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The Temptation Narrative of Genesis 3:1-6: A Prelude to the Pentateuch and the History of Israel

This study of the story of the temptation of Adam and Eve places it in a somewhat wider literary context than is often the case and demonstrates its significance for Israel as a people. The author teaches at Westminster Theological Seminary and Nyack College.

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Perhaps the most well-known story in the Torah is that of the fall of Adam and Eve in Eden. But as much attention as the account has drawn, so much is it often misunderstood. There has been no lack of interpretations of this story, and quite a number of them have been symbolic.

Traditionally Genesis 2-3 has been read in a literalistic fashion, with the claim that everything the story relates is to be taken as bedrock history. The rise of literary criticism (or: form criticism),¹ most eminently triggered by Gunkel's landmark commentary,² effected a shift in that the said material came to be viewed as myth. As such it was mistaken even to ask the question of historical referentiality.

According to the moralistic interpretation, the story of the fall (like the rest of the biblical stories) is not literally true but serves as a backdrop for teaching certain moral lessons.

Structuralist approaches have drawn attention to aspects of the essentially binary nature of human thought as the interpretive model for Gen. 2-3. Thus, the passage from naked to clothed as well as the idea of cultivating nature represents the civilizing force of human

1 For a history of this research see C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974) 186-90.

2 H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910). Gunkel speaks of Genesis 2-3 as 'faded myth' because he recognized the difference between the presentation of divine activity in Genesis and other Near Eastern mythology. Nevertheless, despite this quite different quality, Genesis 2-3 can be viewed as nothing more than a tale (so Gunkel).

society.³ Again, others would see the end of the original idyllic state in paradise as symbolic of the transition from a primitive gathering culture to a more sophisticated farming culture.⁴

Finally, the more current reader-response theories (including feminist work on Gen. 2-3⁵) have raised a host of questions that prompted discussion among exegetes. As is well-known, reader-response criticism is inherently subjective and has often been charged with avoiding some of the most pressing historical issues.

The basic thrust of the present work too does not depend on whether Genesis 2-3 depicts history in the narrow sense of the word, although I think that the text demands the acknowledgement of at least a core of historical referentiality.⁶ Our concern is to furnish a reading of the temptation story (Gen. 3:1-6) within the framework of the Pentateuch. The merit of this approach lies in the fact that Genesis 1-3 constitutes an introduction to the 'five books of Moses'⁷ as a more or less integrated literary work.⁸ As such, one may expect to find some of the important themes of the Pentateuch anticipated in the garden prologue and in particular in Genesis 3:1-6.

In order to direct our reading along these lines of thought, a few introductory observations about the garden theme in the OT are in order.

I. Israel and the Garden of God

The garden Eden is more than just a place to live in for humanity. It is a token of special divine care: 'you may eat of all the trees of the garden' (2:16). It is also a portrait of salvation, which Yahweh has assigned to man, a picture of the ideal world that can be realized if man only listens to the voice of Yahweh. This, at least, would have

3 In actuality, it was Wellhausen who first opted for this possibility. 'As the human race goes forward in civilization, it goes back in the fear of God,' cited from V. P. Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 165.

4 Cf. S. D. Fohr, *Adam and Eve, The Spiritual Symbolism of Genesis and Exodus* (Lanham: University Press, 1986) 119.

5 As a representative of current feminist approaches to the story of the fall see B. J. Stratton, *Out of Eden* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995). She also features a helpful and brief history of the jungle of reader-response criticism.

6 Thus, according to the biblical account, I believe the beginning of human history involved an actual garden (the location of which we cannot be sure about) with two occupants, despite the mythical character of much of the J source. In all likelihood, this is the way the original audience would have taken the story, cf. G. von Rad, *Genesis* (trans. T. J. H. Marks/J. Bowden, London: SCM Press, 1972) 75.

