

Illustrating *han-nāḥāš* in the Garden of Eden

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how *han-nāḥāš* ‘the snake’ in Gen 3.1–7 has been represented pictorially from Roman times to the present. The 435+ pictorial representations of the Fall of Man scene in Gen 3.1–7 gathered by Cummings (2020) show that *han-nāḥāš* is represented primarily as a real snake. However, from the 12th century through to the Michelangelo fresco in the 16th century *han-nāḥāš* is also depicted as Lilith, the female demonic figure in Judaic mythology. There are also some images of the garden of Eden scene where *han-nāḥāš* appears as a dragon. Basically, the artist has to choose one interpretation of who or what *han-nāḥāš* is and portray that understanding pictorially. The picture then fixes the interpretation of the text to that chosen by the artist. However, when the intricacies of the various characterizations of “the snake” (*han-nāḥāš*) in Gen 3.1–5 are examined in order to decide if this is (a) a real snake, (b) a seraph (or other celestial being), (c) a real snake possessed by Satan, or (d) Satan appearing as a snake there are conflicting facets of each characterization which render each of the possible interpretations incoherent.

Introduction

If you think that illustrating the Fall of Man story will help towards understanding the text, then think again. In this paper we examine how the Fall of Man scene described in Gen 3.1–7 has been depicted pictorially from Roman times to the present. In particular we look at how *han-nāḥāš* ‘the snake’ has been represented. This is because there have been multiple suggestions in the literature as to who or what *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3.1–7 is. He has been viewed variously as (a) a real snake, (b) a seraph (or other celestial being), (c) a real snake possessed by Satan, or (d) Satan appearing as a snake. However, it turns out that when these characterizations are examined carefully there are conflicting facets of each characterization which render each of the possible interpretations incoherent. It is argued that *han-nāḥāš* is, in fact, a literary character illustrative of a “knowing person” to carry the plot of the story forward. We also research where the inspiration for *han-nāḥāš* in the garden of Eden came from. Day (2013) critiques a number of proposals for the inspiration of *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3 and concludes that the most likely source is the serpent in the Gilgamesh Epic who stole the plant that gave eternal life from Gilgamesh. However, the popular understanding that *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3 is Satan cannot be correct as the snake in Gen 3.1–5 is not identified with Satan until the inter-testamental period (Wisdom of Solomon 2.24).

Cummings (2020) has gathered over 435 pictorial representations of the Fall of Man scene in Gen 3.1–7 involving *han-nāḥāš*, Eve, and Adam, spanning from Roman times to the present. Examination of portrayals of the Fall of Man in the garden of Eden shows that *han-nāḥāš* is most often depicted as a real snake, sometimes on the ground near the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in earlier illustrations coiled around the trunk of the tree and in later illustrations in the branches of the tree. In some illustrations *han-nāḥāš* is depicted as a snake standing upright on its tail on the ground like a human being. From the 12th century through to the Michelangelo fresco in the 16th century *han-nāḥāš* is depicted as Lilith, the female demonic figure in Judaic mythology. The head of *han-nāḥāš* in this case is that of a woman. There are also some images of the garden of Eden scene where *han-nāḥāš* appears as a dragon. What is clear is that any depiction of the Fall of Man scene in Gen 3.1–7 has to adopt a particular interpretation of the text including who or what *han-nāḥāš* is. The picture then fixes the interpretation of the text to that chosen by the artist.

Interpretating the identity of *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3

There are at least four suggestions in the literature as to who or what *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3 is: he is (a) a real snake, (b) a seraph (or other celestial being), (c) a real snake possessed by Satan, or (d) Satan appearing as a snake.¹ However, there is a coherency difficulty with each interpretation.

(a) *han-nāḥāš* is a real snake, i.e., the most shrewd (*‘ārūm*) of all the animals YHWH Elohim made (Gen 3.1). This interpretation is supported by the curse made on the snake in Gen 3.14–15 that he will crawl on his belly and eat dust all the days of his life. This is the present condition of real snakes. Early translations, such as the Genesis Aramaic Targum and the LXX, interpret *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3.1 as a real snake. The main problem with this interpretation is that real snakes are not in fact the most shrewd (intelligent) of all the animals.² Studies of animal cognition have found that chimpanzees, bottlenose dolphins, elephants, African grey parrots, rats, crows, dogs and pigeons are all more intelligent than snakes.³ The dolphin actually has the highest brain size to body size ratio of all animals second only to human beings in this regard. So, the dolphin may well be the most intelligent of all animals and not the snake. The description in Gen 3.1 of the snake (*han-nāḥāš*) being more crafty (*‘ārūm*) than any other animal is instead an expression of folk belief. For pre-scientific people, the behaviour of snakes and their facial features (e.g., the unblinking, lidless eyes) seemed to imply that they were intelligent. Since the story of the interaction between the snake and Eve in Gen 3.1–5 requires that the snake be cleverer/more knowing than Eve, then it means that *han-nāḥāš* introduced in Gen 3.1 cannot be a real snake. Another problem with the interpretation that *han-nāḥāš* is a real snake is that the created animals all come in male and female pairs so that they can reproduce their kind (cf. Gen 7.2–3) but Gen 3.1 refers to the snake as an individual. If the snake was only created as an individual male how would it reproduce? If there was a female snake somewhere what happened to her when the male snake was cursed in Gen 3.14–15? This interpretation also does not explain how the snake as an animal created after YHWH Elohim spoke to Adam (Gen 2.16–17) knew what YHWH Elohim had said to the man about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

(b) *han-nāḥāš* is a seraph (or other celestial being).⁴ This interpretation assumes that the snake must symbolize a celestial being since this creature knows the counsel of God (cf. Job 1.6, 2.1 where the angelic beings present themselves before YHWH). The logical candidate of choice is a seraph as this creature has the highest rank in the hierarchy of celestial beings (see Isa 6.2). It is also supported by the fact that *šārāp* means “fiery (winged) serpent” elsewhere in scripture (Num 21.6, 8–9, Deu 8.15, Isa 30.6). But the problem with this interpretation is that the seraphim in Isa 6.2 are supernatural beings with wings and feet. For the curse in Gen 3.14–15 to apply then this supernatural being would have had to have been transformed into a real snake. But then the snake would not have been the most shrewd of all the natural animals (*ḥayyat ḥaš-šādeh*) YHWH Elohim made in Gen 2.19 (Gen 3.1), since he would have been created as a *šārāp*, an angelic being. The same reasoning would apply if *han-nāḥāš* was created as any kind of celestial being.

(c) *han-nāḥāš* is a real snake possessed by a celestial being opposed to God and mankind. In support of this interpretation is the fact that this celestial being is depicted as the satan (the accuser) or the devil (ὁ διαβόλος, the slanderer) elsewhere in scripture. Also, this creature opposed to God is described as a great and fearsome dragon (serpent) in Revelation. However, the snake in Gen 3.1–5 is not identified with Satan until the inter-testamental period (Wisdom of Solomon 2.24). Also, against this interpretation is the fact that it is the snake which is cursed above all

¹ According to one interpretation in Rabbinic literature, the serpent represents sexual desire; another interpretation is that the snake is the *yetzer hara* (the congenital desire to do evil by violating the will of God). Modern Rabbinic ideas include seeing the story as a psychological allegory where Adam is reasoning faculties, Eve is the emotional faculties, and the serpent is the hedonic sexual/physical faculties.

² With respect to what constitutes an animal, scientists have found that a brainless, single-celled organism is capable of solving mazes and even learning. This remarkable organism is broadly known as slime mould, though there are many kinds.

³ See <https://10mosttoday.com/10-most-intelligent-animals-in-the-world/>, for example.

⁴ See Leith (2004).

animals (both domestic and wild) to crawl on his belly in Gen 3.14–15 rather than the celestial being. Instead, Satan roams the earth to and fro (Job 1.7) and the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Pet 5.8). Also, since the snake is described as the most crafty of all the animals God made (Gen 3.1) this would imply that God created the snake possessed by the devil?

(d) *han-nāḥāš* is Satan appearing to Eve as a snake. In support of this interpretation is the fact that in 2 Cor 11.3 Paul identifies the snake in the garden of Eden with Satan. In 2 Cor 11.14 Paul also warns the Corinthians that Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light, a servant of righteousness.

2 Cor 11.3: But I am afraid that as the serpent (ὁ ὄφις) deceived Eve by his cunning (τῇ πανουργίᾳ αὐτοῦ), your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (ESV)⁵

Against this interpretation is again the fact that it is the snake which is cursed above all animals (both domestic and wild) to crawl on his belly in Gen 3.14–15 not Satan. Satan is allowed to roam the earth to and fro (Job 1.7) and the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Pet 5.8). Also, it is the snake that is described as the most crafty of all the animals God made (Gen 3.1) not Satan, and the snake in Gen 3.1–5 exhibits this *‘ārûm* by speaking deceptively to Eve (cf. 2 Cor 11.3). So, how could it be Satan appearing as a snake?

When one explores the intricacies of the various characterizations of “the snake” (*han-nāḥāš*) in Gen 3.1–5 in order to decide if this is (a) a real snake, (b) a seraph (or other celestial being), (c) a real snake possessed by Satan, or (d) Satan appearing as a snake there are conflicting facets of each characterization which render each of the possible interpretations incoherent. Nevertheless, the NIV and NJB Study Bibles opt for the Satan appearing as a snake interpretation, while the ESV and Jewish Study Bibles say *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3.1 is introduced into the story as a real snake. Note the conundrum in the NIV note which says the snake is one of God’s good creatures. If so, why is it the snake that is cursed and not Satan?

