"Serpentine" Eve in Syriac Christian Literature of Late Antiquity*

Sergey Minov

"That woman is a worm, we find
E'er since our grandame's evil;
She first conversed with her own kind,
That ancient worm, the devil."

Alexander Pope, *To Mr John Moore,*
author of the celebrated worm-powder

As a starting point for this excursus, I would like to quote a passage from the *Cave of Treasures*, a Syriac composition ascribed falsely to Ephrem that belongs to the loosely defined category of "rewritten Bible" and is dated to the sixth century.[1] The fragment that has drawn my attention is *Cav. Tr.* 4.12,[2] which at first glance seemed to be nothing but a quite literal rendering of Gen 3:1-5 according to the Peshitta version of the Old Testament:

ܘܐܡܪ ܚܘܝܐ ܠܐܢܬܬܐ ܥܠ ܡܢܐ ܐܡܪ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܠܐ ܬܐܟܠܘܢ ܡܢ ܟܠ ܐܝܠܢ ܕܦܪܕܝܣܐ.
ܘܐܡܪܬ ܚܘܐ ܠܚܘܝܐ ܕܓܦ ܐܝܠܢܐ ܕܦܪܕܝܣܐ ܢܐܟܘܠ ܐܠܐ
ܐܝܠܢܐ. ܚܕ ܕܒܓܘ ܦܪܕܝܣܐ ܠܐ ܬܐܟܠܘܢ ܡܢܗ.
ܘܐܡܪ ܚܘܝܐ ܠܚܘܐ ܠܐ ܡܡܬ ܬܡܘܬܘܢ. ܝܕܥ ܓܝܪ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܒܝܘܡܐ ܕܐܟܠܝܢ ܐܢܬܘܢ
ܡܢ ܦܐܪܘܗܝ ܡܬܦܬܚܝܢ ܥܝܢܝܟܘܢ. ܘܗܘܝܢ ܐܢܬܘܢ ܐܝܟ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܕܥܝ ܛܒܬܐ ܘܒܝܫܬܐ.

However, there is one remarkable trait in this passage, namely, that the author of the *Cave*, while rewriting the Peshitta text of Gen 3:1-5 – the text he reproduces almost verbatim – three times introduces the same change into the biblical text. In the three cases, underlined in this passage, where the Peshitta text has "the woman" (ܐܢܬܬܐ) as the serpent's interlocutor, he consistently emends it to "Eve" (ܚܘܐ).[3] On the one side, this phenomenon could be explained as an expression of the general tendency on the side of the *Cave*'s author to refer to the first woman by her personal name in order to avoid the generalizing "woman." Nevertheless, holding this possibility in mind, I am inclined to think that both the graphic – viz., one letter, the Yodh, distinguishing between the two words – and the phonetic – viz., similar sounding Syriac words for "Eve" (ܚܘܐ / *ḥawā*) and "serpent" (ܚܘܝܐ / *ḥewyā*) – effects of this editorial intervention betray the author's conscious decision to introduce a paronomastic word-play upon these two words into his version of the biblical narrative.

In Syriac literature from Late Antiquity, this passage is not the only instance of the world-play that involves the names of Eve and the serpent. Many additional examples of this sort are scattered throughout the works of authors writing in Syriac. At first sight this paronomasia explains itself. It is based on the closeness in orthography and sound between "Eve" and "serpent," and its appearance testifies only to the high level of philological sensitivity on the side of the authors that resort to it.[4] Yet, as I intend to show further, there is something more to say about this particular literary technique if we consider it in the broader perspective of late antique Syriac culture. My primary goal in what follows is to analyze the cluster of exegetical and rhetorical motifs containing "serpentine" imagery of Eve that appear in the works of Syriac authors. While speaking about "serpentine" traditions of Eve, I will focus my attention mainly on these two topics: explicit or implicit etymological connections between her name and the Aramaic word for "serpent" (*ḥiwyā*), and traditions about Eve falling in love or having sexual intercourse with the serpent. First, I shall provide a review of the "serpentine" Eve material in ancient Jewish and non-Syriac Christian sources. Then I will deal in detail with the question of "serpentine" Eve in the Syriac Christian tradition.

[1] On the work's dating, see the thorough discussion in Leonhard 2001.

[2] Ed. Ri 1987: 33. This passage exists only in the Western recension of the *Cave*.

[3] The text of the Peshitta referred here is that of Jansma and Koester 1977.

[4] That, by the way, disproves G.R. Driver's claim that such a phenomenon as word-play "is apparently unknown in early or indeed in any Aramaic literature" (Driver 1967: 121). For various examples of use of this literary technique by Syriac authors, see Charlesworth 1970; Falla 1977; Rodrigues Pereira 2000.

"Serpentine" Eve in ancient Judaism

It is virtually agreed upon by all biblical scholars that in distinction from "Adam," which seems to be a real personal name,[5] his wife's name *ḥawwāh* is an artificial construct invented by the author or redactor of Genesis to convey a certain symbolic meaning.[6] Although several scholars have argued in favor of the direct etymological connection between Eve and the serpent in Gen 3:20a,[7] some of them by taking the Mother Goddess traditions from the Ancient Near East as the foundation, their arguments don't appear persuasive.[8] Recently, Scott C. Layton has argued strongly against any etymological link between the Masoretic חוה and Old Aramaic *ḥiwwā* ("serpent").[9] He considers this name to be derived from the Canaanite root *ḥwy* ("to make alive"), which is consistent with the Biblical explanation of the name in Gen 3:20b.[10]

However, in post-biblical Jewish tradition the exegetical potential hidden in the similarity between Eve's name and the Aramaic word for "serpent" was unleashed. In a most pronounced form, the motif of the "serpentine" Eve appears in the corpus of rabbinic writings. Generally speaking, the rabbis were not particularly fond of Eve, preferring to blame her rather than Adam for the fall.[11] There are several cases where this negative attitude finds its expression in the connection established between Adam's wife and the serpent.

One of the most prominent examples of this approach appears in the following comment on Gen 3:20 in *Genesis Rabbah*, a Palestinian midrashic collection dated usually to the fourth century, where Eve is explicitly likened to the serpent:

> *And the man called his wife's name Eve.* She was given to him for an adviser, but she played the eavesdropper like the serpent. […]. R. Aba interpreted it: The serpent was your (Eve's) serpent (חויך חויה), and you are Adam's serpent (ואת חויה דאדם) (20:11).[12]

In addition, one finds in rabbinic writings a number of exegetical traditions evolving around the serpent's passion for Adam's wife. In general, these traditions can be divided into the two main groups: those where the serpent's plot in Gen 3 is directed against Adam in order to get his wife,[13] and those where he (or Satan) actually has sexual intercourse with Eve.[14]

Although all these traditions are attested in the late Amoraic sources, both Palestinian and Babylonian, there is a high probability that the basic motif of Eve having intercourse with the serpent goes back well into the Second Temple period. For example, in 4 Maccabees, a pseudepigraphic work dated to the first century CE, the mother of the seven sons brings forth the following argument in her speech:

> I was a chaste maiden, and did not depart from my father's house; but I kept guard over the rib fashioned into woman's body. No seducer of the desert or spoiler in the field corrupted me; nor did the seducing and deceitful serpent defile the sanctity of my chastity (οὐδὲ ἐλυμήνατό μου τὰ ἁγνὰ τῆς παρθενίας λυμεὼν ἀπάτης ὄφις). All the period of my maturity I abode with my husband. (18:7-9)[15]

One can see clearly from the phraseology used here that while defending her integrity the woman speaks about her sexual purity and not about some kind of abstract moral defilement. In so doing, she explicitly positions herself against Eve.[16]

Some scholars, such as Bernard Prusak, also understood the scene of Eve's seduction in the Greek *Life of Adam and Eve* (§ 19) to imply that "Satan sexually seduced Eve," basing themselves upon the identification of the serpent's venom in this passage as "lust"

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[5] See Layton, S. C. 1997: 22.

