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

Michael E. Stone
*Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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

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

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

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

By the fifth century CE, at the inception of Armenian written culture, Armenian Christianity took Satan’s role in the fall for granted. So, how were Satan and the serpent related, where did Satan originate, and why did he deceive Adam and Eve according to this literature? Descriptions of Satan occur in many sources (Stone 2002, 17–21),¹ and it is beyond the limits of this paper to present even an overview of them. An example, however, of the way Satan and his host were perceived is the following.

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

The serpent is characterized in various ways. The encyclopaedic theologian, Grigor (Gregory) of Tat’ew, in the fourteenth century, says that the serpent was the beginning of death. Satan’s forked tongue speaks in two ways, false and true (Grigor Tat’ewac’i 1993, 1:218–219).

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¹ The literature on Satan is extensive. Much is assembled in the three volumes by Russell 1977, 1981 and 1984; also see Forsyth 1987.
² On Satan’s kingdom in Hell, see Zak’aria Catholicos (C 9) below.
³ ‘And we envied his honour, and we gave (him) to eat of the fruit /55/ which He ordered him not to eat, and we brought him out of paradise, and we deceived all his descendants to idol worship, to various sorts of sins. Our commander, Satayēl, built /60/ a palace and named it “Hell.”’ (Loeff 2002, 35–36).