

The Curse of the Serpent

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Introduction

Early Christian exegetes interpreted Genesis 3:15 as a prophecy about the Messiah, the seed of the woman, who was struck a fatal blow by the Serpent. His death became the means by which the Serpent was destroyed.

Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; (Heb 2:14 NAS)

Messianic interpretations of Gen 3:15 can also be found in early Jewish texts. For example an early midrash (3rd century AD?) states, "Eve had respect to that seed which is coming from another place. And who is this? This is the King Messiah." (Gen. Rab. 23:5 cited by Rydelink 2010, 123) The medieval commentator David Kimchi (circa late 12th century AD) wrote, "Messiah, the Son of David, who shall wound Satan who is the head, the King and Prince of the house of the wicked." (D. Kimchi cited by Rydelink 2010, 123) The Targum Neophiti has a similar interpretation.

In opposition to the messianic interpretation, Rashi argued that the verse describes the mutual animosity that exists between snakes and humans. His paraphrase states, "You will not stand upright and you will bite him on the heel, and even from there you will kill him." (Rashi as cited by Rydelink 2010, 123) Rashi's naturalistic interpretation of the passage had a significant impact on future commentators, including Christian exegetes although it is debatable to what extent his

influence accounts for the tendency of interpreters to translate Genesis 3:15 in a naturalistic way.¹ Nevertheless, John Calvin agrees with Rashi when he writes, "I interpret this simply to mean that there should always be the hostile strife between the human race and serpents, which is now apparent." (Calvin as cited by Rydelink 2012, 123) Many evangelical scholars have continued in this tradition. The NET Bible, a translation produced by evangelical scholars, contains the following note on Gen. 3:15:

"Ancient Israelites, who often encountered snakes in their daily activities (see, for example, Eccl. 10:8; Amo 5:19), would find the statement quite meaningful as an explanation for the hostility between snakes and humans." (NET Bible, note on Genesis 3:15)

Is the naturalistic explanation of the curse of the serpent the correct interpretation or should we look for a deeper significance to this passage? To answer this question we will briefly consider the syntax of the verse and then consider the meaning of the curse of the Serpent within the broader context of the ancient Near East, the Pentateuch, and later Judean texts.

Translation of Gen. 3:14,15

*Then the LORD God said to the serpent,
because you have done this
cursed are you from among all the livestock and all the animals of the field
on your belly you shall go
and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.
and enmity shall I set between you and the woman,*

¹ The medieval Catholic commentator, Nicholas de Lyra, relied heavily on Rashi earning him the nickname, 'Rashi's Ape'. Luther in turn, made extensive use of the commentaries of Nicholas de Lyra. It was said that "If *Lyra* had not played his *lyre*, *Luther* would not have *danced*" (Rydelink 2012)

and between your seed (zar`ákä) and her seed (zar`äh)

he (hu) will bruise you on the head,

and you (atta) will bruise him on the heel.

One of the immediate questions one is faced with is the question of whether the ‘seed’ (*zera*) refers to a single descendant or to all of ones descendants. This cannot be determined simply from the suffix of the noun because ‘*zera*’ is a collective noun that is always found in the singular. Likewise, verbs that modify ‘*zera*’ can be in the singular or the plural without indicating whether the author has in mind ‘one’ or ‘all’ of ones descendants. (Murakoa 150e)

There is one important grammatical rule however, that offers some insight into the meaning of *zera*. Collins notes that, “when *zera* denotes ‘posterity’ the pronouns (independent pronouns, object pronouns, and suffixes) are always plural.” (Collins 1997) If this rule were applied in Genesis 3:15 then the verse would read, "They (‘*hem*’ instead of ‘*hu*’) will bruise your head and you will bruise their (*təšûpām* instead of *təšûpēnnû*) heels." Instead, the verse reads, “*He* will bruise your head and you will bruise *his* heel.”

If we assume that Genesis 3:15 is an exception to this rule, and allow ‘*hu*’ to have its antecedent in ‘*zera*’ as a collective for ‘posterity’ then we are confronted with another question. Why does the verse continue to address the serpent in the 2nd person singular as though the head of this particular serpent was about to be crushed and not the heads of the serpents posterity? Should ‘*ata*’ (you - 2nd, masc., sing) also be considered collective?