[6] The artificiality or, at least, strangeness of this name for potential readers could be deduced from the fact that in the view of Genesis' redactor(s) it was in need of a separate explanation, namely Gen 3:20b; see on this Layton, S.C. 1997: 23.

[7] Cf. Cassuto 1961: 170-171. Kimelman 1996: 33-34, basing himself on the fact of the artificial nature of Eve's name, argues for the bilingual Hebrew-Aramaic pun in Gen 3:20a. It is noteworthy that in an Old Aramaic inscription from Sefire (I.A.31), "serpent" is spelled as חוה, although as the inscription's editor notes it should be vocalized as *ḥiwwāh*; see Fitzmyer 1967: 14, 48.

[8] See Emerton 1997 for a general discussion on the difficulties entailed in application of the data from comparative Semitic philology. Concerning Eve, see Williams, A.J. 1977: 363-367. Still, there are reasons to suggest that these traditions influenced later perception of Eve in at least some of the Near Eastern cultures that came in contact with Jewish traditions.

[9] See Layton, S. C. 1997: 29-30.

[10] Idem.: 31.

[11] On the generally negative depiction of Eve in Rabbinic literature, see Bronner 1994; Lachs 1974.

[12] Theodor-Albeck 1996, 1: 195. The same saying of R. Aha is found in Gen. Rab. 22:2. Cf. also a marginal gloss to Gen 3:20 in the *Targum Neophyti*, where Adam calls his wife חוויא, "serpent" (Díez Macho 1968: 19), not to speak about such later midrashic collections as *Bereshit Rabbati* 17 or *Yalkut Shimoni* on Gen 3:20.

[13] Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 18:6; 20:5; 85:2; *b.Sotah* 9b; *Avoth de Rabbi Nathan* (A) 1.

[14] Cf. *b. Shabbat* 145b-146a; *b. Yebamoth* 103b; *b. Abodah Zarah* 22b; *Targum Ps-Jonathan* on Gen 4:1; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 21.

[15] Hadas 1953: 239-241.

[16] As it was noted by Norris 1999: 109.

(ἐπιθυμία).[17] However, Johannes Tromp, in his recent critical edition of this text, holds this line to be a later gloss, which increases the likelihood that this tradition is a Christian addition to the original text of the *Life*.[18]

Although it is not an appropriate place here to discuss in detail the origins and development of this exegetical motif, several important points germane to our investigation should be made. First of all, one might point at a set of purely exegetical reasons behind these traditions. Most likely, they were triggered by the wording of Gen 3:13. Thus, as I have mentioned above, it is likely that the sexual connotations of Eve's complaint that the serpent "deceived" her (MT הַנָּחָשׁ הִשִּׁיאַנִי)[19] were brought to the fore already in Second Temple Jewish exegesis. It also should be kept in mind that, notwithstanding the gross imagery and misogyny of this tradition, it had a genuine exegetical rationale at its core. For its ultimate goal is to resolve a wide range of Scriptural problems, such as the strange description of Cain's birth in Gen 4:1 and his unexpectedly vicious behavior afterwards, or Seth's birth, which is described as in Adam's "likeness and image" (Gen 5:3).[20] An additional scriptural "hook" for this motif is provided by Gen 3:15, where God puts enmity between Eve and the serpent, from which one might infer that before this they were friends.[21]

There is another important factor that might contribute to the development of this exegetical motif. It belongs to the milieu of folk beliefs, namely, the widespread superstition about a "killer wife," that is, a woman who, although unwillingly, brings death to her husband. In Jewish culture this belief lurks already behind the story of Tamar and Judah in Gen 38, and is first attested in the Second Temple period – in the book of Tobit, for the later period, when it was definitely taken up in the Rabbis.[22]

An additional possibility of influence upon the development of Eve's "serpentine" image in Jewish tradition comes from Hellenistic Egypt, where the goddess Isis was associated with another female deity, Thermouthis, and assumed the latter's serpentine features.[23] It should be noted that there is archaeological evidence of the Isis-cult in Syria-Palestine,[24] and Isis herself is occasionally identified with Eve in Rabbinic literature.[25]

Last but not least: since in all late Aramaic dialects we find the same word for "serpent,"[26] it seems only logical to suggest that in any scripturally oriented Aramaic culture, Gen 3:20 would sooner or later unleash its ironic potential. There is no wonder that, in a male-centered exegetical perspective of reading Genesis, Eve easily becomes the serpent's willing or unwilling collaborator against the first man, Adam, instead of being the latter's co-victim.[27]

"Serpentine" Eve in Early Christianity and Gnosticism

The association of Eve with the serpent that originated in Jewish circles was readily adopted and further developed by various Christian groups in accordance with their own exegetical needs and theological outlooks.

Thus the Aramaic-based word-play connecting Eve's name with the serpent occurs sporadically throughout Christian writings from

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[17] Prusak 1974: 94.

[18] See Tromp 2005: 109. On the possible Christian origins of the whole work, see de Jonge 2000a.

[19] It should be noted that both in ancient and later literature and folklore the act of "tricking" a female protagonist by a male one does often imply a sexual dimension; for various examples of this deception-seduction cluster, see Thompson 1975, vol. 4: 381-395.

[20] While enjoying a quite wide circulation in rabbinic literature, this exegetical somersault gains especial popularity among the Gnostics; see on this Stroumsa 1984: 38-49.

[21] Among others, Origen makes use of this possibility in *Homilies on Jeremiah* 20.7.4.

[22] See Friedman 1990. The story of Tobit is particularly interesting because of the demon Asmodeus, who kills the husbands of a woman that he loves (Tobit 3:7-9,

6:15); see also Friedman 1990: 33-35. This story, coming from the repertoire of popular beliefs, stands very close to various later traditions about the serpent being in love with Eve.

[23] For references see van den Broek 1973: 37-39. It is remarkable that during the Roman period the couple of Isis and Serapis were often depicted in the form of two upright snakes; see Belayche 2001: 158. That the figure of Thermouthis gained some popularity in Jewish circles during the Second Temple period attests the fact that her name was assigned to pharaoh's daughter, who saved Moses from the waters of Nile; cf. *Jubilees* 47.5; Josephus, *Ant.* 2.224.

[24] See Witt 1971: 130-140; Belayche 2001: 158, 185, 212, 224; Magness 2001.

[25] Cf. *b. Abodah Zarah* 43a, where Eve is identified with the "female nursing image" (דמות מניקן) mentioned in *t. Abodah Zarah* 5:1, and usually understood by scholars to refer to Isis (see Lieberman 1962b: 136-139). Recently an attempt has been made to challenge this identification in favor of that with the goddess Nysa nursing the infant Dionysus; see Friedheim 2003.

[26] Thus, besides Syriac ܚܘܝܐ and Jewish Palestinian Aramaic חוויה, there are Christian Palestinian Aramaic חיויא, Samaritan Aramaic חוה, Jewish Babylonian Aramaic חיויא and Mandaic *hiuia*.

[27] For an example of how women were construed in one of these cultures, the Rabbinic, see Baskin 1999.

