3 account. So to claim that an angel named Satan is in the Genesis temptation is to assume something which the Biblical text nowhere claims to be the case.

Genesis 3 Presents the Tempter as an Animal. The הַ in Genesis 3:1 is best seen as a superlative “*more clever than all the other animals*” and thus among the animals. The same point could be made from the הַ in Genesis 3:14, which either separates this serpent *from the other animals*, indicating that the serpent is an animal (parallel to Genesis 4:11 הַ in the oracle of judgment and reflected in the Greek Septuagint [LXX] Genesis 3:14 use of ἀπὸ) or parallel to the superlative הַ of Genesis 3:1. Either way the הַ in Genesis 3:14 indicates that the serpent is an animal (Rabbi Eleazar in *Genesis Rabbah* 20.3). The Rabbis universally and many Essenes identify this serpent of Genesis 3 as an animal, a snake, whose descendants bite Israelites in Numbers 21:6 (*Jubilees* 3.17–19, 23; *Sibylline Oracles* 1.40–45, 59–61; *Greek Apocalypse of Ezra* 2.17; *Genesis Rabbah* 19.1; 20.3–4; 21.4; *Exodus Rabbah* 3.12; *Numbers Rabbah* 14.12; 19.22; *Koheleth Rabbah* 10.1; Rabbi Yose in *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* 1.17.1.E).¹ Many of the patristics also follow

this view that the serpent is merely an animal (e.g., Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis* 2.15.1 in *Fathers of the Church* 91:107), while others under the influence of neoplatonism allegorize the serpent to be identified with Satan (e.g., Augustine, *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manicheans* 2.14.20 in *Fathers of the Church* 84:116). Gerhard Von Rad (1972, p. 87) develops the serpent is a snake.

The serpent which now enters the narrative as one of God's created animals (ch. 2.19). In the narrator's mind, therefore, it is not the symbol of a "demonic" power and certainly not a Satan. What distinguishes it a little from the rest of the animals is exclusively its cleverness.

Claus Westermann (1974, pp. 237-8), John Skinner (1930, pp. 71-4,79-82), E. A. Speiser (1986, pp. 25-28), and Gordon Wenham (1987, pp. 72-3, 78-9) agree that Satan is nowhere in Genesis 3, rather it is a conflict between a *serpent*, humans, and God Who judges them all. Obviously some other commentaries disagree (e.g., Kidner 1967, pp. 70-71), but that is the essence of the study before us.

The big picture sees the Genesis creation account explaining the origin of temptation, sin and judgment (Gen. 3). This account provides a narrative that reflects the historical account but also is selective in recounting the process of how temptation works so that Israelite readers and now Christian readers might not follow into the way of temptation. The account also provides a view of God as He responds to this temptation and sin that is instructive about human relationship with Him. The fact that man and woman are both naked and not ashamed shows that they are at ease with one another without any fear of exploitation and potential for evil in contrast to the tensions that will come as will be spelled out in the wake of the fall (Gen. 2:25). There is however a word play which shows that in their *naked* (עָרְוֹתָם) innocence which the serpent was particularly *shrewd* (עָרוּם) to take advantage of them (Gen. 2:25–3:1). For example, this particular serpent is described as a beast with unusual craftiness like being able to talk and there is no mention that Eve is surprised, nor that other snakes need to have these abilities. However, Jesus alludes to serpents as having a shrewd character in order for Him to instruct His disciples in their being prudent ambassadors for the Kingdom (Mt. 10:16). While Jesus does not clearly mention the Genesis 3 text,

Jesus' allusion that serpents are shrewd increases the likelihood that we should think of serpents as shrewd (following Gen. 3:1 and Mt. 10:16), and possibly this one serpent is able to deceive in this Genesis 3 account as Genesis 3 claims.

Genesis does not develop other animals talking like is done within the Pseudepigraphical *Jubilee* 3.28 (where animals lose this ability in the Fall of the Creation) or C. S. Lewis' in *The Narnia Chronicles: The Last Battle* (where some animals lose this ability in individual non-alliance with Aslan; Lewis 1956). It is possible that other animals might have some of these abilities, but the Biblical text just does not say how extensive animal reasoning and communication happens to be. However, there had been some hint in the creation account that humankind's miniature sovereign role would be resisted by the choice of such forceful terminology as רָדוּ and כְּבֹשׁ (Gen. 1:26, 28). Evil is not invading on the back of one greater than humans but rather a subordinate serpent as an expression of the creation is seen as rebelling against humans, the miniature sovereign.