It seems better to see a transition between Gen. 3:15a and 15b. The struggle between the posterity of the women and the posterity of the serpent becomes a representative struggle

between two individuals. This translation is supported by the LXX which renders the Hebrew *zera* with σπέρμα ('seed', neuter) and the Hebrew 'hu' with αὐτός ('he', masculine). The mismatch of genders seems to indicate that the LXX understood the verse to refer to an individual. (Collins 1997) Similarly, Targum Onkelos translates it, "between thy son and her son". The verse does not indicate that the descendent of the woman or the serpent will ultimately be victorious for both blows are potentially fatal.² It only indicates that there will be an indeterminate conflict between the two.

The Serpent in the ANE

Grammatical and syntactical considerations do not decisively answer our original question whether the verse has in mind the struggle between humanity and snakes or whether the verse should be understood figuratively. The answer to this question lies in how the people for whom this text was written would have understood the serpent. The central plot of the story in Gen. 3 is that the serpent is the enemy of man who brought about his exile from the garden by luring him with forbidden knowledge. The word used for serpent is '*nachash*'. It may refer to a snake or to a creature that represents the forces of darkness, chaos and evil.³ In order to determine which semantic field the serpent cursed in Genesis 3:15 belongs to, let's consider briefly the Biblical context in which *nachash* appears when it represents the forces of darkness, chaos and evil.

In poetical descriptions of the Exodus, *nachash* often appears in parallel with Leviathan, Rahab and the Teninim (Is. 27:1, Job 26:12,13). The slaying of these creatures is a metaphorical way of describing dividing of the sea (Ps 74:13) or the drying of the sea (Is. 51:10).

² The Septuagint renders שָׁחַק 'to bruise' with τηρήσει (Gen 3:15 BGT) meaning 'watch over' or to keep'.

³ A further distinction may be made between the serpent as a symbol of evil and the serpent as the embodiment of evil. However, both represent a non-naturalistic understanding of the serpent and, for the purposes of this paper, treated alike.

*Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?
Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep,
who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? (Isa 51:9b-10 ESV)*

In Job, these creatures appear in poetical descriptions of God's power over nature. The slaying of these creatures is paralleled with the calming of the sea. (Job 26:12)

*By his power he stilled the sea; by his understanding he shattered Rahab.
By his wind the heavens were made fair;
his hand pierced the fleeing serpent (nāḥāš bārî'ḥ). (Job 26:12-13 ESV)*

The parallelism between these creatures and the sea is obvious. Amos writes that even if one were to hide at the bottom of the sea, God would “command the serpent (*nachash*), and it shall bite them.” (Amo 9:3 ESV) The expressions 'fleeing (*biriach*) serpent' בָּרִיחַ נָחָשׁ (Job 26:13; Isa 27:1 WTT) and 'wriggling (*akalaton*) serpent' עֲקֻלְתוֹן נָחָשׁ (Isa 27:1 WTT) and the description of a serpent with multiple heads (Ps. 74:14a) are paralleled in Ugaritic literature and iconography. In Canaanite myth, the serpent is associated with Yam, the god of the sea, who battles with the storm god, Baal, for kingship over the gods. Baal eventually wins and Yam is banished. Sometimes, the destruction of Yam is carried out by Anat, whose actions are closely tied to the will of Baal.⁴ In one inscription, Anat proclaims,

⁴ Similarly, Tanat, the consort of Baal Hammon, is sometimes referred to as the face of Baal Hammon reflecting the idea that the two are inseparable and act in one accord. (Albright 1941)

I have destroyed the Sea-dragon, beloved of El,

I have muzzled Tannin, I muzzled him(?)!

I have destroyed the winding (ekalaton) serpent,

Shalyat of the seven heads;

I have destroyed the Underworld-dragon, beloved of El... (Albright 1941)

The victory of Baal over Yam shares similarities with the battle described in the Enuma Elish in which the creator god, Marduk, battles with Tiamat (primordial forces of chaos) whose home is in the *tehom* (Greek: the abyss). In this myth, Tiamat appears as a powerful sorceress whose magic is too powerful for either Ea or Anu.⁵ Only Marduk, with the aid of a magical plant, is able to turn back Tiamat's spell.