Late Antiquity. The first Christian author to employ "serpentine" etymology is Clement of Alexandria (II-III CE). While describing the Dionysiac orgies in his *Protrepticus*, Clement brings forth the following scene, where Eve's name is likened to the Bacchic cry Εὐάν and the Aramaic word for "serpent":

> Wreathed with snakes, they perform the distribution of portions of their victims, shouting the name of Eva, that Eva through whom error entered into the world; and a consecrated snake is the emblem of the Bacchic orgies. At any rate, according to the correct Hebrew speech, the word "hevia" with an aspirate means the female snake (2.11-12).[28]

It is not my task here to discuss the probable source of Clement's knowledge, but the possibility of direct Jewish influence upon him in this particular case seems very likely.[29] The connection between Eve's name and the Bacchic cry seems to be employed also in the second century by Theophilus of Antioch.[30] Later on, we find a similar explanation of Eve's name in the context of the Dionysiac cult in Epiphanius of Salamis' *De Fide* (10.7). Most likely, Epiphanius has borrowed this story directly from Clement, as he was well acquainted with the latter's writings.

We also find the etymological connection between Eve's name and the serpent in another Greek source, the so-called *Onomasticum Coislinianum*, an anonymous composition comprised of the etymologies of scriptural figures' names.[31] There the author offers for the name "Eve" such an etymology as ὄφις ("serpent"),[32] alongside the traditional ζωή ("life") and θήλια ("female").[33]

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[28] ἐπολολύζοντες Εὐάν, Εὐαν ἐκείνην, δι' ἧς ἡ πλάνη παρηκολούθησεν· καὶ σημεῖον ὀργίων βακχικῶν ὄφις ἐστὶ τετελεσμένος. Αὐτίκα γοῦν κατὰ τὴν ἀκριβῆ τῶν Ἑβραίων φωνὴν ὄνομα τὸ Ἔυια δασυνόμενον ἑρμηνεύεται ὄφις ἡ θήλεια; ed. Butterworth 1960: 30-31.

[29] On Clement's Jewish connections, see Stroumsa 1995: 58-59. A remarkable detail of this story is that Clement identifies *ḥewyah* not as an Aramaic but as a Hebrew word. In my view, that could strengthen the argument about his reliance on Jewish informants for this etymology.

[30] Cf. *Ad Autolycum* 2.28; for an analysis of this tradition, see Zeegers-Vander Vorst 1981.

[31] First published by Hohlenberg 1836; reprinted in de Lagarde 1887: 194-202.

[32] Hohlenberg 1836: 32.

[33] This unusual explanation of Eve's name might be understood as a corrupted form of θηρία ("beast") and go back to the Aramaic חיה, as it was suggested by Hohlenberg 1836: 32. Another possible explanation for this etymology is that it had been deduced from the biblical references to the first couple as "male and female" (ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ); cf. Gen 1:27, 5:2 (LXX); Mt 19:4, Mk 10:6. Finally, it might be a result of misunderstanding of Clement's words quoted above, when his ὄφις ἡ

Finally, there is one more source where explicit serpentine etymology for Eve's name appears. In an Armenian apocryphal composition entitled the *History of the Forefathers, Adam and his Sons and Grandsons*, the following explanation of the names of Adam and Eve is offered (§ 32): "Adam means 'earth' and Eve, 'serpent' (ԷՒ ՄԱԾ)."[34] As it has been noted by Michael Stone, who published this work, the real basis for this etymology should be looked for outside of the Armenian milieu, namely, in one of the Aramaic dialects.[35] It seems that, similarly to the meaning of Adam's name, the etymology of Eve's name was also adopted by the author from a non-Armenian source.

However, the motif of the "serpentine" Eve in early Christian literature is not confined to these brief etymological observations. It appears also in implicit form, embedded in the stories about the serpent (or Satan) being sexually attracted to Eve.

One of the earliest examples of this sort comes from the *Protevangelium of James*, a second-century pseudepigraphic composition. There Joseph, upon his return to home after a long period of absence, finds his wife in the sixth month of pregnancy. He starts to express his distress in a series of jeremiads, among which the following deserve our attention:

> Who has deceived me? Who has done this evil in my house? Who has captured my virgin and defiled her? Has the story of Adam been repeated in me? For as Adam was (away) in the hour of his offering of praise and the serpent came and found Eve alone and deceived her and defiled her, so also it has happened to me (13:1).[36]

What is remarkable in this passage is that, while drawing a parallel between Mary's unexpected conception and the fall of Eve, the author of the *Protevangelium* lays particular stress on the sexual dimension of the serpent's attack against Adam's wife.

The sexual element also figures prominently in the treatment of Eve's fall found in another pseudepigraphical work, the so-called *Questions of Bartholomew* (IV.59). Here, in order to infatuate Eve, Satan

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θήλεια was the original reading in the *Onomasticon*, but in the process of incorrect transmission it was split into the two separate etymologies.

[34] Stone 1996b: 196.

[35] Stone 1996b: 196, n. 32.

[36] Τίς ὁ θηρεύσας με; Τίς τὸ πονηρὸν τοῦτο ἐποίησεν ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ μου; (Τίς ἠχμαλώτευσε τὴν παρθένον ἀπ' ἐμοῦ) καὶ ἐμίανεν αὐτήν; Μήτι ἐν ἐμοὶ ἀνεκεφαλαιώθη (ἡ) ἱστορία (τοῦ Ἀδάμ); Ὥσπερ γὰρ Ἀδάμ ἦν ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ τῆς δοξολογίας αὐτοῦ καὶ ἦλθεν ὁ ὄφις καὶ εὗρεν τὴν Εὔαν μόνην καὶ ἐξηπάτησεν αὐτὴν καὶ ἐμίανεν αὐτήν, οὕτως κἀμοὶ συνέβη; ed. de Strycker 1961: 122-124.

resorts to a stratagem from the arsenal of love-magic. He infuses the waters of the rivers of Paradise with his sweat, so that when Eve drinks from them she gets overwhelmed with "desire" (ἐπιθυμία) and, thus, becomes vulnerable to Satan's assault.[37]

But perhaps the most prominent association of Eve with the serpent was achieved among those heterodox Christians usually heaped together under the umbrella-term "Gnosticism."[38] While the connection between Eve and the serpent was inherited by Gnostic authors from Jewish exegetical tradition, the Gnostics creatively developed it in order to fit the framework of their particular mythological schemes.

To begin with, in several Gnostic systems one finds the idea of Eve having been sexually abused by the serpent. As an example of this approach, one can mention the system of Justin the Gnostic, who says that Eve was deceived and sexually violated by Naas, an angel whose name is derived from the Heb. נחש, "serpent."[39] Often instead of the serpent it is Satan, the demiurge, or the archons that violate Eve.[40]

Another important line of development of Eve's "serpentine" image in Gnosticism is her association with the serpent in a positive context, as a transmitter of the spiritual knowledge (gnosis) from the highest God to Adam. For example, in the teaching of the Peratae, as it is described by Hippolytus, the ultimate salvific principle, God's Logos of John 1:1, is referred to as the "universal serpent," which is identical with "the wise discourse of Eve."[41]

In some developed Gnostic mythological systems these two options appear combined, through the splitting of Eve's figure into the material and spiritual halves,[42] as in the following account from the *Hypostasis of the Archons* from Nag Hammadi:

Then the authorities came up to their Adam. And when they saw his female counterpart speaking with him, they became agitated with great agitation; and they became enamored of her. They said to one another, "Come, let us sow our seed in her," and they pursued her. And she laughed at them for their witlessness and their blindness; and in their clutches, she became a tree, and left before them her shadowy reflection resembling herself; and they defiled [it] foully. [...] Then the female spiritual principle came [in] the snake, the instructor; and it taught [them] [...] (89:17-32)[43]

There is also Irenaeus' account of the Ophite mythological system, where a distinction is drawn between the Spiritual First Woman "whom they call *the Mother of the living*" and the carnal woman "Eve."[44] The latter was originally formed by the demiurge Jaldabaoth to deprive Adam of his spiritual power and had became a sexual object for the archons, although later on she inadvertently turns into a collaborator of Sophia-Prounikos, the daughter of the First-Woman, in her struggle against the demiurge. Another mythological system where both motifs are found is that of the treatise *On the Origin of the World* from Nag Hammadi.[45]

One remarkable aspect of the Gnostic writings from Nag Hammadi is that in some of the texts there is a recognizable Aramaic substratum behind paronomastic word-plays involving Eve, especially those that are most likely of Egyptian origin.[46] It has been suggested by Birger Pearson that these traditions were borrowed by the Gnostics from Jewish sources.[47] His theory seems quite plausible, whether this borrowing was direct or through intermediates, since Aramaic was known and spoken throughout Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, especially in Jewish circles.[48] There is also evidence of direct contacts

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[37] See Bonwetsch 1897: 26. This tradition appears also in a Coptic love-spell (London, Hay 10376, ln. 15-19); see Meyer & Smith 1994: 165.