The NIV Study Bible note says: The great deceiver clothed himself as a serpent, one of God’s good creatures.

The NJB Study Bible note says: The snake here serves as disguise for a being hostile to God and an enemy of the human race; this being is identified with the Adversary or the Devil in the Book of Wisdom, in the NT and in all Christian tradition.

The ESV Study Bible note says: The speaking serpent is suddenly introduced into the story with minimum detail. Nothing is mentioned about its origin, other than that it is one of the beasts of the field.

The Jewish Study Bible note says: Unlike some later Jewish and Christian literature, Genesis does not identify the talking snake with Satan or any other demonic being.

Mat 10.16 provides an insight into how the snake (*han-nāḥāš*) in Gen 3.1 should be regarded. With regard to Jesus describing snakes as “wise” in Mat 10.16 Morris (1992) says, “Serpents were widely thought to be clever as well as hostile to people (cf. Gen. 3:1).” He cites Foerster (1976): W. Foerster points out the widespread “idea of the cunning and malice of snakes, as indicated in the expression ‘to nourish a snake in one’s bosom,’ related proverbs, and many phrases” (*TDNT*, V, p. 567). Wikipedia says: “Snakes were central to many mythologies because of their perceived quality of being both familiar and exotic. The behaviour of snakes and their facial features (e.g., the unblinking, lidless eyes) seemed to imply that they were intelligent, that they lived by reason and not instinct, and yet their thought-processes were as alien to humans as their ways of movement.” So, in Mat 10.16 Jesus is referring to the folk belief that snakes are intelligent, cunning, shrewd, wise. Alongside of this is the

⁵ Scriptures marked ESV are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

fact that the dove has been a symbol of peace and innocence for thousands of years in many different cultures.

Mat 10.16: “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise (φρόνιμοι) as serpents (ὄφεις) and innocent (ἀκέραιοι) as doves (περιστεραί). (ESV)

It can be shown that Mat 10.16 alludes to Gen 3.1. First, BDB say ‘*ārûm* in Gen 3.1 has a negative sense ‘crafty, cunning’ (see Job 5.12) and a positive sense ‘shrewd, sensible’ (see Pro 12.23).

Job 15.12: He frustrates the devices of the crafty (‘*ārûm*), so that their hands achieve no success. (ESV)

Pro 12.23: A prudent (‘*ārûm*) man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly. (ESV)

Second, the LXX translates the positive sense of ‘*ārûm* in Gen 3.1 with φρονιμώτατος. By contrast, the English translation of the Genesis Aramaic Targum has: “Now the serpent was more skilled in *evil* than all the beasts of the field which YHWH Elohim had made.”

Gen 3.1a: ‘O [the] δὲ [but] ὄφις [snake] ἦν [it was] φρονιμώτατος [most skilled] πάντων [of all] τῶν [of the] θηρίων [wild animals] τῶν [of the] ἐπὶ [upon] τῆς [the] γῆς [earth], (LXX)

Third, the same Greek word φρόνιμοι ‘considerate, thoughtful, prudent, discreet, sagacious, wise’ is used in Mat 10.16 as is used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew ‘*ārûm*. The author of Matthew is therefore referring to the LXX version of Gen 3.1 rather than to the Hebrew scriptures.

So, the description in Gen 3.1 of the snake (*han-nāḥāš*) being more crafty (‘*ārûm*) than any other animal is also an expression of folk belief the same as snakes being regarded as wise (φρόνιμοι) in Mat 10.16. There is further biblical evidence that supports the exegesis that (*han-nāḥāš*) is clever (‘*ārûm*) according to ancient folk belief. Psalms 58.4–5 and Ecclesiastes 10.11 show that the ancient Israelites believed snakes could hear the sound of the snake charmer. However, snakes have no external, visible ear, so they do not hear sounds as humans do. But it is not quite right to say that snakes are deaf. They have vestiges of the apparatus for hearing inside their heads, and that setup is attached to their jaw bones, so they feel vibrations very well and may hear low-frequency airborne sounds. Snakes actually respond to the movement of the snake charmer rather than to any sound he makes.

Psalms 58.4–5: ⁴ They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear, ⁵ so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter. (ESV)

Ecclesiastes 10.11: If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer. (ESV)

Finally, there is a word play in the Hebrew where Adam and Eve are characterized as ‘*ārūmmîm* ‘naked, innocent, ignorant’ in Gen 2.25 and the snake (*han-nāḥāš*) is characterized as ‘*ārûm* ‘crafty, shrewd, knowledgeable’ in Gen 3.1. This word play contrasts Adam and Eve as “unknowing” with the snake who was “knowing.” This shows that the snake is in the story because he is ‘*ārûm*. The definite reference in *han-nāḥāš* indicates that the author is identifying the animal known as *nāḥāš* as the most ‘*ārûm* of all the animals YHWH Elohim had made. However, the idea that the snake is “knowing” is folk belief based on the pre-scientific observation of snakes. Therefore, *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3.1 cannot refer to a real snake as real snakes are not more crafty, cunning, clever or knowledgeable than any other animal. In Gen 3.1–5 *han-nāḥāš* presents himself as someone who is “more knowing” than God. He is an anthropomorphic talking animal who possesses human-like qualities of having knowledge of the things of God. Talking animals are a common theme in folk tales and fables, as well as children’s literature. The usage of talking animals enables storytellers to combine the basic characteristics of the animal with human behaviour, to apply metaphor, and to entertain children.

Note that Balaam’s donkey (Num 22.21–33) is a different type of talking animal to the snake in Gen 3.1–5. Balaam’s donkey is a regular donkey that the Lord miraculously enables to speak to Balaam (Num 22.28). He is not a talking animal who possesses human-like qualities as the snake is in Gen 3.1.

Num 22.28: Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?” (ESV)

Han-nāḥāš, on the other hand, is introduced in Gen 3.1 as a literary character illustrative of a “knowing person” to carry the plot of the story forward. The snake is introduced in Gen 3.1 as a created animal with the attribute of being ‘*ārûm* ‘clever/cunning/crafty’, more ‘*ārûm* than any other animal (both domestic and wild) that YHWH Elohim had made. The author begins with the folk belief that snakes are clever/cunning/crafty but then he extends that image to the snake being clever/cunning/crafty above and beyond all (*mik-kol*)⁶ other animals. This is the first clue that the author is not talking about snakes any more. Then the snake speaks. Real snakes do not speak. That is not an attribute they have. So, this cannot be a real snake. Furthermore, 2 Cor 11.3 tells us that the cunning of the snake is exhibited in his speech. Real snakes do not demonstrate their cleverness/cunning/craftiness in their speech. Instead, the author has successfully combined the basic characteristics of the snake—thought of as being cunning, crafty, clever—with the human-like character introduced into the story as *han-nāḥāš*. This is classic authorial strategy of using a talking animal to express metaphor. The Fall of Man story in Gen 3.1–7 is a parable, a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson.

The cursing in Gen 3.14 and the prophecy in Gen 3.15 then apply metaphorically to *han-nāḥāš* and not to real snakes. The author probably adopted the strategy to introduce *han-nāḥāš* as a talking animal so that he would not be thought to be deity. The pagan creation mythologies often featured deities fighting each other. Also, since the author is speaking metaphorically it does not matter that snakes are not actually clever/cunning/crafty. If snakes have the attribute of being the most cunning of all the animals YHWH Elohim made (Gen 3.1) then it should be the case that snakes can speak deceptively to people today. However, if this attribution is for the purpose of creating *han-nāḥāš* as a literary character then it would not be expected that snakes today would have this ability. Wenham (1987: 50) provides a literary analysis of Gen 2.4–3.24. It is a single unified section (act) of seven scenes with a different set of actors for each scene. In the plotline *han-nāḥāš* is the antagonist to YHWH Elohim. Finally, if *han-nāḥāš* is a literary character then Gen 2.3–3.24 cannot be a historical account.

Identifying the source of *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3

If *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3 is a literary character rather than a historical entity where did the inspiration come from? Day (2013)⁷ critiques a number of proposals for the inspiration of *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3. Day says the serpent in the garden of Eden is popularly equated with the devil. However, modern scholars agree that this was a later identification and not the original meaning, but there is no consensus as to what the original background of the serpent was. His online article critiques a number of the proposals that have been made and suggests a possible background for the serpent:

For Adam and Eve the serpent in the Garden of Eden represented the voice of temptation but it needs to be noted that for the original writer, the Yahwist (or J) source, the serpent was not equated with Satan (the Devil). The concept of Satan developed only later (first attested as a personal name c. 300 BCE. in 1 Chr 21.1⁸), and we find him first equated with the Eden serpent in the apocryphal book of Wisdom (Wis 2.24, “but through the Devil’s envy death entered the world”⁹).

⁶ The preposition *min* ‘from’ is ambiguous. It can have a partitive or comparative meaning. If *min* has a partitive sense then the snake (*han-nāḥāš*) is one of the beasts of the field. He is an animal. If *min* has a comparative sense then the snake is not one of the beasts of the field. He is something else.

⁷ See <https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/2015/04/day398028>.