The serpent also held an important place in Egyptian mythology and iconography. In a never ending battle Seth/Baal is shown killing the horned serpent Apophis who threatens to swallow Ra (the sun god) each night. O. Keel writes that the serpent was "an Egyptian symbol of the danger in the dark of night and a Canaanite symbol of the stormy sea... [the serpent] became a symbol of danger in general." (Keel 1998)

Perhaps the most relevant mention of the serpent in the ANE is in the Gilgamesh Epic. In this story Gilgamesh follows the instructions of Utnapshitim and dives down a fresh water pipeline to

⁵ Tiamat's helpers "Fierce monster-vipers she hath clothed with terror..." Fierce monster-vipers she hath clothed with terror, With splendor she hath decked them, she hath made them of lofty stature. Whoever beholdeth them, terror overcometh him, their bodies rear up and none can withstand their attack. (Enuma Elish)

the bottom of the sea.⁶ There he uproots a prickly plant whose name is “Man becomes Young in Old Age”. Having procured the plant, Gilgamesh begins the journey home. While bathing in a spring, a serpent rises out of the water and snatches the plant away, thereby crushing Gilgamesh’s last hope for immortality. There is no clear connection in this story between the serpent that steals the plant and any other serpent in Babylonian mythology. It may have been conceived as a demon that inhabited the spring in which Gilgamesh bathed when the serpent stole the plant. According to R. Smith “the south Arabs regard medicinal waters as inhabited by jinn, usually of serpent form.” (Smith 1927, 172) Strabo records a tradition that the Orontes was carved out by a “great dragon, which disappeared in the earth at its source.” (Smith 1927, 171) This may explain why a cultic site named the ‘Serpent’s Stone’ was located next to a spring called En-rogel. (1Ki 1:9 ESV) The serpent in the Gilgamesh Epic shares some similarities with the serpent in Genesis 3 in as much as the serpent in both stories bears some responsibility for man’s inability to access the life giving plant.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the serpents association with the primordial forces of chaos, the serpent was worshipped in the ANE. Ningishzida was the patron god of Gudea (late 3rd millennium BC), king of Lagash, and was depicted as two intertwined serpents. ‘*Ningishzida*’ means “Lord of the steadfast tree” (Joines 1974, 115) or “god of the right hand scepter” (Frothingham 1916) The god often appears as a scepter held in the hand of Ishtar, the Babylonian mother goddess, and thus seems to have been an intermediary god that was elsewhere identified with the sun at spring time. Ningishzida was a god of the underworld

⁶Gilgamesh was referred to as “he who has seen the abyss,” (or the apsu) where Ea guards his plants. The exceedingly long life spans of the antediluvian kings was explained by positing that the flood waters had permanently covered the “tree of life” thus preventing post diluvian people from gaining access to it. (Veenker 1981)

whose wife, Geshtinanna, was the sister of Tammuz. She was sometimes called “the lady who renews the gardens” thereby revealing her close association with the mother goddess. (Joines 1974, 115) Ningishzida appears together with Tammuz in the ‘Adapa Myth’ where they are described as two young gods of spring. The fourth month of the year – ‘the month of seed corn’ - was dedicated to Tammuz while the fifth month was dedicated to Ningishzida. (Joines 1974, 117) Although the identity of Ningishzida merged with other gods over time, festivals dedicated to Tammuz continued into the Babylonian period.

The symbol of Ningishzida – intertwining serpents – is also found in Greek and Hindu cultic traditions. According to ancient Hindu beliefs, intertwining serpents represent the ‘Kundalini’ or ‘serpent power’ that travels up and down the spine through two paths that coil around a central channel that connects the brain with the urethra. Flowing through this channel is a fluid that was thought to be brain fluid, spinal marrow and semen. In Kundalini doctrine, this fluid is the essence of life, capable of creating a new living creature. The origin of this belief is not known although certain elements appear in early Hindu texts. The Chandogya Upanishad (8th to 7th centuries BC) states, “A hundred and one are the arteries of the heart, one of them leads up to the crown of the head. Going upward through that, one becomes immortal.”⁷ (McEvilly 1993, 69) Thus, even at this early date we find a description of a channel through which spiritual forces travel upwards - the goal of which is immortality.