The Curse on the Serpent and Hostility with Humans. A closer look at God's oracle of judgment against the serpent in Genesis 3:13–15, would include first that he is an animal; to the serpent, God says, "Cursed are you from all cattle, and from every beast of the field." Notice the direct address is to the serpent (אֶל-הַנָּחָשׁ) and the singular second person address as suffix pronouns "you" (בְּיָדְךָ, חֲיִיךָ, אֲתָה, עֲשִׂיתָ) and the singular address verbs "cursed are you" (אָרִיר) and "you shall eat" (תֹּאכַל) all refer back to the nearest referent, the serpent being addressed. There is no allusion to another beyond or behind the serpent with the singular "you" statements referring to the serpent. Next the description presents that the curse is appropriate of the serpents as snakes elsewhere in the Mosaic context, for these snakes crawl on their belly in the dust with their heads close to the ground so that they could be described metaphorically as eating dust. Elsewhere *serpents* (נָחָשׁ) are described as eating the dust due the position of its head so close to the ground (Isa. 65:25; Mic. 7:17). This curse could also extend figuratively to stand for abject humiliation, especially before enemies (Ps. 72:9; Isa. 49:23; Mic. 7:17).

Part of the curse now extends to the progeny of this serpent and humans (Gen. 3:15). Addressing the serpent, God refers that there will be enmity between

the woman Eve and this very serpent. This enmity would then extend multigenerationally between her seed and “your seed” (זרעך), using the same phrase that God uses to address Abram with “your seed” (זרעך). The word for seed (זרעך) is a collective referring to plural descendents of snakes, and humans (compare with other Genesis זרעך texts like Gen. 15:3–5, 13, 18; 16:10; 17:7–19). So there is no allusion behind the serpent, there is only the continuing multigenerational hostility of humans and serpents, which prefigures the Israelite experience with the snake attacks of Numbers 21:6. However, this hostility is not a collective biting and crushing but one of an individual on individual, “He will bruise you on the head, and you will bruise him on the heel” (Gen. 3:15). In the Hebrew the pronouns are all masculine since “serpent” (שׁוֹפָר) and “seed” (זרעך) are both masculine. However, the LXX merely copies this phrase “He will bruise you on the head, and you will bruise him on the heel” using masculine Greek pronouns to follow the Hebrew masculine pronouns, in spite of the word for seed in the Greek (σπέρματός) shifting to the neuter.

When Gordon Wenham claims that the Satan view is clear in the Septuagint (Wenham, 1987, p. 80) I don’t think that he means this shift of pronoun gender; I think Wenham means that the Apocryphal book *Wisdom of Solomon*, which mentions the devil clearly, since he is listing clear textual references and by the fifth century A.D. the *Wisdom of Solomon* is being bound into the Christian Bible as part of the Apocrypha. However, the *Wisdom of Solomon* never was embraced by mainstream Judaism as canonical in the Greek Septuagint (LXX) pre-bound condition.

Remember the LXX in Gen. 3:15 simply copies the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) with the masculine pronouns, so it is trying to be faithful to the MT text. Additionally, the neuter word for “seed” (σπέρματός) in LXX always takes *masculine* pronouns with it in all other Genesis verses where they occur, following the MT and making no new novel theological point (e.g., Gen. 15:13; 17:7, 9; 22:17; 24:60). Additionally, as in personal address, this *singular* verbal address is retained in MT and LXX when it includes the seed as well (Gen. 3:15; 28:14 “you [singular] shall spread out to the west, east, north, and south;” 48:19 “his seed will become [singular]”). So, the shift in Genesis 3:15 from addressing the serpent as “you” to the seed as “he” and “him” is the normal manner in which

the Hebrew and Greek pronouns function in the MT and LXX with reference to “seed” (זרעך; σπέρματός). That is, the grammatically singular word “seed” (זרעך; σπέρματός) takes singular pronouns, even though it is clear that this word obviously indicates plural descendents (compare זרעך texts like Gen. 3:15; 15:3–5, 13, 18; 16:10; 17:7–19). Notice, with plural descendents being described from the serpent and from Eve, then there is no clear reference here to Christ or a first statement of the gospel. Rather, human and serpent descendents will have a hostile relationship. Thus no new theological point of an empowering agent is being implied by the singular in MT and LXX, or by the LXX grammatical non-agreement of neuter “seed” (σπέρματός) and masculine pronouns and verbs, as the LXX follows the MT.