⁸ Earlier references in Zech 3.1–2 and Job 1–2 speak of “the Satan” (or the Adversary) but these do not allude to the fully fledged concept of the Devil, the leader of all the host of evil over against God, but refer to the figure in an earlier stage of its development. Thus, in Job 1–2 the Satan is still one of the sons of God, God’s heavenly court.

⁹ Sometimes this verse has been understood instead as referring to Cain’s murder of Abel in Genesis 4. But it is more natural to see the reference as alluding to Adam, Eve and the serpent in Genesis 3, since it was already then that death for humanity was instituted (Gen 3.19; Paul in Rom 5.12 [Adam]; Ecclus 25.24 [Eve]), and in the Septuagint the Greek word *diabolos*, “Devil”, used here, regularly translates “Satan”, with whom the Eden serpent became equated. It is significant that Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.1.4 similarly attributes the serpent’s temptation of Eve to jealousy, namely jealousy of the blessings which he thought Adam and Eve would receive if they obeyed God. In contrast, it was Cain himself who was envious that Abel’s offering had been preferred by God to his own.

We may compare Rev 12.9, 20.2, where we read of “that ancient serpent, who is [called] the Devil and Satan”. Less well known is the fact that the serpent is equated in 1 Enoch 69.6 with Gader’el, one of the wicked angels who descended from heaven to have sex with women on the earth (elaborating the story in Gen 6.1–4). Genesis 3.1, however, refers to the Eden serpent as one of Yahweh’s earthly creatures, a “beast of the field”. It is certainly the case that it is the ancestor of later ordinary serpents known to humanity (cf. Gen 3.14–15), but in its original pre-cursed state the serpent not only has the capacity to speak but also to have supernormal knowledge, which makes it more than an ordinary serpent at that point, a kind of magical animal.¹⁰ We may recall Balaam’s donkey in Num 22.28–30 for the only other example of a talking animal in the Old Testament, one moreover with comparable supernatural awareness, a passage which has likewise been traditionally ascribed to the J source. This attribution gains further support from the fact that the Balaam narrative in Num 24.17, 22 similarly knows a Cain [Kain] and a Seth [Sheth], here with clear ethnic overtones, the names of figures who also appear in the J source in Genesis 4.

Turning to the ancient Near Eastern background, it should be noted that a few scholars have tried to see the Eden serpent as symbolic of Canaanite religion. Thus, F.F. Hvidberg saw it as symbolic of the god Baal, a view recently adopted by B.T. Arnold,¹¹ while Nick Wyatt¹² understands it rather as symbolic of the god El. Both views are unconvincing. Baal was never symbolized by a serpent in Canaanite religion (or anywhere else in the Old Testament)—indeed, it was Baal who defeated the sea serpent Leviathan in Canaanite mythology—and nor is El, who is universally viewed positively throughout the Old Testament (contra Wyatt), and is actually equated with Yahweh. Again, in a BBC TV programme broadcast in 2011 (episode 3 of *The Bible’s Buried Secrets*), Francesca Stavrakopoulou claimed that the serpent symbolized snake worship; she seems to be thinking of the bronze serpent Nehushtan. She follows Wyatt in thinking that the expulsion of Adam and Eve symbolized the destruction of Jerusalem and exile of 586 BCE. But Nehushtan, which was allegedly made by Moses (cf. Num 21.4–9), had already been destroyed by King Hezekiah a century earlier than the exile (2 Kgs 18:4). Moreover, Genesis 3 does not speak of worship of the serpent. More generally, J. Coppens and J. A. Soggin¹³ saw the serpent as symbolic of the Canaanite fertility cult. It is true that there is evidence suggesting that the serpent could symbolize fertility in Canaanite religion¹⁴ but there is no particular reason to find that here. The knowledge of good and evil which the serpent tempts the first humans to acquire is quite unrelated to the fertility cult.¹⁵ Moreover, the fertility cult is not depicted as an important concern of the Yahwist source elsewhere, so it would be surprising to find it represented as the archetypal sin at the time of creation.

Recently a quite different and highly original attempt to find a Canaanite background to the serpent in Genesis 3, indeed to the Garden of Eden story more generally, has been put forward by Marjo Korpel and Johannes de Moor.¹⁶ Basing themselves on their interpretation of the Ugaritic

¹⁰ Cf. T. C. Vriezen, *Onderzoek naar de Paradijsvoorstelling bij de oude Semietische Volken* (Wageningen: H. Veenman, 1937), 177.

¹¹ F.F. Hvidberg, “The Canaanitic Background of Gen. i–iii”, *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960), 285–94, at 287–90; B.T. Arnold, *Genesis* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 62–63.

¹² N. Wyatt, “Interpreting the Creation and Fall Story in Genesis 2–3”, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93 (1981), 10–21, at 18–20.

¹³ J. Coppens, *La connaissance du bien et du mal at le péché du Paradis* (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1948), passim; J.A. Soggin, “The Fall of Man in the Third chapter of Genesis”, in idem, *Old Testament and Oriental Studies* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1975), 88–111, at 94–100.

¹⁴ See the data presented in K.R. Joines, “The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1965), 245–58, at 246–50; idem, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament* (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), 63–73. She points, for example, to the frequent association of the serpent in Canaanite iconography with the nude goddess Qudshu, in addition to bulls and water, all of which were symbolic of fertility or life.

¹⁵ On the meaning of the knowledge of good and evil, see J. Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11* (LHBOTS 592; London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 41–44.

¹⁶ M.C.A. Korpel and J.C. de Moor, *Adam, Eve, and the Devil: A New Beginning* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 65; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014). A summary by Korpel and de Moor of this book can also be

texts *KTU* 1.100 and 107, they conclude, in the words of their book's blurb, that "El, the creator deity, and his wife Asherah lived in a vineyard or garden on the slopes of Mt Ararat, known in the Bible as the mountain where Noah's ark came to rest. The first sinner was not a human being but an evil god called Horon who wanted to depose El. Horon was thrown down from the mountain of the gods, and in revenge he transformed the Tree of Life in the garden into the Tree of Death and enveloped the whole world in a poisonous fog. Adam was sent down to restore life on earth, but failed because Horon in the form of a huge serpent bit him. As a result Adam and his wife lost their immortality." Their book is erudite and makes fascinating reading, but Korpel and de Moor admit that the basis of their thesis is somewhat fragile. In fact, anyone who reads through the Ugaritic texts in question, say in Dennis Pardee's excellent edition,¹⁷ will see how virtually everything in Korpel and de Moor's summary account above is not explicitly in our preserved texts but has to be reconstructed in the gaps. For example, the idea that Horon wished to depose El and in consequence was thrown down from the mountain of the gods is pure supposition, based on what Korpel and de Moor think was referred to in a hypothetical missing tablet preceding *KTU* 1.107. Again, it should be noted that though *KTU* 1.100.65 refers to a "tree of death", nothing in the actual text implies that this had been transformed from a tree of life. But very significantly, I would note that the word *'adm*, which Korpel and de Moor understand as a reference to Adam, occurs only once in the whole of the preserved texts, in *KTU* 1.107.3, and the only other reference to Adam that Korpel and de Moor find has to be two-thirds reconstructed (*KTU* 1.107.21). Moreover, since *'adm* occurs everywhere else in Ugaritic as a word for "man", rather than a personal name, this is most likely the case here too (Korpel and de Moor's finding a personal name in *KTU* 1.179.9 again requires textual reconstruction). As a consequence of all this, I do not feel we can have confidence in the reconstruction, so it is unlikely that it lies behind Genesis 3. Accordingly, the Genesis serpent does not derive from the Canaanite god Horon. What I would agree is that El dwelt on a mountain in Armenia (not necessarily the mountain called Mt Ararat since mediaeval times), and that this is the location of the Garden of Eden in Gen 2.10–14, which derives from El's dwelling.¹⁸

If none of the above views is likely, is it still possible that the ancient Near Eastern background can shed light on the origin of the Eden serpent? Possibly it can. In the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh epic we read that it was a serpent¹⁹ that snatched and ate the plant of life which Gilgamesh had been seeking, thereby rejuvenating itself rather than Gilgamesh (Gilgamesh 11.305–307), just as it was a serpent that tempted Adam and Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit, thereby denying them access to the tree of life which granted immortality. But in addition to a life-depriving serpent and a life-giving plant or tree of life, both works imply that immortality is beyond the grasp of humans. It is thus possible that the Garden of Eden narrative represents a reworking of similar elements in

found on *The Bible and Interpretation* website, similarly entitled "Adam, Eve, and the Devil". An earlier version of this thesis was put forward by de Moor in "East of Eden", *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 100 (1988), 105–12.

¹⁷ See D. Pardee, *Les textes-para-mythologiques de la 24e campagne (1961)* (Ras Shamra-Ougarit IV; Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988), 193–226, 227–56; idem, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (Writings from the Biblical World, Society of Biblical Literature; Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 172–79, 179–91.

¹⁸ The Ugaritic texts repeatedly speak of El's mountain dwelling as being "at the source of the two rivers, amidst the source of the deeps" without indicating precisely where this is. The Canaanite-Hittite Elkunirsha myth, however, specifies that Elkunirsha (= El creator of the earth) dwelt at the source of the river Mala, i.e. Tigris; see J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 519. This can only be the western end of the Tigris in Armenia, which is mountainous, unlike the flat eastern end (cf. Ezk 28. 13, 14, 16, where Eden is set on a mountain, though here seemingly in Phoenicia). Similarly in Gen 2.10–14 the Garden of Eden is set in Armenia, since it is located at the source of four headwaters, including the Tigris and Euphrates, both of which rise in Armenia.