The Greeks had a similar physiological model that can be traced back to as early as the

⁷ A later Maitri Upanishad (VI.21) specifies that the goal of yoga is to cause the *prana*, or spirit-energy, to rise through the spinal channel to the crown of the head. Kung Bushemen believe that physiological power called *ntum* can be aroused by trance dancing. "The men say it boils up their spinal columns into their heads, and is so strong when it does this that it overcomes them and they lose their senses." (McEvilly 1993)

Pythagoreans but receives its fullest treatment in the *Timaeus*. Thus Plato writes, “the marrow is the starting-point for the bonds of life, so long as the soul is bound up with the body, were made fast in it as the roots of the mortal creature.” (*Timaeus* 73b) Like the Hindus, the Greeks may also have identified the spine with the serpent although our primary evidence for this is a fable recorded by Aelian in *De Natura Animalium*.⁸ (McEvelly 1993, 68) It has been suggested that the *djed* column, an important amulet in Egypt, may be a stylized representation of the backbone of Osiris. The *djed* column was placed on the bottom of coffins near the backbone of the deceased.

The evidence is admittedly weak for the widespread association in the ANE of the serpent with the backbone. Neither can it be said, as McEvelly does, that Plato understood or described the intertwining pathways along the spine that intersect at the chakras according to Hindu doctrine.⁹ It is nevertheless noteworthy that the fluid contained in the spinal cord, brain fluid and semen were understood to be the essence of life by both Hindus and Greeks. Because of the strong association of the serpent with the cosmic forces of life, it is possible that backbone may have been identified with the serpent.

The regenerative power of the serpent is probably also the reason the caduceus (a staff with intertwining serpents) later became the symbol of Aesclepius, the Greek god of healing. Frothingham argues that the caduceus has its roots in a pre-Olympian deity who was worshipped in the form of intertwining serpents which only later became a staff held in the hand of the anthropomorphized and thereby hellenized Hermes. He further suggests that vestiges of this cult

⁸ Aelian writes, “They say the putrefying marrow from the spine of a human corpse turns into a serpent and the reptile issues forth and crawls off alive...”

⁹ The pathways described Plato in *Timaeus* 77ff seem to be an anatomical description of the circulatory system and not Hindu pathways for spiritual forces.

were preserved at Hierapolis where intertwining serpents are shown flanked by Hadad and Atagartis on a coin from the 3rd century AD. (Fig. 4) (Frothingham 1916, 208) According to Lucian, this cult item “possesses no special form of its own, but recalls the characteristics of the other gods. The Syrians speak of it as Semeïon.”

(<http://www.sacredtexts.com/cla/luc/tsg/tsg04.htm> accessed 2/4/2013) Like Ningshizda, the sexuality of the god is left ambiguous – it being a combination of both male and female principles of life. It is possible that the conservative cult at Hierapolis preserved this aspect of ancient Mesopotamian religion.

As mentioned already, intertwining serpents are often portrayed as a kind of caduceus (Fig. 6) in the hand of the mother goddess who is also a serpent. The identification of the mother goddess with the serpent goes back to at least the Chalcolithic period at Tepe Gawra if not earlier. A fragmentary cuneiform text says of the goddess Belit-ili that her breast is filled with milk and that the lower part of her body is that of a serpent. (Joines 1974) Mesopotamian cylinder seals often depict Ishtar seated on a throne with alternating serpents and branches coming out of her shoulders. (Fig. 5) A Late Bronze plaque from the stele temple at Hazor depicts a goddess holding up a serpent in each hand. A plaque from Egypt (mid 16th century BC) shows the goddess Qadesh holding up a snake in one hand and a lotus blossom in the other. The inscription on the plaque states, “Qadesh, lady of the sky, and mistress of all gods.” (Joines 1974, 66) Qadesh was the only Egyptian goddess that was consistently portrayed in the nude, her name being the same as that of a sacred prostitute in Western Semitic. Because of the serpents was a fertility symbol, it is sometimes shown to be present at the union of the first divine couple from which all living things arose. This may be seen most clearly on a Phoenician plaque dating to no

earlier than the 4th century BC that shows the creation of the world through the sexual union of Baal and Tanat in the presence of two serpents, one male and one female. (Fig. 7)

Serpents were also a part of temple rituals. One of the verbs used for divination in the Bible is ‘*nichash*’ or ‘*lachash*’ which comes from the same root as ‘serpent’. According to the BDB it is an onomatopoeia for ‘hiss’ and means ‘to utter omens’. (BDB 2000) It is not clear whether serpent charming was a part of divination but it was clearly a practice familiar to the Israelites. (cf. Ps 58:3-5; Jer 8:17; Eccl. 10:11) The practice of snake charming is very ancient. The “snake walker” or “snake handler” appears in lists of professions as early as the Fara period and both male and female ‘*mushlahhu*’ are listed as members of temple personal in Akkadian texts. (Astour 1968, 18) The discovery of Ugaritic serpent charms offer some insight into the trade secrets of the charmer. They describe the removal of the venom from the fangs of the serpent, the ‘binding’ of the serpent, perhaps through the rhythmic motions of the charmer, and even the seated posture of the charmer. These methods are similar to those of snake charmers today. (Astour 1968) The charms were written in order to secure the protection of the god for the snake charmer. This indicates that snake charming had religious significance of some kind.