7 Ultimately, though, Genesis 1-3 provide an introduction to the entire deuteronomistic history.

8 Cf. J. Sailhamer, 'Exegetical Notes — Genesis 1:1-2:4a,' *TrinJ* 5 (1964) 73-82.

been the way the original audience of the Pentateuch understood the garden. After all, the promised land of Canaan, the land that 'flows with milk and honey' itself is quite frequently described as the garden of God. In the following references we must keep in mind that the idea of the land in the mind of ancient Israel was one that is well watered and features a rich layer of forests and greenery, especially fruit trees. Thus Moses' blessing of Joseph in Deuteronomy 33:13-16 evinces the imagery of a land that abounds in water and so fertility.⁹ Numbers 24:5-7 too, a portion of Balaam's benediction, describes the splendor and excellence of Israel in terms of a garden by the river: 'O Jacob, how lovely are your tents, how lovely are your dwellings, O Israel! Like streams they are spread out, like gardens by the river, like oaks planted by Yahweh, like cedars by the waters.' In fact, the deuteronomic history connects the garden motif with the vision of the blissful messianic age, when 1 Kings 5:5 depicts the peaceful, tranquil life under the reign of Solomon in the following way: 'Judah and Israel lived in security from Dan to Beersheba; everyone sat under his vine and his fig tree, as long as Solomon lived.' The contours of this picture of the future messianic time of bliss become even more explicit in Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10: 'On that day, declaration of Yahweh of hosts, you will invite one another to sit under the vine and the fig tree' (=in the garden). And even the Assyrian king Sennacherib made his terms of surrender for Jerusalem (701 BC) palatable to the inhabitants of the besieged city in very similar words: 'Make a covenant with me and surrender! So everyone of you will eat of his own vine and fig tree, and will drink water from his own cistern' (2 Kings 18:31f.; Is. 36:16f.).

In the post-exilic period, the comparison of Eden with the land of Israel becomes even more eloquent: 'Then one will say: this desolate land has become like the garden Eden' (Ez. 36:33f.). 'Yahweh comforts Zion, he comforts all of its ruins. Its desert he will make like Eden, and its wilderness like the garden of God' (Is. 51:3). These texts describe the return of the captivity into Palestine as the return to the paradise, the garden Eden.

All this demonstrates that the garden of Genesis 2-3 wants to be viewed as the archetype of the land of Israel. In other words, the

9 Obviously, other texts can be enlisted to reinforce this notion (cf. Dt. 8:7-9). What is propagated in these texts, then, is not only the beauty of the land but also its 'usefulness' (productiveness). The latter idea was early on linked with the blessing of God. Thus, for example, the vine was a symbol of the divine blessing for Judah (Gen. 49:11). The harvest song of Is. 65:8 speaks of God's blessing in the grapes: 'Declaration of Yahweh: As soon as the juice is in the grape, one will say, do not let it perish, for a blessing is in it.'

planting of the garden in Eden looks forward to the 'garden culture' of Israel. Thus Eden represents the ideal world of the ancient Palestinian farmer. One could say that Eden is an Israelite garden, in which God provided rest (cf. *nwh*, Gen. 2:15; Ex. 33:14; Dt. 3:20, etc.) for humanity.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the garden Eden as well as the land of Canaan were also understood to involve responsibilities:¹¹ only as long as the commandment of God was acknowledged, the privilege of living in the ideal world was maintained. Disobedience would forfeit man's (Israel's) exalted position and result in the exile 'in the East' of paradise (cf. Gen. 3:24; 4:16; Jer. 24:5). With this in mind, the story of the fall of Adam and Eve forestalls Israel's sin in its own time. Sailhamer, in developing the same point, puts it as follows:¹²

If chapter 2 portrayed humanity's earliest state as a prototype of God's gift of the good land to Israel, then it should come as no surprise that the account of the Fall should also be recounted in terms that bring to mind Israel's future exile from the land.¹³

We may thus turn to the account of the temptation, focusing on the three main aspects of the fall.

II. The Two Trees

There has been much debating among scholars as to the significance of the two trees 'in the midst of the garden' (2:9). First of all, since 2:9 explicitly locates the tree of life at the center of the garden, and 3:3 locates the other there, it has been surmised that this is evidence of the reworking of an earlier story of paradise that involved only the tree of life.¹⁴ One could even argue for three original strands of tradition, insofar as the tree described in 3:1-6 seems to bear a somewhat different fruit than the tree introduced in 2:9. However, the separation and assigning of the two (or three) trees to different sources cannot be harmonized with the development and literary texture of

10 The concept of rest, of course, did not entail idleness (Gen. 2:15).

11 Cf. E. Zenger, *Israel am Sinai, Analysen und Interpretationen zu Exodus 17-34* (Altenberge: Herder, 1982) 186.

12 J. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 102.

13 Although we hinted at the fact that the story of the fall is reminiscent of Israel's exile (cf. pp. 3-4), the latter notion is not central to this paper, since our main concern is the temptation itself and not its consequences. The consequences will only be discussed as far as the proper understanding of the temptation requires it.

14 For a more detailed discussion of this theory see C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 289f. The notion of two different narratives, the earlier being the one concerning the tree of life, goes back to K. Budde, *Die Biblische Urgeschichte II: Der Baum des Lebens* (Berlin, 1883) 46-86.