¹⁹ Å.W. Sjöberg, "Eve and the Chameleon", in W. B. Barrick and J. R. Spencer (eds.), *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Literature in Honor of G. W. Ahlström* (JSOTSup 31; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 217–25, at 221–23 claimed that the Gilgamesh epic and even perhaps Genesis 3 referred to a chameleon rather than a serpent, but this view has rightly failed to gain acceptance.

the Gilgamesh epic.²⁰ We have evidence that the Gilgamesh epic was known in Palestine and the Levant from a fragment found at Megiddo dating to the fourteenth century BCE. as well as other Late Bronze Age fragments discovered at Ugarit and Emar, and even as late as the third century BCE. we find in Ecc 9.7–9 a virtual paraphrase of the words of Shiduri in the Old Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh epic (10.3.6–14) about the purpose of life.²¹ However, if Genesis 3 is a reworking of Gilgamesh we must grant that it is a radical reworking, since the plant of life was a source of rejuvenation, not immortality, and was to be found under water, as was the serpent, rather than on land. The dependence of Genesis 3 on the Gilgamesh epic must remain an interesting possibility rather than a certainty.

Recently James Charlesworth has written a massive book entitled *The Good and Evil Serpent*²² in which he argues that in the ancient Near East and classical world the serpent was mostly viewed positively, not negatively, and he claims this is also true of the Bible, including the serpent of Genesis 3.²³ However, while his ancient Near Eastern and classical material are fascinating, I would point out that most references in the Bible indicate that the serpent was viewed negatively,²⁴ and this is certainly the case in Genesis 3. Charlesworth claims that the serpent does not tempt Eve (it merely asks her a question!), it tells the truth (unlike God), is described as wise (not crafty), and is not a symbol of evil. However, if all this is true it becomes difficult to understand why the serpent should be so thoroughly cursed towards the end of the story so as to become the lowliest of creatures (Gen 3.14–15). Again, the fact that Eve declares “the serpent beguiled me” (Gen 3.13)—an assertion accepted by God (Gen 3.14) – indicates that “crafty” rather than “wise” is the better translation of the Hebrew word *‘arum* used here to describe the serpent in Gen 3.1.²⁵ It is difficult to accept that there is no element of temptation in the serpent’s questioning of Eve. Moreover, it is clear that the serpent does not speak the whole truth, since while the eyes of Adam and Eve are indeed opened so as to know good and evil as a result of eating the forbidden fruit, as the serpent had predicted, it fails to inform them that they will also be expelled from the Garden of Eden as a result of their disobedience, thereby denying them access to the tree of life and ensuring their eventual death, even if they do not die immediately (the latter seemingly a consequence of the divine compassion²⁶).

At the conclusion of the cursing of the serpent in Gen 3.15 God declares to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; they shall strike your head, and you will strike their heel.” In its original meaning, cohering with character of Gen 3.14–19 as an aetiology of the state of the world as the Israelites knew it, this is clearly

²⁰ Cf. S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963), 130, 135, 139; J. H. Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent* (Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 294–96.

²¹ See J. Day, “Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom of Israel and its Appropriation in the Book of Proverbs”, in J. Day, R. P. Gordon and H.G.M. Williamson (eds.), *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 55–70, at 59–60, which notes six parallels in identical order between Ecc 9.7–9 and the words of Shiduri. However, it is more likely that the flood story in Genesis 6–9 is dependent on the Atrahasis epic rather than on Gilgamesh; see Day, *From Creation to Babel*, 98–112.

²² Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent* (see above n. 13 for full details).

²³ For Genesis 1 see Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 275–324.

²⁴ Most frequently we read of serpents biting people (Gen 49.17; Pro 23.32; Ecc 10.8, 11; Jer 8.17; Amos 5.19; 9.3); they also symbolize the wicked (Psa 40.5, ET 3; 58.5, ET 4) and are mentioned in connection with the dreadful wilderness and scorpions (Deu 8.15). In addition, the chaos monster defeated by Yahweh is depicted as a serpent (Job 26.13; Isa 27.1). However, the bronze serpent Nehushtan is viewed positively in Num 21.8–9 (unlike in 2 Kgs 18.4, when it had become idolatrous), as are the apparently partially serpentine heavenly seraphim of Isaiah 6.

²⁵ The word *‘arum* clearly has negative overtones in the book of Job (cf. Job 5.12; 15.5), “crafty”, and positive overtones in Proverbs (cf. Pro 12.16, 23; 13.16; 14.8, 15, 18; 22.3; 27.12), “wise”, “shrewd”, “sensible”, “prudent”, “clever”. Note further the Yahwist’s liking for word play in referring to the first couple as “naked” (*‘arummim*) in Gen 2:25, the verse immediately preceding the allusion to the serpent as crafty (*‘arum*). Contrast Gen 3.7, 10, 11, where the word “naked” is spelled *‘erummim* and *‘erom*.

²⁶ See Day, *From Creation to Babel*, 38–41.

referring to the enmity between snakes and human beings, with snakes biting the heels of human beings and humans treading on snakes' heads. What is here translated "they shall strike" is literally "he shall strike", the "he" being a collective singular, referring to Eve's offspring or seed (Hebrew *zera* ' , a masculine word). There is no indication that one side would be victorious over the other in the ongoing hostilities (even if striking the head sounds more severe than striking the heel) and an eschatological meaning would be completely out of place in this aetiological context. However, for centuries a popular Christian understanding of these words understood them as a prediction of Christ's victory over Satan, a view first attested c. 180 CE. in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* 3.23.7 and 5.21.1. This passage of Genesis thus became known as the *Protoevangelium*, the first declaration of the Gospel. While this is an interpretation that very few serious scholars today would entertain, this passage is still read out at some Christmas services with the traditional understanding in view.²⁷

It has, however, been suggested that the Greek Septuagint translation in the third century BCE already equated the "he" with the Messiah, in which case this would be the earliest known Messianic interpretation of Gen 3.15.²⁸ The evidence presented for this view is that the Septuagint still speaks of "he", although rendering "offspring" or "seed" by the Greek word *sperma*, which is neuter, despite the fact that everywhere else in the Septuagint of Genesis the Hebrew word *hu* ' , "he", is translated by a word of the appropriate gender in Greek, whether *autos*, "he", *aute*, "she" or *auto*, "it". The Septuagint's "he", it has therefore been argued, most naturally does not refer to Eve's offspring generally but to a specific masculine individual and it has been proposed that this is the Messiah. There is, however, a problem with this view. This is that it would be remarkable if the Septuagint understood the "he" as referring to the Messiah, since such an understanding is completely lacking in subsequent Jewish understanding of the verse. Even though the fulfilment of Gen 3.15 in the Messianic age is attested several centuries later in the Neofiti, Pseudo-Jonathan and Fragment Targums, the "he" is there still interpreted collectively (of the righteous Jews) and not of the Messiah.²⁹ In the light of all this it seems more likely that the Septuagint's "he" is simply an over-literal translation of the Hebrew. Nevertheless, the idea of the *Protoevangelium* did emerge from it in the early church.

Finally, it is interesting to note that in Gen 3.15 the Latin Vulgate reads "she" rather than "he" for whoever is to strike the head of the serpent. This is surprising, since Jerome was generally very concerned to adhere closely to the original Hebrew in his Vulgate translation. Indeed, in his *Quaestiones Hebraicae* in Genesim, when commenting on Gen 3.15, Jerome clearly presupposes the reading *ipse*, "he" and makes no reference to the *ipsa*, "she" reading. The "she" of the Vulgate, therefore, must be seen as a later scribal alteration of the text, and it was probably intended to equate the one striking the head of the serpent (Satan) with Eve, who has just been mentioned earlier in the verse as being at enmity with the serpent. However, many mediaeval and later exegetes within the Roman Catholic Church understood the Vulgate's "she" as referring to Mary, who is to join with Jesus in vanquishing the serpent Satan,³⁰ though modern Catholic critical scholars now rightly reject this understanding of Gen 3.15 and follow the Hebrew text (cf. New American Bible, New Jerusalem Bible).

Thus, Day suggests that the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent in Gen 3 is possibly/likely a reworking of the scene in the Gilgamesh epic where a serpent snatched and ate the plant of life which Gilgamesh had been seeking. Immediately the serpent sloughed its skin and returned to the well. It obtained the ability to rejuvenate itself at Gilgamesh's expense. In the Adam and Eve story they lose

²⁷ For a useful historical survey of the *Protoevangelium* interpretation throughout the centuries, see J. P. Lewis, "The Woman's Seed (Gen 3.15)", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991), 299–319.

²⁸ See R. A. Martin, "The Earliest Messianic Interpretation of Genesis 3.15", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965), 425–27.

²⁹ See M. McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (Analecta Biblica 27; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1966), 217–21.

³⁰ See T. Gallus, *Interpretatio Mariologica Protoevangelii* (3 vols.; Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1949–54); cf. idem, *Die "Frau" in Gen 3,15* (Klagenfurt: Carinthia, 1979).

the opportunity to eat from the tree of life. Day also suggests that both works imply that immortality is beyond the grasp of humans. The relevant passage in the Gilgamesh epic is given below.