[38] On the problematic character of this term, see Williams 1996; King 2003.

[39] Hippolytus, *Haer.* V.26: ὁ δὲ Νάας παρανομίαν ἔσχε· προσῆλθε γὰρ τῇ Εὔᾳ ἐξαπατήσας αὐτὴν καὶ ἐμοίχευσεν αὐτήν, ὅπερ ἐστὶ παράνομον; ed. Marcovich 1986: 205.

[40] Cf. the *Apocryphon of John* NHC II.24.8-25; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30.7 (for the doctrine of Ophites); Epiphanius, *Panarion* 40.5.3; 40.6.9 (the doctrine of Archontics). For more examples of this sort, and thorough discussion, see Stroumsa 1984: 38-42.

[41] Hippolytus, *Haer.* V.16.8: ὁ ⟨δὲ⟩ καθολικὸς ὄφις [...] οὗ τός ἐστιν ὁ σοφὸς τῆς Εὔας λόγος; ed. Marcovich 1986: 183. Similarly, in another specimen of Gnostic mythology described by Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.30.15), Sophia, projection of the heavenly Eve, is identified with the biblical serpent. Cf. also Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.2.6 on Borborites. For more on this motif, see Sundermann 1994.

[42] See on this Pagels 1986: 270-271.

[43] Tr. Layton 1989, 1: 241-243.

[44] See *Haer.* 1.30.1-9, 15; tr. Unger 1992: 97-98, 102.

[45] See esp. 112.29-120.10. Cf. also the *Apocalypse of Adam* 64:12-13 and 66:25-28.

[46] Cf. *On the Origin of the World* 103-104 (ed. Layton, B. 1989, vol. 2: 72-73), where Aramaic word-play on חוה ("Eve"), חויא ("serpent"), חיוא ("beast") and חוא ("to instruct") is at work. Cf. also *Testimony of Truth* 45.31-47.4 (Pearson 1981: 158-163) as well as the passage from *Hypostasis of the Archons* quoted above, where a similar word-play is used.

[47] See Pearson 1972: 461-465. For dependence of Gnostics on Jewish traditions in this particular case, see also Stroumsa 1984: 46-47. On Jewish influence upon Gnosticism in general, see Alexander 1999; Pearson 1990.

[48] On Jewish presence in Roman and late antique Egypt, see Tcherikover 1963; see esp. pp. 187-189 for the evidence of the popularity of Aramaic names among Egyptian Jewry. In fact, Aramaic was used by Jews as late as V C. E.; see Lieu, J. 2002 on an Aramaic *ketuba* found in Antinoopolis, Upper Egypt.

between Roman and Byzantine Palestinian Jewry, including Rabbis, and their Egyptian compatriots.[49]

Syriac Christian Authors on the "Serpentine" Eve

Let us now turn to the main subject of this study: the fortunes of "serpentine" Eve traditions in the Syriac-speaking milieu. It should be noted that the association of Eve with the serpent in Syriac literature appears from its earliest stage, i. e. the second-third century. Thus, the Peshitta version of Eve's complaint in Gen 3:13 (ܐܛܥܝܢܝ) expresses the ambiguity of the Hebrew text even more, since in Syriac one of the possible meanings of the verb ܛܥܐ in Aphel is "to seduce."[50]

One possible channel for infiltration of "serpentine" Eve imagery in Syria is represented by the works containing this kind of material that were translated into Syriac. Thus, 4 Maccabees, mentioned above, was translated into Syriac quite early, and sometimes circulated as a part of the Old Testament.[51] Whether or not the *Protevangelium of James* originated in Syria, as some scholars have argued,[52] there is no doubt that it was read in the region, since we have its translation into Syriac, dated by some to the fifth century.[53] The contrast between Eve and Mary, evoking the love-affair between the former and the serpent, which appears in the *Protevangelium*, became a stock-motif of Syriac exegetical tradition. This can be seen from the fact that it recurs as late as the thirteenth century in the works of Barhebraeus, who in one of his references to Mary's hesitation at Gabriel's coming evokes the story of Eve and the serpent:

> ...the Virgin, who had not experienced marriage, was frightened when she heard about pregnancy and birth, (fearing) that the Serpent would seduce her too, as it had seduced her mother. And she said to the Messenger: as the Serpent cast down my mother between the trees, so I fear that you speak deceit(ful words to me).[54]

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[49] See Tcherikover 1963: 17, 21, n. 32.

[50] See Brockelmann 1928: 282. Cf. also the Peshitta version of Exodus 34:16, where Hebrew וְזָנוּ was translated as ܘܢܛܥܝܢ.

[51] The Syriac version of 4 Maccabees was published by Bensly – Barnes 1895.

[52] See Smid 1965: 20-22.

[53] The Syriac text was edited and translated into English by Lewis 1902; the story on Joseph and Mary appears on p. ܪ [Syr.], 6 [tr.]. For dating of this translation, see Schneemelcher 1991: 421.

[54] *Ethicon* I.5.7: ܒܬܘܠܬܐ ܗܝ ܕܠܐ ܗܘܬ ܒܡܫܟܢܐ ܟܕ ܫܡܥܬ ܥܠ ܒܛܢܐ ܘܝܠܕܐ ܕܚܠܬ ܕܕܠܡܐ ܐܦ ܠܗ ܢܛܥܝܗ ܚܘܝܐ ܐܝܟ ܕܐܛܥܝ ܠܐܡܗ. ܘܐܡܪܬ ܠܐܝܙܓܕܐ ܕܐܝܟ ܕܫܕܐ ܚܘܝܐ ܠܐܡܝ ܒܝܬ ܐܝܠܢܐ ܗܟܢܐ ܕܚܠܐ ܐܢܐ ܕܐܢܬ ܡܡܠܠ ܢܟܠܐ.; ed. Teule 1993: 79 [Syr.], 67 [tr.].

In addition to these translated compositions, the motif of the serpent falling in love with Eve is found also in such an original product of Syriac Christianity as the *Acts of Thomas*, a pseudepigraphic work written in the third century. There, in the third act of the apostle, a story appears about the snake that killed a young man because of jealousy for his beautiful girlfriend.[55] This episode seems to be modeled upon the tradition about the love-triangle composed of Adam, Eve, and the serpent, well attested in rabbinic sources.[56] As I have argued elsewhere, the appearance of this motif in the *Acts of Thomas* and rabbinic literature betrays their dependence upon an earlier Jewish source.[57]

While following the development of traditions about the "serpentine" Eve in Syria-Mesopotamia, it is important to take into account the fact that at least several Gnostic groups were active in this region in antiquity. The first attested Gnostic group in Syria seems to be the one founded by a certain Quq in Edessa in the middle of the second century.[58] In the teaching of this group one finds, although in a significantly transformed form, the motif of Eve having been seduced by the serpent. Thus, in a short review of this sect in the eleventh chapter of Theodore bar Koni's *Book of Scholies*, we are told about the "Mother of Life" (ܐܡܐ ܕܚܝܐ), a mythological female figure derived from Gen 3:20b, who was sexually tricked by the enemy of the highest God, her spouse.[59]

A similar motif of sexual intercourse between Eve and the archons appears in the system of the Audians, another Gnostic group that was active in Edessa during the fourth century.[60] Theodore bar Koni in his report on the Audians quotes from several writings of the group's founder Audi, where this theme is developed:

> He says in the *Book of the Strangers*, while representing God: "God said to Eve, 'Conceive a child with me before the creators of Adam come to you!'" And, while representing the rulers, he says in the *Book of Questions*: "Come, let us lie with Eve, so that whatever that will be born will be ours!" And he says also that "the rulers led Eve (away) and lay with her

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[55] See Klijn 2003: 90-92.