In the cursed hostility between humans and serpents, both humans and serpents will kill the other. The word for bruise (שׁוֹפָר) is the same for the serpents as for the humans and elsewhere that it is used of a dominating covering (Job 9:17; Ps. 139:11). Such a dominating bruise on the head is a deadly crushing blow that kills, such as the millstone that crushed Abimelech’s head (Judg. 9:53). This crushing of the head is accomplished singularly by a human on a snake, based on the singular pronominal suffixes of the oracle of curse (זרעך יהוא שׁוֹפָר ראשׁ).

Elsewhere in the Mosaic context a serpent biting on the heel kills the humans, unless God supernaturally stays the effect of the venom (e.g., Num. 21:6–9). This oracle of curse prefigures the Israelite experience with the snake attacks of Numbers 21:6 (also Deut. 8:15; 1 Cor. 10:9). Thus Genesis 3:15 is not a first statement of the gospel, for snakes and humans continue with such hostility. The term שׁוֹפָר continues to be used throughout the O.T. for venomous serpents biting and destroying humans (Num. 21:6–7; Deut. 8:15; Pss. 58:4(5); 140:3(4); Prov. 23:32; Ecc. 10:8, 11; Jer. 8:17; Amos 5:19; 9:3). Thus based on this Genesis text, there are some instances of God creating venomous serpents as a normal feature of the creation, only to be utilized as a feature of God’s curse of sin, a view affirmed by Josephus (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.45-50.4).

OTHER RELEVANT BIBLICAL AND SECOND TEMPLE TEXTS

Eve's Deceiver. With reference to the Genesis 3 event, **1 Timothy 2:14** identifies that Adam was not deceived but that Eve was deceived (ἐξαπατηθεῖσα), as they fell into transgression. No comments are made in this context about the identity of the deceiver.

Whereas, in **2 Corinthians 11:3** Eve is described as being deceived (ἐξηπάτησεν) by the serpent (ὄφις), which serves as a historical grounding for the exhortation that the church should not be led astray from the simplicity and purity to Christ. This N.T. serpent reference identifies the serpent with craftiness (πανουργία), which takes his ability in a less favorable crafty direction than the LXX Genesis 3:1 development for the serpent being crafty in a more wise direction (φρονιμώτατος; Bauer et al. 1957, pp.612-13), and subsequent Jesus' disciple/serpent prudence (φρόνιμοι; Mt. 10:16). The warning in the Corinthian context is especially not to be taken in by human proclamation and speech that would entice away from the purity of Christ (2 Cor. 11:4-6). Paul even warns them not to follow statements he might make that lead away from the purity of Christ. Paul boasts that he ministers to the Corinthian church without taking any other support from them because he was supported by other churches (2 Cor. 11:7-12). Paul warns the Corinthian church that false apostles and deceitful workers claim to be apostles of Christ, but that is no surprise since even Satan disguises himself (2 Cor. 11:14). There is no mention of Satan here in Genesis 3, but rather with the contemporary situation of false apostles who have similar character traits with Satan.

Trampling and Crushing Underfoot. **Psalm 91:13** promises that with God's help, the chosen in Israel will trample under foot dangerous serpents and wild beasts (Jewett 2007, p. 994). This sentiment is extended by the *Testament of Levi* 18.12 which promises that after the apocalyptic battle, the Lord will grant his children to trample on spirits.