Gilgamesh Epic: The Serpent Steals the Secret Plant that Restores Youth.

Then Gilgamesh and Urshanabi launched the boat on to the water and boarded it, and they made ready to sail away; but the wife of Utnapishtim the Faraway said to him, “Gilgamesh came here wearied out, he is worn out; what will you give him to carry him back to his own country?” So Utnapishtim spoke, and Gilgamesh took a pole and brought the boat in to the bank. “Gilgamesh, you came here a man wearied out, you have worn yourself out; what shall I give you to carry you back to your own country? Gilgamesh, I shall reveal a secret thing, it is a mystery of the gods that I am telling you. There is a plant that grows under the water, it has a prickle like a thorn, like a rose; it will wound your hands, but if you succeed in taking it, then your hands will hold that which restores his lost youth to a man.”

When Gilgamesh heard this he opened the sluices so that a sweet water current might carry him out to the deepest channel; he tied heavy stones to his feet and they dragged him down to the water-bed. There he saw the plant growing; although it pricked him he took it in his hands; then he cut the heavy stones from his feet, and the sea carried him and threw him on to the shore. Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi the ferryman, “Come here, and see this marvellous plant. By its virtue a man may win back all his former strength. I will take it to Uruk of the strong walls; there I will give it to the old men to eat. Its name shall be ‘The Old Men Are Young Again’; and at last I shall eat it myself and have back all my lost youth.” So Gilgamesh returned by the gate through which he had come, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi went together. They travelled their twenty leagues and then they broke their fast; after thirty leagues they stopped for the night.

Gilgamesh saw a well of cool water and he went down and bathed; but deep in the pool there was lying a serpent, and the serpent sensed the sweetness of the flower. It rose out of the water and snatched it away, and immediately it sloughed its skin and returned to the well. Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept, the tears ran down his face, and he took the hand of Urshanabi; “O Urshanabi, was it for this that I toiled with my hands, is it for this I have wrung out my heart's blood? For myself I have gained nothing; not I, but the beast of the earth has joy of it now. Already the stream has carried it twenty leagues back to the channels where I found it. I found a sign and now I have lost it. Let us leave the boat on the bank and go.”

Illustrations depicting *han-nāḥāš* through the centuries

From the early days of Christianity, artists have used their imaginations and tradition to portray the temptation of Eve scene described in Gen 3. On a basic level, the portrayals are often meant to visually interpret the text, especially for illiterate viewers. Cummings (2020) has gathered over 435 interpretations of the self-awakening moment involving *han-nāḥāš*, Eve, and Adam, spanning from Roman times to the present. We will examine these many different pictorial interpretations.

Perhaps the earliest extant example of The Fall can be seen in a late 3rd—early 4th century catacomb traditionally known as the burial place of Christian martyrs Marcellinus and Peter as shown in Figure 1. The tomb features a mixture of pagan and Christian imagery, reflective of the transitioning times. The fresco places the first Roman-looking couple on either side of the tree of knowledge in what would become a very common arrangement. The artist emphasizes their self-consciousness, posing them in a shameful gesture covering their reproductive organs with grape leaves. There appears to be a coiled snake on the ground at the bottom of the tree. So, this early image depicts *han-nāḥāš* in the garden of Eden as a real snake.



Figure 1: 4th century Early Christian depiction of Adam and Eve in the Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter.

Another early depiction of Adam and Eve is given in Figure 2. Here it shows Eve giving the forbidden fruit to Adam and they are both covering their genitals with large leaves. A Greek inscription above reads from Genesis: “And they ate, [and they] were made naked.” However, *han-nāḥāš* is not shown in this illustration.



Figure 2: A mosaic of Adam and Eve from the 5th c. CE now at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

The depiction of Adam, Eve, and *han-nāḥāš* in Figure 3 comes from a Spanish illuminated manuscript produced some time around 950 CE. There is a gap of about 700 years from the Roman catacomb scene, but we can see a standard way of describing the story has developed: Adam and Eve on either side of the tree (Eve is more often to the right), with *han-nāḥāš* in the middle coiled around the trunk of the tree. The images are flat, not anatomically proportional, each covering their reproductive organs with a large leaf.

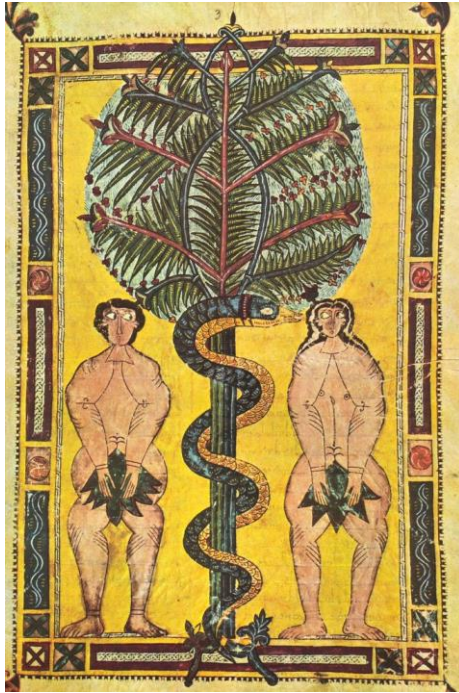


Figure 3: Circa 950–955, Illustration of Adam, Eve, and Serpent from the Escorial Beatus manuscript, likely created in the San Millán de la Cogolla Monastery.

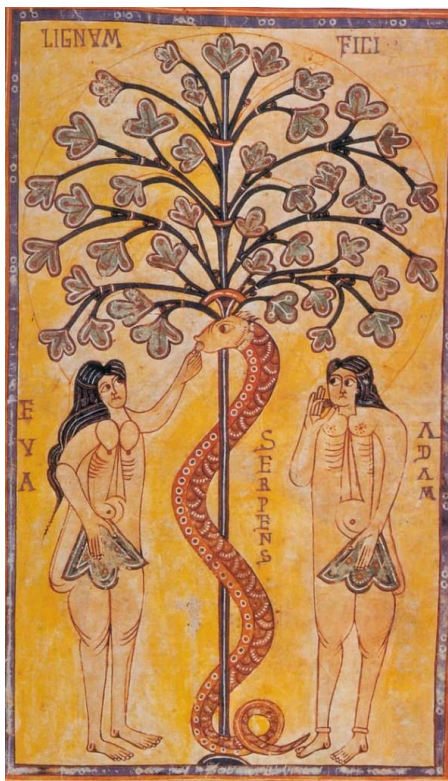


Figure 4: 976 CE, Illustration in the Codex Vigilanus.

The depiction of Adam, Eve, and *han-nāḥāš* in Figure 4 is similar except that Eve is standing on the left of the tree and Adam on the right. In the depiction in Figure 5 Adam and Eve are both standing to the left of the tree of knowledge and *han-nāḥāš* is depicted as a real snake coiled around the tree that is giving Eve the forbidden fruit holding it in his mouth. Adam is also eating the fruit and Adam and Eve are covering their genitals with large leaves. So, it is a portmanteau image depicting the whole Fall of Man scene.

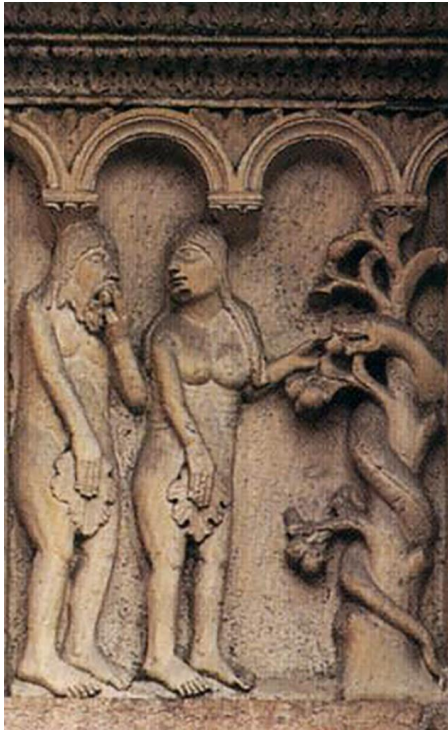


Figure 5: Creation of Adam and Eve, Fall of Man. 1100s Marble, height 100 cm Cathedral of San Geminiano, Modena.

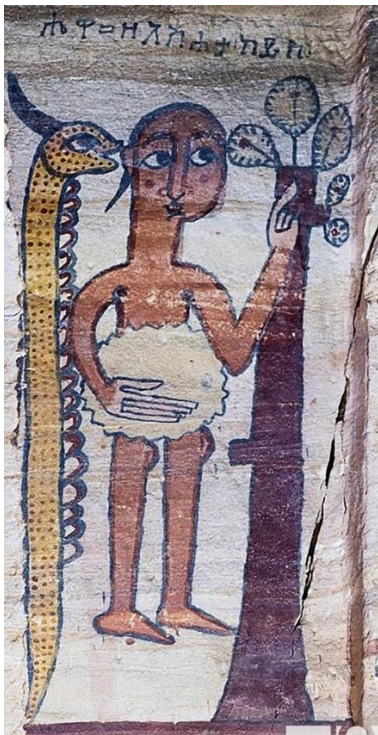


Figure 6: 12th–13th Century rupestrian painting from the rock-hewn church of Qorqor Maryam, Tigray region, Northern Ethiopia and needlework of wool on cotton scrim (1992–1996).