[56] Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 18:6; 85:2.

[57] See Minov, S., "An Unnoticed Jewish Exegetical Tradition in the *Acts of Thomas*" (forthcoming).

[58] See Drijvers 1967.

[59] *Liber Scholiorum* XI.77; ed. Scher 1910-1912, 2: 334. See translation and discussion of this fragment in Drijvers 1967: 113-123.

[60] The Audians are mentioned by Ephrem, *Contra Haereses* 24.16. The founder of this movement could be a native of Edessa; see Stroumsa 1998: 98-42.

before she came to Adam." And in the *Apocalypse of the Strangers* he says, while representing the rulers: "Come, let us cast our seed in her, and let us do it with her first, so that whatever that will be born from her will be under our control." And he says moreover: "They led Eve away from Adam's presence and had sexual intercourse with her."[61]

A possible source for this tradition in Audi's system seems to be the *Apocryphon of John* from Nag Hammadi, where a similar story about the seduction of Eve by the archons appears.[62] It is likely that this (or a similar) work was known to Audi, who, according to Theodore's account, quotes from an apocryphal composition called "the Apocalypse in the name of John" (ܓܠܝܢܐ ܕܚܣܡ ܝܘܚܢ) a passage on the creation of the human body by the seven archons, which is similar to the tradition about seven planetary powers responsible for the creation of Adam in the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II.15.13-23).[63]

The Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* from Nag Hammadi, which many scholars connect to Syria, associates Eve with the serpent in an implicit form.[64] It is stated there, about Cain, that "he was begotten in adultery, for he was the child of the serpent" (§ 36).[65] Obviously, such an understanding of Cain's genealogy presupposes some kind of love-affair between the serpent and Adam's wife having had to have taken place.

In addition to these Gnostics, there is evidence that such heterodox groups as Ophites and Borborites, in whose systems the motif of the "serpentine" Eve played a prominent part, were also active in this region.[66] Furthermore, alongside these groups, not only in Syria-Mesopotamia but throughout the Roman and Persian empires,

such a highly influential and widespread heterodox movement as Manichaeism was active.[67] In Manichaean mythology we also find a treatment of Eve similar to that found in other Gnostic systems. For example, there is a story about Eve having intercourse with the archons and siding with them against Adam in the Manichaean retelling of Genesis 2-4 by Ibn al-Nadim (X C. E.), who narrates how "the [male] archon reverted to his daughter, who was Eve, and because of the lust that was in him, had intercourse with her."[68] The same tradition is reflected, probably, in the anti-Manichaean *Acts of Archelaus*, where we are told that the archons "made Eve too in a similar way, and gave her some of their lust in order to deceive Adam" (12.2).[69] Eve as the transmitter of spiritual knowledge features in the *Kephalaia* and some other Manichaean works.[70] And, finally, the mythological "Mother of Life" (ܐܡܐ ܕܚܝܐ) that was connected with Eve in some pre-Manichaean Gnostic systems played a prominent role in Manichaeism as well.[71]

Turning to the "orthodox" authors writing in Syriac from the fourth century on, one discovers that there is a variety of contexts and rhetorical strategies where association of Eve with the serpent can be found.

One of the most prominent contexts where such association takes place is that of ascetical exhortation. For example, Aphrahat, a fourth-century Persian Christian writing in Syriac, in one of his homilies aimed at his fellow-ascetics, urges them to beware of Satan (identical with the serpent), since he inflames those who pursue celibacy with "the lust of Eve."[72] This phrase evokes the rhetoric of contempt for marriage and sexuality, typical for a radical-ascetic faction within Early Syriac Christianity known under the name of Encratism, where these aspects of human existence were considered as invented

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[61] *Liber Scholiorum* XI.63: [Syriac text] ed. Scher 1910-1912, vol. 2: 320; tr. (modified) by Reeves 1996: 116. Cf. also Barhebraeus' testimony on Audians in Nau 1916: 260.

[62] Cf. *Apocryphon of John* NHC II.24.8-25.

[63] Cf. *Liber Scholiorum* XI.63; ed. Scher 1910-1912, 2: 320. For an English translation and discussion of this passage, see Reeves 1996: 116.

[64] On the work's date and place of composition, see Layton 1989, 1: 134-135; Segelberg 1967-1968.

[65] NHC II.3.61.5-10: ⲀⲨⲰ ⲀⲨⲬⲠⲞϤ ⲈⲂⲞⲗ ϨⲒⲦⲘⲘⲚⲦⲚⲞⲈⲒⲔ ⲚⲈⲠϢⲎⲢⲈ ⲄⲀⲢ ⲘⲠϨⲞϤ ⲠⲈ; ed. Layton 1989, 1: 161-163.

[66] On the Ophites in general, see Lancellotti 2000. See Gero 1987 on this group in Syria, where they were generally known as ܚܘܝܐ (in pseudo-Ephremian *Testament* they are called ܒܢܝ ܚܘܝܐ; ed. Beck 1973: 58, ln. 501). On the Borborite Gnosticism in

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[67] Syria-Mesopotamia, see Gero 1986, esp. pp. 295-303. On connection between Eve and the serpent in these two systems, see the references in nn. 54-55 above.

[68] On Manichaean presence in Syria, see Lieu, S. 1994: 38-53.

[69] *Fihrist* IX.1: ثم ان الاركون عاد الى ابنته التى هى حوّاء فنكحها بالشبق الذى فيه; ed. Flügel 1871-1872, 1: 331; tr. Dodge 1970, 2: 784. For more Manichaean material on Eve as Adam's enemy, see Reeves 1999b: 432-437.

[69] Tr. Vermes 2001: 56.

[70] See van Lindt, 1992: 148, 188-189. Eve functions there as a channel of "Jesus the Splendor," so that through her knowledge is imparted to Adam. Cf. also Augustine's claim that for the Manichaeans the serpent is Christ; for the reference and discussion, see Pedersen 1988: 165.

[71] See on this van Tongerloo 1997: 361-364.