Without referring to Genesis 3 or the creation-fall account, **Romans 16:20** encourages the plural church that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your-all feet." Within Paul's theology, there is a real angelic being named Satan that is a lead adversary against believers but he does not explain where he comes from or first appears in the creation (2 Cor. 4:4; 11:14; Eph. 2:2). The term for crush (συντρίψει) is

forceful requiring Satan to be utterly defeated before the church, in the same manner as Judas Maccabeus reassured his followers that they would crush the numerically superior foe before them (*1 Maccabees* 3.22). Robert Jewett argues *1 Maccabees* takes this term of crushing as a technical expression for "violent, military triumph" (Jewett 2007, p. 994; *1 Maccabees* 3.23; 4.10, 30, 36; 5.7, 21, 43; 7.42-43; 8.4-6; 9.7, 15-16, 68; 10.52-53, 82; 13.51; 14.13). The metaphor in Romans 16:20 does not refer to Genesis 3:15 in any clear way in the context but to the broadly depicted metaphor of a completely defeated person under the conqueror's feet, as developed in Jewish second Temple literature (*1 Maccabees* 3.22-3; 4.10, 30, 36; 5.7, 21, 43; 7.42-43; 8.4-6; 9.7, 15-16, 68; 10.52-53, 82; 13.51; 14.13; *Testament of Levi* 18.12), and from Greco-Roman Temples and history (Gotsmich 1941; Malaise 1972, pp. 179-80). Thus blessing the church with such a final victory over Satan is praying for the eschatological conquest of Christ and Kingdom, in which the church will rule with Him (Jewett 2007, pp. 994-5).

Johannine Texts on References of the Beginning. **John 8** develops Satan as a "murderer from the beginning" (ἀρχὴν), in which beginning (ἀρχὴν) is used in the near context as the beginning of Jesus' ministry (John 8:25, 44). In fact, apart from the introduction uses of ἀρχὴν in the gospel of John (Jn. 1:1-2), the other instances or 75% of the use of ἀρχὴν in the gospel are of the beginning of Jesus' miraculous and teaching ministry (Jn. 2:11; 6:64; 8:25, and likely 44; 15:27; 16:4). Notice, not that this word can not have a variety of meanings (creation [Jn. 1:1-2] and beginning of Jesus' ministry [Jn. 2:11; 6:64; 8:25, and likely 44; 15:27; 16:4]) but that the authorial and contextual emphasis should be maintained unless there is strong contextual reason to deviate from this emphasis. There is no mention of the creation or Fall of humanity in this John 8 context. Thus, it is best to interpret the word "beginning" (ἀρχὴν) by how it is used in this same context, and the Johannine emphasis, which then means that ἀρχὴν refers to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, rather than assuming it to refer to Genesis 3. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry Satan tempts Jesus to throw Himself off the horn of the Temple (Mt. 4:5-6; Lk. 4:9). Might it be to try to kill Jesus, even though he suggests angels will come to protect Jesus? When Jesus announces His ministry

in the Nazareth synagogue those in attendance try to kill Him (Lk. 4:28–30). The religious leaders have a lineage of being those who murdered the prophets (e.g., Mt. 23:31). The subject of Satan murdering through the Jewish leadership (which has aligned with Satan) is the immediately preceding context to the statement for how Satan is a murderer from the beginning. The religious leaders have been seeking Jesus life (John 8:40, 42–47, 59).

In **1 John 3:8**, “the devil has sinned from the beginning.” Once again notice that creation and the Fall are not in the context of this passage. Like in the gospel of John, so here in his epistle the strong emphasis of the use of ἀρχήν is of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry which then makes Jesus able to be seen, handled, proclaimed, and then heard by which they obtained, namely: everlasting life (1 Jn. 1:1, 2:7, 24 [2x]; 3:11). While some commentators wish to see 1 John 1:1 as in the pattern of a pre-creation “beginning” as occurred in John 1:1–3, the emphasis in 1 John 1:1 is that which is present which can be heard, seen, and handled for John to say that the apostles saw him and witness concerning Him. This empirical viewing and handling emphasis strongly refers to the humanity of Jesus. Such humanity of Jesus was there in the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when the apostles heard, saw and handled Him but His humanity was not there before creation. So based on the empirical emphasis of 1 John 1:1–3 context, Raymond Brown (1982, pp.157–8) concludes that the most plausible way to understand ἀρχής in 1 John 1:1 is with the emphasis of the context, namely the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when the apostles observed Jesus, thus consistent with the emphasis of this term (ἀρχής) in the Gospel of John. In 1 John 2:13–14, the one who has been from the beginning is probably Jesus, since: 1) Jesus has been the empirically handled Word of life which witnesses to brings eternal life (1 Jn. 1:1–2), and 2) the Father is other than He and we are in a context in which the believers are confessing the Father and the Son (1 Jn. 2:22–24). However, the term ἀρχήν is ambiguous in 1 John 2:13–14 as to which beginning is being referred, but I am more inclined to understand it in light of its use in the near context (1 Jn. 2:7, 24 [2x]) and the majority use in the epistle, so I take these references of ἀρχήν in 1 John 2:13–14 as referring to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. With clearly six of the nine references (65%) of ἀρχήν and likely eight of