The 12th–13th century rupestrian paintings in Figure 6 show something quite different. Here only Eve and *han-nāḥāš* are in view but instead of being coiled around the tree *han-nāḥāš* is standing up straight like a human and speaking into Eve's ear. Also in the 12th century there began to appear depictions of *han-nāḥāš* as Lilith as shown in Figure 7. Here the body of *han-nāḥāš* is coiled around the tree but the head of the snake is a woman's head and upper torso with breasts and arms. Lilith is a

demonic figure in Judaic mythology, supposedly the primordial she-demon and alternatively first wife of Adam. She is presumed to be mentioned in Biblical Hebrew in the book of Isaiah 34.14, and later in Late Antiquity in Mandaean Gnosticism mythology and Jewish mythology sources from 500 CE onwards. Lilith appears in historiolas (incantations incorporating a short mythic story) in various concepts and localities that give partial descriptions of her. She is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (Eruvin 100b, Niddah 24b, Shabbat 151b, Baba Bathra 73a), in the Book of Adam and Eve as Adam's first wife, and in the Zohar Leviticus 19a as “a hot fiery female who first cohabited with man”. Depictions of *han-nāḥāš* as Lilith represented by a human female persisted through to the 16th century. See Figure 7 to Figure 15.

Isa 34.14: Wildcats shall meet hyenas, goat-demons (satyrs) shall greet each other; there too lilith (*lîlîṭ*) shall repose and find herself a resting place. (Tanakh)

BDB (2010 [1906]: 539) 3917 *lîlîṭ* name of a female night-demon haunting desolate Edom.



Figure 7: 12th–13th century. Adam, Eve, and the (female) serpent (often identified as Lilith) at the entrance to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

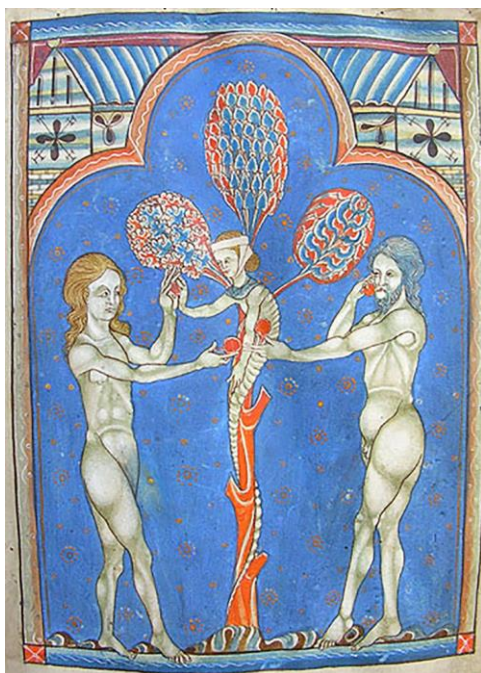


Figure 8: 1270–1280 From vellum manuscript MS K.26 f.4r (St. John's College, Cambridge). One of a sequence of 46 Biblical illustrations inserted at the front of a fourteenth-century Psalter.



Figure 9: 14th Century, early. Pisa Cathedral.



Figure 10: 1396 Rüdiger Schopf Adam, Eve, and the Serpent Manuscript illustration Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, MS. A II 1, folio 16r.

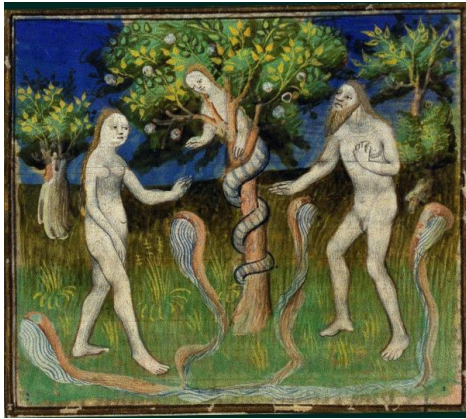


Figure 11: 1400 circa. Guiard des Moulins, Bible historique Ms français 3 fol-8v – Paris 15e siècle – Pêché originel et les quatre fleuves du paradis.



Figure 12: Detail from St. Augustine, The City of God. 1469–1473.



Figure 13: 1470 Hugo van der Goes, 'The Temptation'.

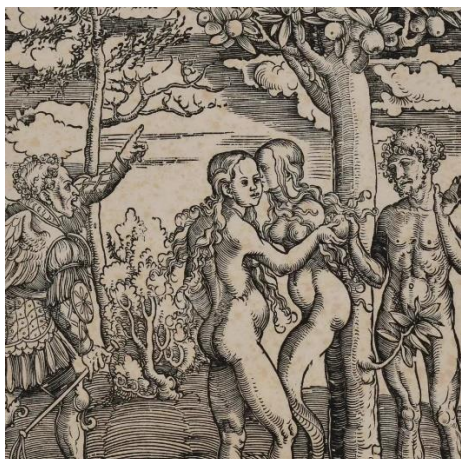


Figure 14: 1505 circa. Lucas Cranach the Elder.



Figure 15: 1508–1512 Michelangelo. Fresco on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, The Vatican, Rome.

There are also some images of the garden of Eden scene where *han-nāḥāš* appears as a dragon. See Figure 16 to Figure 20.



Figure 16: 1350–1400 Speculum humanae salvationis.



Figure 17: 1483, Johann Veldener, woodcut.



Figure 18: 1550 circa, Ja'far al-Sadiq, Adam and Eve from a copy of the *Fālnāmeḥ* (Book of Omens), Safavid dynasty, Iran.



Figure 19: 1799–1800, William Blake, Eve Tempted by the Serpent.

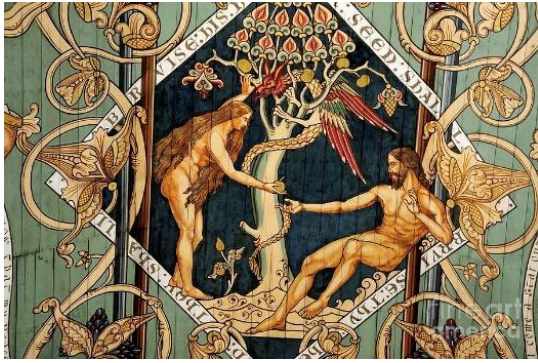


Figure 20: 1858 circa. Henry Styleman Le Strange. Ely Cathedral. Painted panel on wooden nave ceiling, after a Victorian era restoration.

A significant development from the 13th century onwards (see Figure 8) is the presentation of Adam and Eve as completely naked with their genitals exposed to view. See Figure 21 to Figure 38 and also Figure 15. With this innovation it was still the norm to present Adam and Eve with their genitals covered in some way in most images. Where *han-nāḥāš* occurs in these portrayals of a completely naked Adam and Eve s/he is most often depicted as being coiled in the branches of the tree of knowledge.



Figure 21: 1465–1470 Furtmeyr Bible, Regensburg, after 1465, München BSB Cgm 8010a fol. 10r.



Figure 22: 1465–1470 Furtmeyr Bible, Regensburg, after 1465, München BSB Cgm 8010a fol. 10r.

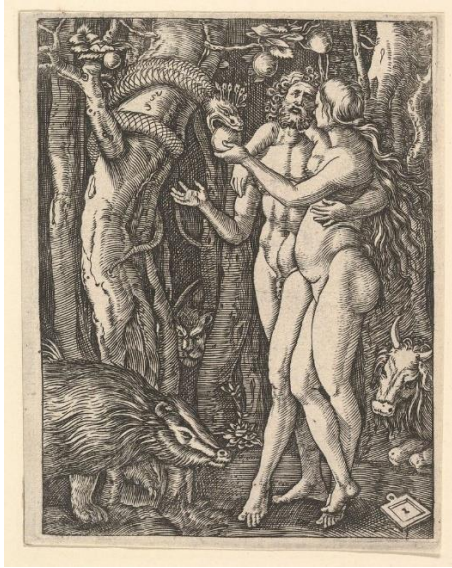


Figure 23: 1500–1534 Marcantonio Raimondi.



Figure 24: 1504 Durer.



Figure 25: 1512–1514 Marcantonio Raimondi, after Raphael.

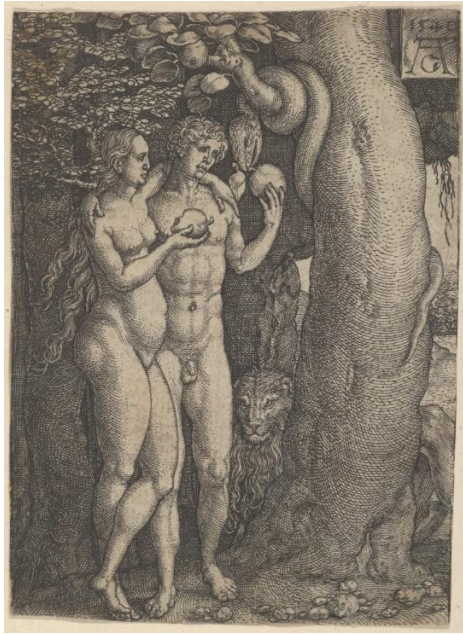


Figure 26: 1540 Heinrich Aldegrever.



Figure 27: 16th century early, In the manner of Giulio Romano (Italian, b. ca. 1499–1546) The Temptation of Adam and Eve.