[72] *Dem.* 6.2: [Syriac text]; ed. Parisot 1894, col. 256, ln. 22. For identification of Satan with the serpent, cf. *Dem.* 12.8; 23.49.

and controlled by Satan. Thus in the *Acts of Thomas* (§ 52), associated usually with Encratism, the apostle laments the destructive effects of sexual desire and calls it "the work of the serpent" (ἔργον ὄφεως).[73]

In another ascetical work coming from the Syrian milieu, the second of the Pseudo-Clementine *Letters on Virginity*, the author admonishes his readers not to stay in a place where a woman is present but to "flee as from before the face of a serpent and as from before the face of sin."[74] The author of the *Letter* clearly elaborates a popular ascetic topos, woman as an instrument of Satan.[75] This topos finds its expression also in the exegetical strategy of presenting Eve during the fall, not as the co-victim of Adam, but as Satan's instrument or even willing agent, not unlike the serpent. In the fourth century this idea occurs in Aphrahat, who mentions that Satan "approached Adam by means of Eve,"[76] and in Ephrem, who in the *Nisibene Hymns* presents Eve and the serpent as two seducers employed by Satan in order to defeat Adam.[77] Similarly, in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* (I.1) ascribed to Ephrem, it is said that "the serpent killed the entire human race through Eve."[78] Later on, Philoxenus of Mabbug, while commenting on Luke 3:23-28, draws a parallel between Eve and Cain, in that both of them served Satan as instruments to bring death upon the righteous.[79] In a similar manner, Jacob of Serugh in the *Homily on Samson* draws a parallel between Delilah's treacherous behavior towards Samson and that of Eve towards Adam:

> A second Eve brought down a second Adam, that is Samson, and he fell from the greatness wherein he stood. [...] Eve expelled Adam from Paradise, Delilah took from Samson his Naziriteship. [...] In these two, women's treachery is explained to you.[80]

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[73] Ed. Bonnet 1883: 37. This phrase is absent from the Syriac version of the *Acts*. Cf. also the characteristic of the serpent as "the enemy of virginity" (ⲡϫⲁϫⲉ ⲛ̄ⲧⲡⲁⲣⲑⲉⲛⲓⲁ) in the *Manichaean Psalms*; ed. Allberry 1938: 60, ln. 18. For more examples and discussion of Encratite views on the Satanic origins of marriage and sexuality, see Minov 2010.

[74] *De virginitate* II.5: ܚܘܝܐ [Syriac]; ed. Beelen 1856: 82.

[75] See Pesthy 2005.

[76] *Dem.* 6.3: [Syriac]; ed. Parisot 1894, col. 256, ln. 25-26.

[77] *Carm. Nisib.* 35.20: [Syriac]; ed. Beck 1963: 8. Cf. also De Ecclesia 11.10; De Paradiso 13.12.

[78] Tr. McCarthy 1993: 40.

[79] [Syriac]; ed. Watt 1978, fr. 56: 85 [Syr.], 73 [tr.].

[80] [Syriac] [...] [Syriac] [...] [Syriac]; ed. Bedjan 1905-1910, vol. 5: 350-352. It might be that connection between Eve and Delilah was taken by Jacob from Ephrem, *De Paradiso* 13.12.

Furthermore, Eve is linked to the serpent in a variety of other contexts. In a most versatile way this connection is developed in the writings of Ephrem. Thus he often engages in the sort of allusive word-play that places Eve's name side by side with the serpent, with which I began this paper.[81] It has been correctly underscored by Alphonso Rodrigues Pereira that the cases where Ephrem juxtaposes Eve's name and the word "serpent" (ܚܘܝܐ) should be considered as a deliberate choice on his side, i. e., as an intended word-play meant to present Eve in a certain way. This is supported by the fact that Ephrem's anguine vocabulary was quite developed, as one can see from the *Nisibene Hymns*, where he uses no less than four synonyms for "serpent."[82]

On a number of occasions Ephrem resorts to the motif of Eve's falling in love with the serpent. Thus in *On Virginity*, one of his ascetical works, Ephrem brings forth the image of Eve's fatal infatuation with the serpent, enforced by an evolved paronomasia based on her name, the word "serpent" and the verb "to love, embrace" (ܚܒܒ):

> Eve (ܚܘܐ) the inexperienced found the Serpent (ܚܘܝܐ), the poisonous one whose words are sweet; she cherished him with love (ܚܒܒ [Syriac]), and he smote her to destruction.[83]

Later in the same work Ephrem refers to Eve as "the simple dove that has uprooted her nest and gone forth in her love after the serpent."[84] In one of Ephrem's hymns this love-affair between Eve and the serpent is alluded to in terms of hospitality:

> On the other hand, Eve became a cave and grave for the accused serpent, for his evil counsel entered and dwelt in her; she who became dust became bread for him.[85]

On another occasion, while comparing Eve to Mary, Ephrem uses explicit sexually-charged language in order to emphasize the promiscuous behavior of Eve vis-à-vis the serpent:

> Eve, who was intoxicated from the advice of pride, dared to be immoderate like a whore. She did not ask him: "Are you a slave, or a freeborn?

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[81] For examples of such paronomasia in Ephrem's writings, cf. *De Paradiso* 6.8; *De Ecclesia* 46.10; *De Virg.* 17.2; 37.1; *Carm. Nisib.* 57.3; *De Fide* 83.2.

[82] Rodrigues Pereira 2000: 258.

[83] *On Virginity* 30; ed. Mitchell 1921: 180, ln. 17-18 [Syr.]; lxxxv [tr.].

[84] *On Virginity* 43: [Syriac]; ed. Mitchell 1921: 185, ln. 9-11 [Syr.]; lxxxviii [tr.] (modified).

[85] *De Nativ.* 17.6: [Syriac]; ed. Beck 1959: 88; tr. McVey 1989: 155.

Are you (one) of the heavenly ones, (one) of the animals, or (one) of the watchers?"[86]

While commenting on these passages, Tryggve Kronholm has suggested that Ephrem imagined Eve's fall as "a kind of spiritual intercourse between the Serpent and the first woman."[87] In my opinion, this proposal does not do justice to the rhetorical dimension of Ephrem's poetical reworking of biblical themes. It has been rightly remarked by Phil Botha that, although Ephrem does on occasion speak about Eve's fall using sexually charged images or vocabulary, "one should be rather careful in suggesting that the Fall of Eve is understood by Ephrem as a sexual seduction."[88] The erotic imagery in relation to Eve and the serpent was used by Ephrem only occasionally, as a poetic device to dramatize the biblical narrative in order to produce rhetorical effect, but it would be an exaggeration to claim that the motif of a love-affair between Eve and the serpent served him as an essential hermeneutical paradigm for deciphering the story of the fall. This can be seen from the fact that, notwithstanding all the allusions to an intimate connection between Eve and the serpent found in Ephrem's poetry, he does not employ this motif in his two main works dealing with Genesis – the *Commentary on Genesis* and the *Hymns on Paradise*. Nor, it should be stressed, does Ephrem connect Eve's name with the serpent in the cases where he resorts to its etymology, which for him is usually the biblical one, i. e., based on Gen 3:20.[89]

Ephrem's probably most ingenious association of Eve's name with the serpent is found in his *Hymns on the Church*. Here Ephrem develops the theme of the naming of the animals by Adam in Gen 2:19-20 in the following manner:

> Indeed, the Creator declared the names of the created things and to that servant (i. e. Adam) he conceded the names of the animals, so that he (i. e. Adam) might call to mind the name of Eve, that he gave (her), and the name of the serpent, that he himself declared, and they might not deceive him.[90]

In this exegetical masterpiece – which, by the way, disregards the chronology of the biblical narrative, given the fact that Adam named

his wife only after the fall (Gen 3:20) – Ephrem expresses the idea that there was an opportunity for Adam to pass through the temptation unharmed, if he would only have had a somewhat deeper philological insight, and recognized the Aramaic word-play at work on the name of his partner and the serpent. Homophony between the word "serpent" and Eve's name turns the latter into an omen that Adam fails to interpret. Treatment of personal names as possible omens played an important role in Greek and Roman antiquity.[91] In view of that, one might consider this passage as an additional example of Ephrem's acquaintance with Greek culture.[92]

Besides Ephrem, there are others examples of Syriac authors making use of the idea of intimacy between Eve and the serpent. An interesting parallel between the two figures is drawn in another passage of the already mentioned *Cave of Treasures*. In *Cav. Tr.* 4.7-14 the author applies, to the scene of Eve's seduction by Satan, the parable of a man teaching a parrot to speak.[93] According to him, Satan, in order not to scare Eve by his hideous appearance, hides himself behind the serpent, who serves him as a kind of mirror and from there speaks to her. It is noteworthy that in the description of Eve's reaction to this plot the author of the *Cave* states that "she saw in him (i. e. in the serpent) her own image" (ܚܙܬ ܒܗ ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܝܠܗ),[94] thus putting forward the idea of visual similarity between Eve and the serpent.