According to Sancunthion, the early historian of Phoenicia, serpents were accorded a “divine nature” from the earliest time.¹⁰ He further states that because of their effortless movement and their ability to renew their skin, the serpent was “introduced in the sacred rites and mysteries.” (*Euseb. Praep. Evan. lib. I. c. 10.*) Although the snake does not have an exceptionally long lifespan, its ability to renew its skin may made it a symbol of longevity and an important part of Egyptian rituals having to do with death and the afterlife. For example, an enormous serpent

¹⁰ Portions of Sancunthion were copied down by the early Christian historian Eusebius. Our knowledge of Sancunthion’s history of Phoenician is mediated through several generations of manuscripts.

formed in the shape of a circle was engraved on the side of the coffin of Ramses III. Its name is “millions of years,” and for “millions of days encompass him [Ramses III].” (Joines 1974, 19) Similarly, the purpose of an incantation from “The Book of the Dead” was to transform a person into a serpent in order to achieve immortality.

I am the snake, the son of the earth, multiplying the years I lay myself down and am brought forth every day. I am the snake, the son of the earth, at the ends of the earth. I lay myself down and am brought forth, renewed, grown young again every day. (Joines 1974, 20)

In summary, the serpent was a symbol of cultic wisdom, of the cosmic forces of life, and of chaos. This symbolism is not only a part of the religious beliefs of cultures throughout the ANE but also belongs to the religious beliefs of people living in remote geographical locations in the Americas, Asia and Africa.¹¹ The descriptions of *leviathan*, *rahab*, the *teninim* and *nachash* in the Bible are clearly a part of this common tradition. It is therefore unlikely that the original audience for which the story in Gen. 2-3 was composed would have thought of the conflict between snakes and humans in Gen. 3:15 in purely naturalistic terms. At the very least, the conflict between man and serpent represented the warring forces of order and chaos; forces that take on a personal dimension in the daimons and gods who inhabit the darkness, the springs, the trees, and the underworld.

The Serpent and its Literary Context in the Pentateuch

¹¹ Many theories have been put forward to explain this curious fact. Thus Sagan writes, “The pervasiveness of dragon myths in the folk legends of many cultures is probably no accident... Is it possible that dragons posed a problem for our proto-human ancestors of a few million years ago, and that the terror they evoked and the deaths they caused helped bring about the evolution of human intelligence?...Could the pervasive dreams and common fears of 'monsters,' which children develop shortly after they are able to talk, be evolutionary vestiges of quite adaptive - baboonlike - responses to dragons and owls?” (Sagan 1977, *The Dragons of Eden* as quoted by Blust 2000) C.W. Jung, on the other hand, believed that dragons were the product of a universal human psychosis. (Blust 2000)

There is a danger however, in placing too much emphasis on conceptions of the serpent in the ANE without recognizing the unique way in which the serpent is understood within the context of Judean monotheism. The Leviathan is not a primordial mother goddess that must be vanquished but rather a creation of God. The chaotic state of human affairs is the result of man's disobedience rather than a cosmic battle between the forces of nature in which man is a passive victim.

The interpretation of the curse of the serpent in Genesis 3:15 ultimately depends on how one understands the relationship between Genesis chapters 2 and 3 and the rest of the Pentateuch and how one understands the development of religious beliefs as a whole.¹² If the reader interprets chapters 2 and 3 as the product of an early Israelite author whose religious concepts are only just emerging from primitive fetishism then he or she will be inclined to reduce Genesis 2 and 3 to simple etiologies. The narrative is about man and woman discovering sex and becoming aware of themselves (Speiser 1964, 26), the man learning his role as a toiler in the fields and the woman her role as child bearer, and the reason a serpent slithers, etc. Such an approach is best summarized by Meyers when she writes, "the most prominent theme word in the Eden tale is precisely the word just mentioned: the root *'kl*, "to eat." (Meyers 1988) According to Meyers, Genesis 2 and 3 reflects the conditions of an agricultural society primarily concerned with gathering food. If this is the case, then we should not expect to find anything more in these chapters.