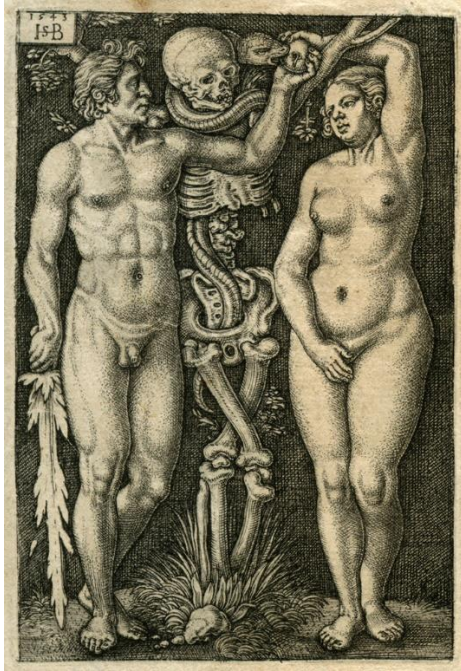


Figure 28: 1543 Hans Sebald Beham
Adam and Eve with the Tree of Death.



Figure 29: 1585 Hendrick Goltzius.

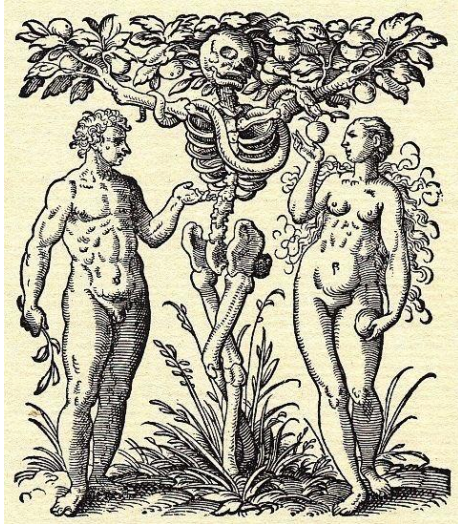


Figure 30: 1587 Jost Amman. Adam and Eve: The Tree of Knowledge & Death.



Figure 31: 1638 Rembrandt van Rijn.



Figure 32: 1700 Adriaen van der Werff.

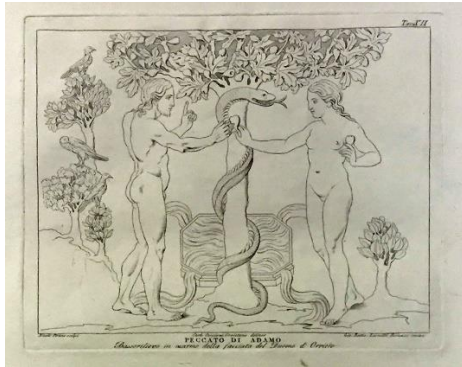


Figure 33: 1791 Giovanni Battista Leonetti, after Nicola Pisano. Prints of the Duomo in Orvieto.



Figure 34: 19th century. Guérithault Pierre Eugène.



Figure 35: 1898–1899 Edvard Munch
“Metabolism”.

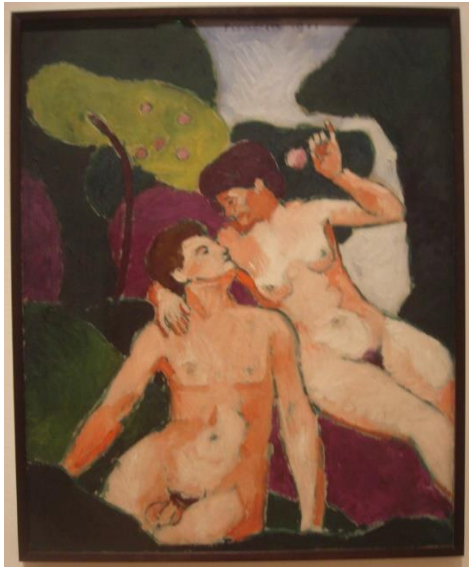


Figure 36: 1911 Francis Picabia, 1979–1953, French. Adam and Eve, oil on canvas.



Figure 37: 1917 Max Beckmann.



Figure 38: 2012 Jane Adams.

There is a theme that began in the 16th century to depict the eating of the forbidden fruit as the sex act. See Figure 39 to Figure 43. *han-nāḥāš* does not appear in Figure 39. In Figure 40 *han-nāḥāš* is depicted as a snake coiled around a branch of the tree of knowledge. This is preferred in more modern portrayals to *han-nāḥāš* being coiled around the truck of the tree as in older depictions. In Figure 41 *han-nāḥāš* is a coiled snake on the ground. In Figure 42 *han-nāḥāš* is depicted as coiled around the tree trunk and as having a face and head that looks demonic. In Figure 43 *han-nāḥāš* is a snake in the branches of the tree.



Figure 39: 1520–1525 Jan Gossaert, Wien, Albertina

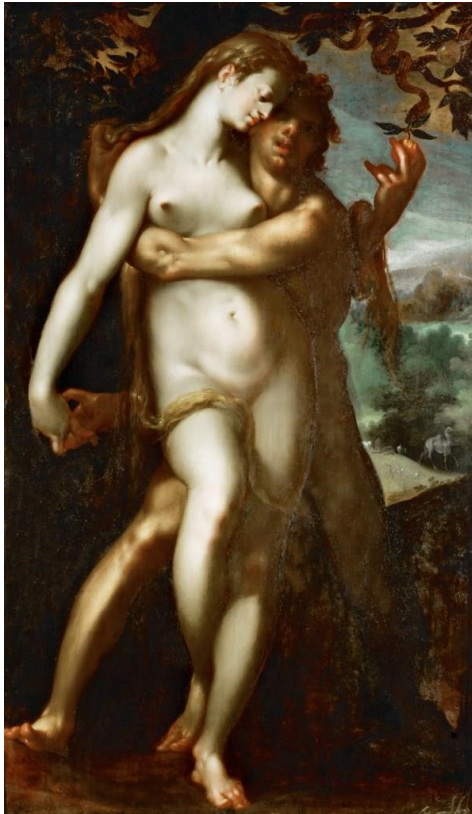


Figure 40: 1593-1595 Bartholomeus Spranger. Fall Of Man.



Figure 41: 1926 József Bató. The temptation of eve.



Figure 42: 1965–1973 Peter Proksch (Austrian, 1935–2012). Adam und Eva.



Figure 43: 1986 Anthony Pilbro (b.1954) Adam and Eve.

Interpreting the eating of the forbidden fruit as the sex act is based on a particular understanding of the phrase “knowing good and evil” in Gen 3.5. Wenham (1987: 63–64) says suggestions for interpretation of the phrase “knowing good and evil” include:

1. “The knowledge of good and evil” is simply a description of the consequences of obeying or disobeying the commandments. Man would have known good had he obeyed the command: he knows evil as a result of disobedience. “The tree plays its part in the opportunity it offers, rather than the qualities it possesses; like a door whose name announces only what lies beyond it” (Kidner, 1967: 63).

Valid as this observation is, it is inadequate. As the tree of life offered immortality, so this tree offered knowledge appropriate only to the divine (3.5, 22). Furthermore, this explanation does

not fit Deu 1.39 and 2 Sam 19.36[35], which observe that neither the very young nor the elderly know good and evil.

2. “The knowledge of good and evil” means moral discernment, knowing the difference between right and wrong. This interpretation is now taken seriously by modern commentators, because, given the narrator’s assumptions, it is absurd to suppose man was not always expected to exercise moral discretion or that he acquired such a capacity through eating the fruit.

3. “The knowledge of good and evil” means sexual knowledge. Though this explanation suits the situation of the elderly and the young, it is incongruous in its present context. In Gen 1 and 2 there is no hint that sexual knowledge is reserved for God, or that it was wrong for man (cf. 1.28, 2.18–25). Also Gen 2.24 suggests that Eve was created to be a sexual partner for Adam. The explanation that “the knowledge of good and evil” represents the sex act is quite untenable.

4. “The knowledge of good and evil” means omniscience. “Good and evil” here stand for the parts which make up the whole, just as the phrase “heaven and earth” means the universe. Though God enjoys omniscience, and the narrative suggests that the woman hoped to gain great knowledge (3.6), it is clear that the man and woman who ate the fruit did not acquire omniscience as a result, merely shame and a recognition of their nakedness (3.7–8).

5. “The knowledge of good and evil” is wisdom. It offered “insight” *haśākîl* (3.6). At first sight this interpretation appears as unlikely as moral discernment. It is easy to see that God has wisdom and that children lack it, but more difficult to see why it was forbidden to man. The acquisition of wisdom is seen as one of the highest goals of the godly according to the Book of Proverbs. But the wisdom literature also makes it plain that there is a wisdom that is God’s sole preserve, which man should not aspire to attain (e.g., Job 15.7–9, 40, Pro 30.1–4), since a full understanding of God, the universe, and man’s place in it is ultimately beyond human comprehension. To pursue it without reference to revelation is to assert human autonomy, and to neglect the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of knowledge (Pro 1.7). ... This interpretation appears to be confirmed by Ezk 28, the closest parallel to Gen 2–3, which in highly mythological language describes how the king of Tyre was expelled from Eden for overweening pride and claiming himself to be “wise as a god” (Ezk 28.6, 15–17). Clark (JBL 88 [1969] 266–78) has come to similar conclusions: he points to the use of the phrase “good and evil” in legal contexts to describe legal responsibility. In Gen 2–3 he suggests J is using it for moral autonomy, deciding what is right without reference to God’s revealed will. This is confirmed by allusions to Gen 2–3 in Psa 19.8–10[7–9] where the law is compared to the tree of knowledge: the law makes wise the simple and enlightens the eyes (cf. Gen 3.6).