The notion of natural similarity between woman and serpent also finds expression in a hagiographical topos about a serpent that penetrates a woman's body and has to be exercised. For example, it appears in a story found in the Syriac version of *Transitus Mariae*, where Satan in the form of a serpent enters the body of a noble woman and leaves it only after she kisses the infant Jesus.[95]

Finally, let us turn to perhaps the most vitriolic expression of a connection between Eve and the serpent among those that are scattered through the writings of Syriac "orthodox" authors. It belongs to Narsai, the most distinguished East-Syrian poet, who was active in Edessa and Nisibis during the second half of the fifth century. In the *Memra on the Reproof of Eve's Daughters*, an extended and extremely misogynistic *psogos*, he describes Eve's relationships with Satan in this way:

[86] *De Ecclesia* 47.3: ܡܒܠܐܟ̈ܐ ܐܢ ܐܝܬܝܟ ܗܝܡܘܢ ܐܘ ܚܕ ܗܘܝܬ ܡܢ ܚܝ̈ܘܬܐ ܐܘ ܡܢ ܥܝ̈ܪܐ ܐܘ ܐܢܬ ܗܘ ܡܢ ܥܝ̈ܪܐ ܐܝܟ ܚܕ ܡܢ ܐܢܬ ܗܘ ܐܘ ܚܕ ܐܝܬ; ed. Beck 1960: 120-121.

[87] Kronholm 1978: 101.

[88] Botha 1997: 487.

[89] Cf. *De Fide* 60.11: ܚܘܝܐ ܘܚܘܐ; ed. Beck 1965: 187.

[90] *De Ecclesia* 47.13: ܫܡ ܗܘܐ ܕܚܘܐ ܥܡܗ ܪܒܐ ܗܢܘ ܣܡܗ ܕܚܘܝܐ ܗܘ ܕܝܠܗ ... ܡܢ ܗܕ ܠܒ ܥܠ ܢܩܪܐ ܡܫܡ ܕܝܠܗ ܗܘ ܢܩܪܐ ܕܚܘܐ; ed. Beck 1960: 122.

[91] See Lateiner 2005.

[92] On this subject, see Possekel 1999.

[93] Most probably, this image was borrowed by the author of the *Cave* from Ephrem's hymn *On Faith* (31.6-7), where it serves as an illustration of God's pedagogic approach towards humanity.

[94] CT 4.13 (Eastern recension); ed. Ri 1987: 32.

[95] Ed. Budge 1899, 1: 44-45 [Syr.], v. 2: 51-52 [tr.].

As a whore she stood in Eden, naked, and as soon as the Evil One saw her, he ran to her semblance and committed adultery with her. Through the visible senses the accuser committed adultery with her but his seed reached into her soul and settled itself therein. Through the sense of hearing the royal bride, Adam's betrothed, committed adultery, and her wedding-day had not yet come, when she bore iniquity.[96]

Narsai goes even further in his defamation of Eve, presenting her as Satan's teacher in trickery:

> With regard to evil alone her heart is wise and her propensity skilful, and, perhaps, even the demons are in need of her tricks. She instructed the head of their hosts how he could lead astray and she opened the gate of her thought for him and he cast his seed.[97]

This vivid and unsympathetic description of Eve's fall in terms of her exceeding lustfulness and active collaboration with Satan against Adam constitutes the closest parallel to the Gnostic traditions on Eve's love-affair with the serpent we have seen among the "orthodox" Syriac writers so far. Such a treatment of Eve is extraordinary for the mainstream Syriac tradition and, thus, demands explanation.

There are reasons to think that this virulent misogynistic rhetoric was conditioned by certain exceptional circumstances in Narsai's personal life. We have enough historical evidence to suggest that one of Narsai's main reasons for writing this particular *Memra* was his conflict with Barsauma, the bishop of Nisibis, whose wife actively intrigued against him.[98] This personal dimension comes to the fore at the end of the *Memra*, where Narsai speaks in the first person while turning to a female interlocutor.[99] There is nothing improbable in the suggestion that Narsai's personal motives have prevailed in this conflict, and without restraint he attacked his enemy using all the rhetorical means available to him. It is also remarkable that, in the *Homilies on Genesis* published by Philippe Gignoux, where the creation of the world and the fall are the main topics, Narsai does not allow himself this kind of derogatory word-play, and sticks firmly

to the biblical etymology of Eve's name.[100] Yet there is an additional context that might shed some light on the roots of Narsai's misogynistic rhetoric. I would like to suggest a possibility of Zoroastrian background for the negative portrait of Eve in this work of Narsai.[101] Certain details in the description of Eve in the *Memra* bring to mind the mythological image of Jeh, the "Demon-Whore" (Pahl. *Jēh-dēv*), the malicious female demon that caused the fall of Gayomart, the primal man of Zoroastrian mythology.[102] According to Narsai, "partnership with the Evil One is very dear to her (i. e. Eve's) mind"[103] and, being lustful by nature, she readily embraces him. In a similar vein, in Zoroastrian sources Jeh is presented as the intimate "friend" (*dōst*) of the Evil Spirit, whose relation to her is "as a man has a woman who is a whore as his bed-fellow."[104] In Narsai's text, Eve instructs Satan how to deceive Adam, while in the Zoroastrian myth Jeh helps Ahriman to bring down Gayomart. Finally, similarly to the Zoroastrian account of Jeh, Narsai uses the language of impurity in his description of women, for whose destructive behavior Eve serves as the paradigm. Thus he states about women that "full of impure sin are the inner chambers of their thoughts,"[105] and that "they defile the pure."[106] These parallels are suggestive enough to allow us to propose that Narsai has deliberately infused his polemical work, aimed at a female adversary, with the misogynistic imagery of the Zoroastrian mythological account of Jeh and Gayomart known to him from the dominant Persian culture. In this regard, it should be taken into account that Narsai composed this text in Nisibis, a city located in the confines of the Sasanian Empire. This suggestion is strengthened even more by the fact that the story of Jeh and Gayomart was

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[96] [Syriac text]; ed. Mingana 1905, vol. 2: 353, ln. 13-17; transl., although from a different ms., by Molenberg 1993: 76, ln. 11-13. Cf. also Ibid.: 77, ln. 20-25; p. 82, ln. 126; p. 84, ln. 156-158, where similar imagery is employed.

[97] [Syriac text]; ed. Mingana 1905, 2: 360, ln. 3-6; tr. Molenberg 1993: 82, ln. 125-126.

[98] See on this Gero 1981: 68; Molenberg 1993: 66-67.

[99] See Molenberg 1993: 85-86, ln. 192-224.

[100] Cf. IV.244 – [Syriac text]; ed. Gignoux 1968: 624. Yet Narsai occasionally resorts to the kind of "soft" paronomastic word-play involving Eve's name and the serpent that we have seen in the *Cave of Treasures* or in Ephrem; cf. IV.135 – [Syriac text] (Ibid.: 618).

[101] Unfortunately Sunquist 1990, who on pp. 173-174, 181-182 discusses parallels between Narsai's treatment of Adam and Eve and Zoroastrian traditions about the primeval humans, does not take our *Memra* into consideration.

[102] The story of Jeh and Gayomart appears in *Bundahišn* 3; *Zātspram* 34.30-32; see Widengren 1967 for an English translation of the relevant passages and discussion, as well as de Jong 1995.

[103] [Syriac text]; ed. Mingana 1905, 2: 361, ln. 21-22; tr. Molenberg 1993: 84, ln. 157.

[104] Widengren 1967: 349.