¹² Albright states, "No great historian or philologist is likely to construct his system in a vacuum; there must be some body of external data or some exterior plane of reference by the aid of which he can redeem his system from pure subjectivity. Since no body of external data was recognized as being applicable, men like Wellhausen and Robertson Smith were forced to resort to the second alternative: the arrangement of Israelite date with reference to the evolutionary historical philosophies of Hegel (so Wellhausen) or of the English positivists (so essentially Robertson Smith)." (Albright 1965, 136) Albright believes that scholars of the ANE have been released from the philosophical straitjacket of Hegel or Comte through the contributions of archaeology, the decipherment of inscriptions, etc. However it seems to me that the historical reductionism of Wellhausen remains unchallenged.

There is another approach to Genesis 2 and 3 that also finds etiologies but of a different sort. Here we find the first command given by God to man; the formation of the first family unit; the first act of disobedience; the origin of guilt, shame and fear; and the first act of grace by God towards his erring creatures. In this case, Genesis chapters 2 and 3 are interpreted within the context of the Pentateuch as a whole.¹³ Parallels between the garden and the temple support this reading of the text. Both the temple and the garden were holy places, created and chosen by God, where God would meet (*wənnōʿadti šāmmā^h* - Exo 29:43a) with man. Agricultural motifs were incorporated into the decoration of the temple and the menorah was patterned after an almond tree that may bear some relation to the Tree of Life in the garden. The entrance to both the garden and the temple was located in the east. Both were guarded by cherubim. The ceremonies in the temple display an awareness of man's exile from the garden. Based on these parallels, it would be surprising if the curse of the serpent in Genesis 3:15 were no more than an etiology for the fear that exists between snakes and humans.

As already noted, the word *nachash* can mean snake or Leviathan even though the physical characteristics of a snake are much different than those of Leviathan. Genesis 3 is aware of the full semantic range of the word *nachash* and attributes the change in the anatomy of the serpent to the curse of God. When the Hebrews saw 'the sloughing serpent' of the Gilgamesh epic, they remembered the curse,

*...on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. (Gen 3:14
ESV)*

¹³ The documentary hypothesis is left out of this discussion as we are not concerned with the date or origin of the tradition but only that it exists in the Pentateuch in its canonical form.

The ability of the serpent to speak and act suggests that it be placed into a similar category as that of the cherubim who also makes an appearance at the end of the story as guardians to the entrance of Eden. This admittedly does not help us identify the serpent but it prevents us from thinking of the serpent in purely naturalistic terms.

The Serpent and its Literary Context in Later Judean Texts

The somewhat obscure curse of the serpent marks the beginning of a genealogy that spans the pages of the Bible. The seed of the woman is traced through the lineage of Abraham, Judah and David and ultimately projected into the future.

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him... and the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them....And the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea.

(Isa 11:1-9 NAS)

The prophet looks forward to the day when a Ruler, of the seed of Jesse, will reverse the effects of the curse. Whereas once the earth was ruled by the chaos of the sea, it is now filled with the knowledge of the LORD. The phrase 'holy mountain' and the description of a garden paradise allude to the restoration of the original Paradise at the end of time. Elsewhere, we read that Leviathan will be destroyed.

In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea. (Isa 27:1 ESV)

The eschatological visions in Daniel 7 describe a succession of powerful empires, each represented by a beast rising from the sea. The destruction of the fourth and most terrifying beast will usher in an eternal kingdom ruled by one ‘like the Son of Man’ (Dan. 7:13). This theme is further elaborated in the Revelation of John where a battle is described between the angel Michael and a seven headed dragon identified as “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver...” (Rev. 12:13 ESV) It is fair to surmise that Revelation 12:13 reflects back on the serpent in Genesis 3. The final victory over the beast culminates in the recreation of heaven and earth. According to the final vision of the apostle John, a river flows ‘from the throne of God and from the lamb’. On either side of the river grows the tree of life. And ‘the sea was no more’ (Rev. 21:2) for the serpent has been vanquished and Eden restored.