these (89%) best taken as referring to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (Brown 1982, p. 158), then 1 John 3:8 is best taken in that manner as well. Likewise, with the references of ἀρχή just before and after this text (1 Jn. 2:24; 3:11) referring to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry it is better to take 1 John 3:8 as making reference to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as well. This means that the devil was sinning at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Remember, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry Satan tempts Jesus to worship him and try for a shortcut to kingdom (Mt. 4:1–11; Mk. 1:13; Lk. 4:2–13). So, once again there is no clear reference in 1 John that places Satan in Genesis 3.

Satan in Revelation 12:1–9 and 20:2. Revelation 12:9 and 20:2 develops that Satan has a long standing conflict with the woman (Israel) and her son (Christ). The woman is not named, though she births a son, Who is described in Revelation 12:5 as a Son Who will rule the nations with a rod of iron, and is caught up into the heavenly throne room by the Christian’s monotheistic God. This imagery already in the Revelation context identifies the Son as Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:12–20; 2:26–27). The previous paragraphs show that John is concerned with Satan opposing Christ throughout His earthly ministry (Jn. 6:70; 8:44; 13:2, 27; 1 Jn. 3:8). With the son being Christ, the views that propose the woman to be a pagan deity or mythological character are clearly excluded. This leaves Jewish-Christian views that conjecture the mother as: Eve, Israel or Mary. No texts fit the woman’s description as closely as those of Israel. Of these options, only Israel is described by the sun, moon and 12 stars prior to the composition of Revelation (Gen. 37:9). Second Temple literature multi-generationally extend this description of sun, moon and stars upon the people of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the twelve tribes (*Testament of Abraham* B 7.4-16; *Midrash Rabbah* of: Ex. 15:6, Lev. 30:2, Num. 2:4, 13, 9:14, Deut. 1:14; *The Midrash on Psalms* 22:11-12; *Sifre to Deuteronomy* 10:47; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 42 in Ulmer 2006; Kahana, 1975, *Piska* 22; Beale 1999, pp. 625-6). Only Israel and Mary have undergone an exodus into the wilderness, but of these only Israel is described Biblically and by second Temple sources to undertake an exodus eschatologically as Revelation seems to be describing (Deut. 30:4–5; Isa. 32:15; 35:1; 40:3; 41:18; 43:19–20; 51:3; Jer. 31:2; Ezek. 34:25; Rev. 12:6; Wise et al. 2005, 1QH 3.7–12; 1QM 1.2–3;

1QS 8.12–15; 9:18–21; 4QpPs a; *Midrash Rabbah* Ex. 2:4; *Sifre to Deuteronomy* 31:3; Englander, 1984, *Midrash Ruth* 5.6; Buber 1980, *Midrash Cant.* 2.9.3; *Pesikta Rabbati*, 1968, 5.9; 15.10). So it is best to see the woman in Revelation 12 as Israel birthing the Messiah in this context.

Second Temple literature presents Satan as the accuser of Israel (*Jubilees* 1.20; 17.15–16; 18.9–12; 48.15–18; *1 Enoch* 40.7; *Testament of Levi* 5.6; *Testament of Dan* 6.2) and Michael as the defender of Israel in the heavenly court (Wise et al. 2005, 1QM 13.10–13; 1QS 3.18–25; *Testament of Levi* 5.6; *Testament of Dan* 6.1–6; *Midrash Rabbah* Ex. 18:5; Neusner 1984, *The Talmud of Babylonia: an American Translation b. Yoma* 77a; *Pesikta Rabbati* 1968, p. 44; Beale 1999, pp. 661-2.). This Jewish tradition prefigures Revelation 12:7–10 and shows a long standing conflict between Satan and Israel (with Michael) that can be described as ancient. The description of “serpent of old” could refer to Satan as the adversary who has such a long standing conflict with Israel. Since Israel is nowhere in existence by Genesis 3 context, the long standing conflict which Satan has with Israel must be understood from a different context than the Genesis temptation.