[105] [Syriac text]; ed. Mingana 1905, vol. 2: 356, ln. 21-22; tr. Molenberg 1993: 79, ln. 67.

[106] [Syriac text]; ed. Mingana 1905, vol. 2: 357, ln. 15; tr. Molenberg 1993: 80, ln. 80.

known to Syriac-speaking Christians, as the testimony of Theodore bar Koni demonstrates.[107]

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this study with some general remarks on the development of "serpentine" Eve imagery in Syriac Christian writings from Late Antiquity.

As I have tried to demonstrate, different traditions about a close connection between Eve and the serpent entered Syriac-speaking Christian culture at the earliest stage of its formation, i. e., during the second and third centuries. Imagery of this sort played a particularly prominent role in the mythological systems of such heterodox groups as Gnostics and Manicheans. Apparently, at least in some cases, these motifs were inherited by Syriac Christians from the Jewish matrix.[108]

Different examples of associating Eve with the serpent are found also in the writings that belong to the later "classical" period of Syriac Christianity, which started with the fourth century and was dominated by the nascent "orthodoxy." However, in most of these cases the authors confine themselves to the relatively mild misogynistic rhetoric of the ascetically-oriented topos of woman as *instrumentum diaboli*, or to non-offensive paronomastic word-plays. Even with respect to Ephrem, in whose writings a significant number of "serpentine" Eve motifs appears, one can hardly say that this imagery figures prominently in his arsenal of rhetorical and hermeneutical tools for dealing with the biblical story of the fall. The only remarkable exception to this trend discovered so far is the case of Narsai, whose virulently misogynistic treatment of Eve as Satan's eager partner in crime seems to be conditioned by his extraordinary personal circumstances. Generally speaking, it looks as if there was a certain reticence on the side of the Syriac "orthodox" writers to make full use of the rich exegetical and rhetorical potential buried in the anguine associations of Eve.

As a possible expression of this tendency, I would like to point to the surprising fact that not a single example of explicit serpentine etymology for Eve's name is found in the Syriac exegetical or theo-

logical works, including biblical onomastical works.[109] Likewise, a majority of the later Syriac interpreters of Genesis, such as Theodore bar Koni, the anonymous *Diyarbakir Commentary*, Ishodad of Merv, or Barhebraeus, ignore the similarity between the word "serpent" and Eve's name, and offer for it only the etymology based on Gen 3:20b. This stands in a certain contrast with the fact that many of these authors made use of Aramaic etymologies for the names of various Biblical figures.

There are a number of possible explanations for this reservation. First of all, in light of the fact that various Gnostic groups, as well as Manichaeism, posed a considerable challenge to the nascent orthodoxy in Syria,[110] one might argue that the "orthodox" authors writing in Syriac avoided applying serpentine imagery to Eve because it was tainted by heterodox associations. This marginalization of "serpentine" Eve traditions serves as an indicator of the new discourse of orthodoxy that developed in Syria-Mesopotamia during the fourth-fifth centuries, for which polemic against Gnosticism was one of its important constitutive factors. It might be noted in this relation that in the contemporary rabbinic tradition, whose contacts with Gnosticism could be characterized as minimal,[111] the "serpentine" imagery of Eve enjoyed full legitimacy.

However, it is possible to explain this difference in exegetical approaches between Syriac-Christian and Rabbinic traditions on a more general basis, namely, that such an important feature of the rabbinic approach to Scripture as "mythopoesis," in the words of Michael Fishbane,[112] was alien to the classical Syriac culture, which became more and more oriented on the Greek Christian patterns of thought and imagination.[113] The standards set by this highly developed and influential culture, including the field of scriptural exegesis, could also contribute to the process of marginalization of indigenous exegetical traditions, including those based on an association of Eve with the serpent.

An additional factor that may have hindered the development of the traditions about a love-affair between Eve and the serpent has been suggested by Phil Botha.[114] The particular version of angelology

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[107] Cf. *Liber Scholiorum* XI.13. For a discussion of this tradition, see Widengren 1967: 346-347.

[108] On the Jewish background of Syriac Christianity, see Brock 1979; Drijvers 1992.

[109] These were published by Wutz 1915, 2: 792-847.

[110] On "orthodox" polemic against these groups, see Griffith 2002; Harrak 2004.

[111] As it has been argued by Gruenwald 1981: esp. 188-189.

[112] For an example of this phenomenon in Rabbinic literature, see Fishbane 1991.

[113] There was dramatic increase in Greek influence on Syriac culture beginning with the fifth century; see on this Brock 1998: 712-717, and Brock 2000.

[114] Botha 1997: 488.

held by the majority of Syriac orthodox writers might be described as a "high" angelology, according to which angels as spiritual beings are not able to mix physically with humans.[115] This frame of reference would leave no place for any literal kind of sexual understanding of Eve's seduction by the serpent or Satan.

Whatever might be the reason for the relative marginalization of the "serpentine" Eve imagery in the literature produced by "orthodox" Syriac Christians, it never completely disappeared from the stock of exegetical and rhetorical motifs available to Syriac writers, as the case of Narsai shows. Hence one might look at these traditions as a kind of Chekhov's gun that, although loaded, for the most part is just hanging on the wall; yet it could be picked up at any moment in order to make a clean shot.

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[115] Cf. the polemic against the understanding of the "sons of God" in Gen 6:2 as angels waged by the author of the *Cave of Treasures* (15.4-8) and by Jacob of Serug in his now lost memra *On those who say that angels had intercourse with the daughters of men* (this title is known from ms. Vatican Syriac 252, fol. 52a).

From "Pre-Emptive Exegesis" to "Pre-Emptive Speculation"? *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in *Genesis Rabbah* and *Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer*

ANNETTE YOSHIKO REED

Among the most intriguing aspects of *Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer* (eighth or ninth century C. E.; henceforth *PRE*) is its approach to Genesis 1. The work begins with an expansive hexaemeral retelling.[1] In the course of describing God's deeds during the six days of creation, it integrates many traditions familiar from classical rabbinic literature. Conspicuously absent, however, is the reticence that characterizes rabbinic discussion of *ma'aseh bereshit*, "work of creation." The *locus classicus* of that discussion – *Mishnah Ḥagigah* 2.1 – famously sets bounds upon the public exposition of the beginning of Genesis ("it is not permitted to expound [*doreshin*] … *ma'aseh bereshit* among two") and warns against speculation into "what is above and what is below, what is before and what is after"; such inquiries are associated with the dangers of dishonoring the Creator (Halperin 1980: 19-63 *passim*; cf. *t. Ḥag* 2.1-7; *y. Ḥag* 2.1/77a-c; *b. Ḥag* 11b-13a, 15a; Schäfer 2009: 180-185, 207-210, 233-234). By contrast, in *PRE*, cosmological speculation is not deemed a dangerous pursuit, nor is the exposition of creation treated as an esoteric discipline. The author of *PRE* delves without hesitation into what lies above and below the inhabited world, and into events before and after history. In addition, he goes well beyond teachings derived from Scripture, integrating astronomical, meteorological, calendrical, geographical, and even zoological materials, alongside ethical, ritual, and exegetical traditions.

At first sight, *PRE*'s hexaemeral retelling (esp. 3-11) might seem more akin to the apocalypses that prompted ben Sira's famous warning against speculation into the unknown (Sir 3.21-22), than

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[1] The first five days (cf. Gen 1:1-23) are taken up in *PRE* 3-10, and the sixth day and the story of Adam and Eve (cf. Gen 1:24-31; 2:4-3:24) in 11-17. Although 18-19 focus on the first Sabbath (cf. Gen 2:1-3), these chapters include additional hexaemeral material (e. g., discussions of whether heaven or earth was created first; the list of things created at twilight before the first Sabbath). Citations here and below follow the chapter-numbering in Börner-Klein 2004.

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