Satan’s Refusal to Worship Adam: A Jewish Motif and Its Reception in Syriac Christian Tradition

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The sinister figure of Satan, about whom the canonical writings of the Bible provide so little information, puzzled many generations of Jewish and Christian theologians and exegetes from antiquity through the middle ages.1 Perhaps the most significant challenge posed by this mythological figure for the thinkers of the nondualist mainstream in both Judaism and Christianity was the need to explain why and how Satan, created originally as good, became quite the opposite—a quintessential and paradigmatic enemy of the omnipotent and good deity, and of humanity. A number of different explanations have been suggested to account for the fall of Satan. Generally speaking, they may be divided into two major groups: 1) stories in which Satan forfeits his original quality of goodness because he tries to challenge God himself and usurp his place in heaven;2 and 2) stories in which he loses his exalted status because of his enmity towards the primeval humans, God's creatures.3

The purpose of the present study is to investigate one particular version of the myth of the fall of Satan, which belongs to the second group. Its distinguishing feature is the combination of the two closely related but nevertheless distinctive submotifs: 1) the veneration of the newly created Adam by the

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2 This explanation often invokes the motif of Satan’s pride vis-à-vis God.

3 This explanation often invokes the motif of Satan’s “envy” towards Adam. For a concise presentation of these two positions, see J.-M. Rosenstiehl, “La chute de l’Ange: Origines et développement d’une légende; ses attestations dans la littérature copte,” in Écritures et traditions dans la littérature copte: Journée d’études coptes, Strasbourg 28 mai 1982 (Cahiers de la Bibliothèque copte 1; Louvain: Peeters, 1983), 37–60, esp. 37–53.

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angelic forces; and 2) the refusal of Satan to participate in this act, which results in his rejection by God. One of the earliest attestations of this interpretation of Satan's demotion comes from the apocryphal composition known as the *Life of Adam and Eve*. In the first part of my investigation, I discuss the account of the fall of Satan as it is presented in the *Life*. The main thrust of this discussion is that this interpretation of Satan's fall is deeply rooted in the context of ancient Jewish speculation on the figure of Adam; I argue that this account took its point of departure from a Jewish tradition about the veneration of Adam by the angels. This latter tradition is itself attested in such diverse sources as the Slavonic apocryphon *2 Enoch* and some rabbinic texts.

In the second section I offer an overview of the reception history of this originally Jewish tradition in the Syriac Christian milieu, from its earliest appearance during late antiquity, in the sixth-century composition known as the *Cave of Treasures*, until the early modern period. In the process, I explore how this tradition was adapted to and functioned within a wide range of literary genres and rhetorical settings. I place particular emphasis on how this tradition became an important topic of the Christian dialogue with Islam, in the context of the complex cross-cultural exchange that characterized societies of the medieval Near East. Because this explanation of Satan's fall gained canonical status in the Muslim tradition, where it appears already in the Qurʾān, some later Syriac-speaking Christians began to perceive it as problematic and tried to marginalize it; those who continued to use this tradition also mobilized it for the purpose of polemic against Islam. I connect the diversity among Syriac-speaking Christians in the usage of this account with its popularity as an element of the mythological discourse that was shared by many groups across the Islamicate world: a world which was shaped by the tradition of the dominant Muslim majority, but was open to a certain degree to the participation of various religious minorities.

1 The Fall of Satan in the *Life of Adam and Eve*

One of the earliest attestations of the explanation of Satan's fall as a result of the conflict with Adam comes from the *Life of Adam and Eve*, a retelling of the life story of the primeval couple written most probably during the period 100–300 CE.4 This work, the original language of which was apparently Greek,

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4 For general information on this work, see M. E. Stone, *A History of the Literature of Adam and Eve* (SBLEJL 3; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); and M. de Jonge and J. Tromp, *The Life of Adam*