There is no direct comment or description of the creation or the Fall of humanity in this Revelation 12 context, so it should not be read on to the text. However, there is the possibility that such an apocalyptic text is framing things in a grand mythological manner common among the ancient near-East and Greek context (Gunkel 1895, pp. 171-398, esp. 379-98; Deiterich 1891, pp. 117-22; Bousset 1894, 1906, pp. 350-56; Fontenrose et al. 1959, p. 210; Aune 1998, pp. 670-93; Lucan 1928, p. 1685, sect. 60.5.79-81; Lucian 1945, sect. 300.9.). However, Jewish use of combat myths does not embrace such mythology to affirm its reality, but rather polemicizes such myths to celebrate the victory and power of the monotheistic God, Who metaphorically destroys the mythological chaos serpent Rahab and Leviathan as an ongoing threatening agent (Job 41:1; Pss. 74:14; 87:4; 89:10; 104:26; Isa. 27:1; 51:9). Within this Biblical emphasis, it would be more consistent to see Revelation 12 as broadly metaphorical after the pattern of apocalyptic genre, rather than precisely descriptive of a real being. So if combat myths are used in Revelation 12 they do not seem to be in the Biblical use of polemic, and

the myths would have been altered to a Christianized version to include Messiah Jesus. I would prefer to see Revelation consistent with the abundant use of metaphors present in apocalyptic genre rather than a modified appropriation of chaos mythology.

The primary description of Satan in this context is as a dragon (δράκων; 7 times in the context), though he is mentioned in passing (2 times in the context) as a serpent utilizing the same word ὄφις as the LXX does of the snakes. This description of Satan as a “serpent of old” (ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος) in this context would likely indicate: 1) the long standing conflict that Satan has with Israel, the Messiah Jesus, or the people that surround Christ, as the context of Revelation 12: 1-6 develops (also Rev. 2:9–10, 13, 24; 3:9). Thus this conflict would likely be over a thousand years long by the time of John’s writing and is a couple more millennium to our day. Eschatologically, Satan continues the conflict when he is released after the future millennium by then deceiving some on the field of battle to try to destroy the saints, but Satan and his allies are destroyed (Rev. 20:2, 7–10). Other options include: 2) Satan’s involvement near creation and the Fall, or 3) the mythological longstanding conflict in the heavenlies.

To help decide between these options a word study of ἀρχαῖος (of old) is in order. Some take umbrage in the root of ἀρχαῖος being that of “beginning” (ἀρχή) and Liddell and Scott (1996, p. 251) defining the term “from beginning or origin”. This option would support view two or three above. With no mention of creation or Fall, there would actually be more evidence between these options in favor of the mythological serpent view. However, no evidence is marshaled for this basic definition by Liddell and Scott for this meaning, only an allusion to the root ἀρχή. Based on the analysis above of Johannine writing, ἀρχή refers to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry 81% of the time (Jn. 2:11; 6:64; 8:25, 44; 15:27; 16:4; 1 Jn. 1:1; 2:7 [2x], 13–14, 24 [2x]; 3:8, 11; 2 Jn. 5–6). Furthermore, Liddell and Scott’s top three definitions with evidence are: “ancient,” “old fashioned” and “former.” Here we need to be careful that we do not define the meaning of a term by its root (the root fallacy; Carson 1996, pp. 28-33), for the meaning of terms is defined by their use. So the meaning of ἀρχαῖος is best understood as “a former time” based on Jewish-Christian use of and before the time John writes Revelation (i.e.,