So Wenham says the idea that “the knowledge of good and evil” means sexual knowledge is quite untenable. Therefore, depicting the eating of the forbidden fruit as the sex act is not justified from careful exegesis of the text.

Examination of portrayals of the Fall of Man in the garden of Eden shows that *han-nāḥāš* is most often depicted as a real snake, sometimes on the ground near the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in earlier illustrations coiled around the trunk of the tree and in later illustrations in the branches of the tree. In the rupestrian paintings in Figure 6 *han-nāḥāš* is depicted as a snake standing upright on its tail on the ground. Here, I believe, the illustrators are struggling to understand how the curse in Gen 3.14 applies to *han-nāḥāš*. Before the curse was *han-nāḥāš* a creature that had arms and legs and able to stand erect like a human? Or was *han-nāḥāš* a creature that lived in trees before the curse? In any event, all the images of *han-nāḥāš* depict a snake as a creature that crawls on the ground in a unique way. Snakes essentially “walk” on their ribs. Rectilinear locomotion or rectilinear progression is a mode of locomotion most often associated with snakes. It is one of at least five forms of locomotion used by snakes, the others being lateral undulation, sidewinding, concertina movement, and slide-pushing. Snakes are thought to have evolved from either burrowing or aquatic lizards, perhaps during the Jurassic period, with the earliest known fossils dating to between 143 and 167 mya. So snakes have been crawling on their bellies for a long time. But the writer of Gen 3 did not know this.

Gen 3.14: The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. (ESV)

It is interesting that from the 12th century to the Michelangelo fresco in the 16th century *han-nāḥāš* is depicted as Lilith, the demonic figure in Judaic mythology, supposedly the primordial she-demon and alternatively first wife of Adam. It is not clear to me where this fits with the four possibilities mentioned earlier that *han-nāḥāš* is (a) a real snake, (b) a seraph (or other celestial being), (c) a real snake possessed by a celestial being opposed to God and mankind, or (d) Satan appearing to Eve as a snake. In any event, the depictions of *han-nāḥāš* as Lilith demonstrates that the artist thought Lilith was real. There are also some images of the garden of Eden scene where *han-nāḥāš* appears as a dragon. These images must be based on Rev 12.3, 4, 7, 9, 13, 16, 17, 13.2, 4, 11, 20.2 where Satan is described as being a great red dragon. But Revelation would not have been available to the author of Gen 3 so the depictions of *han-nāḥāš* as a dragon misrepresent the garden of Eden scene of the Fall of Man.

Finally, there are a set of illustrations which show YHWH Elohim speaking to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. See Figure 44 to Figure 50. YHWH Elohim must be theophanic to do all the physical things he does, such as make Adam from dust and breathe life into him, plant a garden, take Adam and put him in the garden, talk to Adam, take Adam’s rib and make a woman, be heard walking in the garden in the cool of the day, make clothes for Adam and Eve from animal skins, etc. The depictions of YHWH Elohim are mostly of a long-haired, bearded man with a halo dressed in Middle Eastern garb. In Figure 49 the man wears medieval dress, has short hair and no beard and appears to have angelic wings. YHWH Elohim would certainly not have appeared to Adam and Eve in Middle Eastern or medieval dress. Since Adam and Eve were created naked would YHWH Elohim even have appeared to them clothed?



Figure 44: 1180s Mosaic Cathedral, Monreale.



Figure 45: Mid-13th Century.
German manuscript, unknown artist.
From The Barnes Collection.



Figure 46: 1375–1383 Master
Bertram Depiction of the Fall in
Kunsthalle Hamburg.



Figure 47: 1450–1467 Meister E. S., Germany.

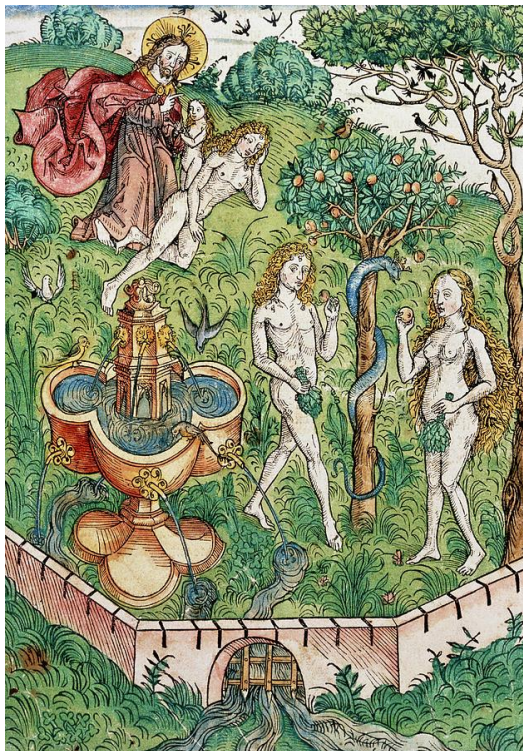


Figure 48: 1491, Melchior Wohlgemuth, Nuremberg Bible manuscript.



Figure 49: 1505 circa. Lucas Cranach the Elder.



Figure 50: 1530 Lucas Cranach der Ältere The Garden of Eden.

Conclusion

We have examined some of the difficulties artists in the Christian Era have had in picturing *han-nāḥāš* in the Fall of Man scene in Gen 3.1–7. This is because picturing *han-nāḥāš* is a visual interpretation of the text and interpreting the text is not straightforward. First, there are at least four suggestions in the literature as to who or what *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3 is: he is (a) a real snake, (b) a seraph (or other celestial being), (c) a real snake possessed by Satan, or (d) Satan appearing as a snake. However, there are conflicting facets of each characterization which render each of the possible interpretations incoherent. If *han-nāḥāš* is a real snake then snakes are not the most intelligent creature that YHWH Elohim formed. If *han-nāḥāš* is a celestial being then he is not an animal that YHWH Elohim formed from the ground in Gen 2.19. If *han-nāḥāš* is a real snake possessed by Satan then why is the snake cursed and not Satan? If *han-nāḥāš* is Satan appearing as a snake then again why is the snake cursed and not Satan? Second, how does the cursing of *han-nāḥāš* in Gen 3.14 affect what he looked like before he was cursed? Did *han-nāḥāš* have four limbs like other animals before he was cursed, for example? Third, real snakes do not have a vocal apparatus to be able to speak nor ears to be able to hear. Some artists depict *han-nāḥāš* as a snake-like creature with a tongue to speak and ears to hear. Others depict *han-nāḥāš* as Lilith with a human female head able to speak and hear. Fourth, where was *han-nāḥāš* located when he tempted Eve? Artists place him variously on the ground at the base of the tree of knowledge, coiled around the trunk of the tree, or in the branches of the tree. Some have *han-nāḥāš* standing away from the tree.

Another complication is that the scene depicted in Gen 3.1–7 is mythological involving supernatural entities. The events narrated are mythological as they cannot be attested as being historical. Indeed, the

fossil³¹ and genomic evidence³² denies the creation of Adam and Eve account given in Gen 2 and therefore discounts Gen 3.1–7 as describing historical events. Adam and Eve are both created supernaturally. YHWH Elohim forms Adam from the dust of the ground (Gen 2.7) and he fashions Eve from Adam’s side or rib (Gen 2.22). Thus, Adam and Eve were not born naturally and would not have had navels. Yet nearly every image of Adam and Eve given in Cummings (2020) depicts them as having a navel. However, the fresco shown in Figure 51 represents Adam and Eve before and after their fall from grace. To the right they are depicted without genitals, innocent and unashamed and to the left they are covering their genitals with a large leaf. There is no indication they have navels in either representation.



Figure 51: Early 11th Century. From Tebtunis (Um el-Beregat, Faiyum). Now in the Coptic Museum, Cairo. 3962

The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are magical trees with supernatural properties. Eating from the tree of life gives the eater eternal life (see Gen 3.22) and eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil makes the eater like the divine knowing good and evil (see Gen 3.22). The tree of life is mythological because it appears in both the opening and closing chapters of the Bible (Gen 2–3 and Rev 22). If the tree of life is mythological then it follows that the tree of knowledge must be mythological too as they are both planted in the middle of the garden of Eden (Gen 2.9). How do you depict the tree of knowledge, a magical tree? The depictions are either highly stylized or that of a fruit tree with the fruit resembling an apple.

The bottom line is that any depiction of the Fall of Man scene in Gen 3.1–7 has to adopt a particular interpretation of the text including who or what *han-nāḥāš* is. This also applies to depictions of Adam and Eve and YHWH Elohim in the garden of Eden. While the text remains text it is open to different interpretations but once a picture of the scene is drawn then the picture becomes the only interpretation.

Abbreviations

BCE	Before Christian Era
BDB	Brown, Driver & Briggs
CE	Christian Era
ESV	English Standard Version (2007, 2008)
LXX	The Greek Old Testament, or Septuagint
NIV	New International Version (1978)
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible (1994)
Tanakh	The Jewish Study Bible (2004)

³¹ See <https://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/fossils/al-288-1>.

³² See Venema & McKnight (2017).

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