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them... (Rev 21:3a ESV)

Conclusion

At the beginning of each year, at the time for planting, the Babylonians carried an image of Marduk out onto the wild steppe lands to do battle with the primordial monster goddess, Tiamat. Marduk’s victory that year ensured the success of their crops. (Anchor Bible Dictionary, Akitu, Vol. I, 138) The Egyptians believed that the life giving sunlight of Ra was threatened every evening as the sun dipped beneath the horizon and entered a frightening world in which Apophis,

the great serpent, threatened to extinguish the sun. Did the Babylonians or Egyptians see an end to this struggle? It is perhaps unique that the Judean prophets look forward to the destruction of Leviathan. Although this hope is by no means explicit in Genesis 3:15, the curse of the serpent in the Garden belongs with other passages in the Bible that look forward to a time when Eden will be restored.

Illustrations



Figure 1 - A seven headed serpent in ANE iconography. (Wallace 1948)



87a



87b



87c

Figure 2. - "Baal-Seth is shown adorned with two bull's horns, from which a long band hangs down. With one hand he has struck snake on the back of the neck, and with the other he is swinging a scimitar." (Keel 1998)

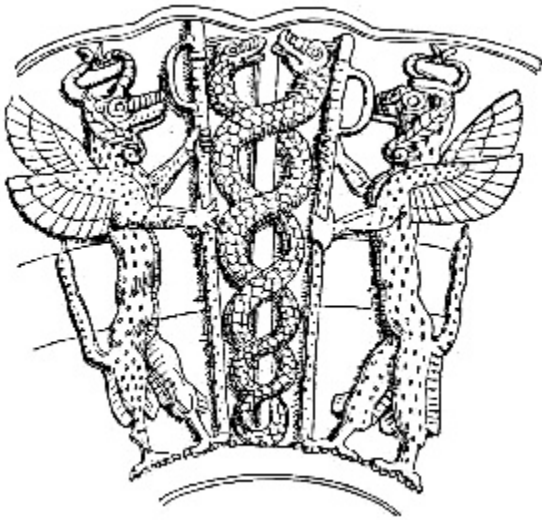


Figure 3. - Gudea Vase (21 century BC) Wiki Commons
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ningizzida.jpg>



Figure 4. – 3rd century AD. The inscription states, “The gods of Hierapolis of Syria”. Pictured is a caduceus flanked by Atagartis on the right (with lions) and Hadad on the left (with bulls). The caduceus in the center represents the third member of the Hieropolitan pantheon – Semeion. This god seems to combine both the male and female principles of life. The temple is surmounted by a dove and underneath a lion, the animal of Atagartis. (Frothingham 1916, 208)

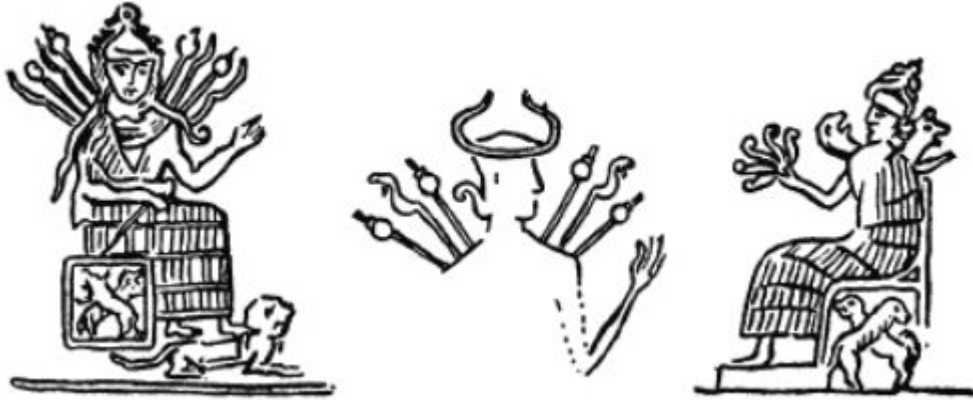


Figure 5. – Ishtar with knobbed branch from tree of life and serpents. (Ward 377 as quoted in Frothingham 1916)



Figure 6. – Ishtar standing on lions and holding caduceus. (Ward 442 as quoted in Frothingham 1916)



Figure 7. – The origin of life on the Phoenician tablet of Madrid – 4th century BC. The dress of Tanat is similar to that worn by Diana in the temple in Ephesus. The warmth of the earth and the heat of the sun combine to create embryonic life. Creation occurs in the presence of male and female serpents. (Frothingham 1916)

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