LXX, N.T., and Josephus). These meanings of this term can be separated as follows: 1) before the flood (3 millennium years; 2 Pet. 2:5); 2) the era of Moses and the conquest (400–700 years; Pss. 44:1[43:2]; 76:5[6]; 78[79]:8; Isa. 25:1; 37:26; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 7.171); 3) post-Mosaic torah teaching which the listeners have heard (1400 to 1 years; Mt. 5:21, 27, 33; Acts 15:21); 4) Jesus was viewed by some as a resurrected prophet (800–600 years; Lk. 9:8, 19); 5) ambiguous former judgment or wisdom (Judg. 5:21; 1 Sam. 24:13[14]; 1 Kgs. 5:10; Isa. 22:9, 11; *Ben Sirach*, 1897, 39:1; *Wisdom of Solomon*, 1973, 8:8; 13:10; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 9.264); 6) three to six decades (Ps. 142:5; Isa. 43:18; Lam. 1:7; 2:17; Acts 21:16; *Ben Sirach*, 1897, 9:10; *2 Maccabees* 1897, 6:22.); 7) about sixteen years before, around the founding of Christianity (Acts 15:7); 8) within the last few years when the old character was disposed of and we were made new in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17); and 9) in the surrounding context (Ps. 138:5). None of these ἀρχαῖος texts takes this term as referring to the creation or Fall of humanity. Only one of these texts (2 Pet. 2:5) or 3% places the term as ancient in the early pre-flood stage of humanity. Seven of these texts or 22% describes events of 400 to 700 years before the writing. Seven of these texts or 22% describe ἀρχαῖος as within the last few decades before writing. Eight of these texts or 25% present ἀρχαῖος as an ambiguous former era. A couple of instances indicate merely a few years. The emphasis of the N.T. use of ἀρχαῖος is that of since the torah and prophet era, or hundreds of years. Such a length of time would easily fit the longevity of conflict which Satan has with Israel. There is no need to conjecture about more time than this to require either the mythological serpent view (view 3 above) or involvement with the creation and Fall (view 2 above). The nearer context of Revelation 12 develops the hundreds of years hostility of Satan with Israel, and that parameter of time easily accounts for the serpent “of old” (ἀρχαῖος) reference and fits within 66% of the terms (LXX, N.T., and Josephus’) use. The main alternative to this use of ἀρχαῖος would be the last few decades, that also has seen Satan antagonistic to Israel and to Christ. So over 99% of the early Jewish-Christian use of ἀρχαῖος fits with the context emphasis that Satan as the “serpent of old” is probably an allusion to the longstanding conflict between Israel and Satan.

Fall or Defeat of Satan. Luke 10:18–19 identifies that while Jesus’ disciples were proclaiming Kingdom Satan fell from heaven like lightning with Jesus’ stated rationale, “Behold I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.” Notice there is no direct connection with the Fall in Genesis 3. Luke 10:19 is describing a present and future benefit of the disciples’ Kingdom ministry. This is similar to Christ’s ministry casting out demons and thus opposing Satan during His earthly ministry (e.g., Mt. 12:22–37; Lk. 11:14–26). These texts do not refer to the Genesis 3 events but rather focus on the present Kingdom ministry of Jesus and His disciples.

Poythress claims that **Colossians 2:15** and **Hebrews 2:14** are to be identified with Genesis 3:15 in teaching the defeat of Satan (Poythress 2007). However, neither Colossians 2:15, nor Hebrews 2:14 say anything about the Genesis 3 event. They do join ample texts that highlight angels of various orders will be rendered into submission and some judged (e.g., Eph. 3:10; 1 Cor. 15:24; 1 Pet. 3:22). Christ’s triumph over angels and especially Satan is truly Christ as Victor. However, none of these texts refers to Genesis 3.

Ezekiel 28:11–19 does not mention “Satan” nor describe what relation the described cherub event has to Genesis 3. However, it does describe a cherub in the garden of Eden in a beautiful non-fallen condition and there are cherubim in Genesis 3 that are described that way (Gen. 3:23–24; Ezek. 28:12–14). The cherubim described in the Genesis 3 account are defending the way to the tree of Life. There is no mention in Genesis 3 or Ezekiel 28 of any cherub named Satan behind the snake. So if Satan is being described in Ezekiel 28, then I have more Biblical evidence for humanity falling first before this cherub does as it remains in a nonfallen condition in the garden of Eden to defend the way to the tree of life. The cherub in Ezekiel 28 is especially involved in the sin of corrupting its wisdom through unrighteousness of trade and violence, which only makes sense as occurring when there is a substantial human population already present (Ezek. 28:16–18). There is no mention in Ezekiel 28 of this cherub involved in the initial temptation and fall of humanity.

LIKELY SOURCE OF SATAN VIEW

So where does this resilient tradition of Satan as the agent behind the snake come from? Jeffrey Russell (1977, pp. 207-9) claims that the first century pseudepigraphal works *The Books of Adam and Eve* and the *Apocalypse of Moses* are the first to identify Satan as tempting Adam and Eve in the garden. Russell explains that there is a consensus among historians that this is the effect of Iranian Zoroastrianism on these texts. Under this influence, Judaism identified the *Ahriman* myth (a dualistic god of evil which takes the form of a snake to destroy happiness by the two men eating some fruit; *Zendavesta*, Th. 3; Westergaard 1993, pp. 54-55, 62) and conflated it with a chief angel Sammael and the apocryphal text *Wisdom of Solomon* 2:24 “by the envy of the devil death entered into the world.” *The Life of Adam and Eve* 33 speaks of “the adversary, the devil...[who]deceived Eve.” However, in *1 Enoch* 69:6 one of the lesser angels, Gadreel, is identified as leading Eve astray through the guise of a serpent. So in sectarian second Temple Judaism, the tempter in the Fall is an angel but there is disagreement about the name (devil, Sammael, Gadreel) of whom it is who tempts Eve. Furthermore, I don’t think that we want to identify with a view that has syncretized Zoroastrian myth as its root as seen through the lens of rejected Jewish sectarian writings. I think that interpreters see Satan in Genesis 3 because they assume one of the less contextualized options for the Biblical text, inclined by this second Temple Jewish tradition because the majority of Christianity follows it. However, I see no clear Biblical text that places Satan as involved with the temptation and fall of humans. Furthermore, remember that mainstream Pharisaic Judaism as evident in Rabbinic Judaism unanimously identifies the Genesis serpent with a snake, not Satan, and even some from sectarian Judaism join with them (*Jubilees* 3.17–19, 23; *Sibylline Oracle* 1.40–45, 59–61; *Greek Apocalypse of Ezra* 2.17; *Genesis Rabbah* 19.1; 20.3–4; 21.4; *Exodus Rabbah* 3.12; *Numbers Rabbah* 14.12; 19.22; *Koheleth Rabbah* 10.1; Rabbi Yose in *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, 1955, 1.17.1.E).

CONCLUSION

How much do we let later texts govern our reading of earlier texts like Genesis 3? I am of the opinion that earlier texts should be read in their context. Later texts

that are clear can further inform about the activities and characters that an earlier text discusses. However, the meaning of an earlier text should not be changed by texts that enter on the scene a millennium later. Furthermore, the Biblical canon is that which has the authority. If the Biblical texts are at best ambiguous about placing Satan in the fall event, then I think we should resist reading them through the bias of the fringe Jewish sectarian sources that are clear about placing Satan in the fall event. This is especially the case because to read Genesis 3 with Satan involved turns the event into a quasi-dualism like Zoroastrianism proposed with the humans overpowered by a greater force (“the devil made us do it”), rather than reading the text as humans (the co-regents with God) throwing away their privilege when confronted by an animal that we had the power to resist.

Thus, the serpent (שָׁרָפָה) in Genesis 3 is presented likely a venomous snake, created by God with this venomous capacity within the good creation. The venomous capacity was likely already within God’s good creation. However, there does not seem to be any use of the venomous snake bite until after the Fall in Genesis 3 (e.g., Gen. 3:15; Num. 21:6–9). This use of venom in snake bite is never said to be removed either, only that in the Kingdom, the hostility between snakes and humans will be removed, such that children in the Kingdom are not at risk playing in the viper’s den (Isa. 11:8–9). “They will not hurt or destroy” in that day (Isa. 11:9).

In Genesis 3, evil is not invading on the back of one greater than man, but rather a subordinate snake as an expression of the creation is seen as rebelling against humans who are the miniature sovereign.

ENDNOTES

1. It is coincidental in *The Gilgamesh Epic* tablet 11, column 8 that a snake ate the thorny bush “reborn man” collected from under the sea by Gilgamesh and thus robs him of immortality and enables the snake in the story to molt his skin every month

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