Genesis 2-3, because 3:22-24 informs the reader that the motivation for the expulsion from the paradise rests on the existence of both trees, which have been named in 2:9.¹⁵

Trees as symbols of life are well known in various mythologies of the world. The Gilgamesh epic (11:268-89) mentions a plant that imparts 'youth in old age'.¹⁶ Even Japanese Shinto traditions¹⁷ have the evergreen tree as the symbol of immortality.

The tree of knowing good and evil has attracted most of the attention among interpreters. We shall limit our discussion to the proposals that have gained widest acceptance. One suggestion is that the knowledge of good and evil denotes omniscience.¹⁸ This view faces great difficulties, since according to the biblical narrative man did not attain to unlimited knowledge.

Another suggestion sees the knowledge in view as sexual.¹⁹ In support of this idea it has been pointed out that the couple's first reaction after eating the forbidden fruit was that they knew (*yd* 'having sexual connotation, cf. 4:11) they were naked (3:7), while they were naked and unashamed before the fall. Secondly, in the Gilgamesh Epic Enkidu acquires wisdom and becomes 'like a god' after a week of intercourse with a harlot in a garden-like environment. This theory seems unlikely since it would apply sexuality to God, a concept conspicuously absent from the OT's depiction of the nature of God. After all, since the initial command for man was to 'be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth' (1:28), sexual knowledge can hardly warrant God's banishment of Adam and Eve from the garden.

The third view, that the change elicited by the transgression represents the civilizing force of humanity (development of culture) has already been introduced.²⁰ At least two factors militate against this interpretation. First of all, there are no clear indications that cultural knowledge began with the fall of humanity. Secondly, the fact that Adam was to take care of the garden (2:15) is far from suggesting an uncivilized life, when we keep in mind that agriculture has been the

15 Cf. C. Dohmen, *Schöpfung und Tod* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1996) 209.

16 Cf. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987) 62.

17 This cult (from Chinese 'shen-tao') has its roots in the experience of nature and soul. From the ninth century on it began to merge with buddhistic thought to form a mixed religion. After World War II Shintoism experienced a renaissance in Japan and rose to become the national cult in Japan.

18 The phrase is thus construed as merism, cf. J. Krasovec, *Der Merismus in Biblisch-Hebräischen und Nordwest-Semitischen Schriften* (Rome: PBI, 1977).

19 R. Gordis, 'The Significance of the Paradise Myth,' *AJSL* 52 (1936) 86-94; J. A. Bailey, 'Initiation and the Primal Woman in Gilgamesh and Gen. 2-3,' *JBL* 89 (1979) 144-47.

20 See above, n. 3.

trademark of virtually any ancient culture.

The most cogent explanation of the tree's significance centers on the concept of wisdom (understood as autonomous wisdom), since it offered 'insight' (3:6).²¹ Wenham affords a worthy defense of this view:²²

The acquisition of wisdom is seen as one of the highest goals of the godly according to the book of Proverbs. But the wisdom literature also makes it plain that there is a wisdom that is God's sole preserve, which man should not aspire to attain (e.g., Job 15:7-9,40; Prov. 30:1-4), since a full understanding of God, the universe, and man's place in it is ultimately beyond human comprehension. To pursue it without reference to revelation is to assert human autonomy, and to neglect the fear of the LORD which is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7).

Thus, what is prohibited to man is the privilege and power to decide for himself what is good and what is evil (or rather: bad). This interpretation accords with 3:22 ('man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil') and seems to draw support from the closest parallel to Genesis 2-3, namely Ezekiel 28:6,15-17, which claims that it was pride that caused the fall. Man became like God when he defined wisdom in independence from the fear of God. One might say that the tree of knowing good and evil *was* man's wisdom or imparted proper knowledge as long as its law was heeded. That knowledge of good and evil has autonomous knowledge in mind is also suggested by the reading of 3:6, 'The woman saw that the tree was good . . . ' since this language echoes the recurrent evaluation formulas in 1:10,12,18, etc. In other words, it is the woman that now decides over what is good, and she does so in blunt contradiction to God's command.²³

Nevertheless, the weakness of the above mentioned approach lies in the fact that interpreters have attempted to define the significance of the two trees in virtual isolation from each other. I believe the symbolism can only be fully grasped when we see the two trees together as communicating the intended message. My contention is that the trees are meant to function like the Torah. First of all, the fruit of the trees is said to procure life and death respectively. The idea that lies at the heart of this arrangement, then, is to *choose* between life and death, a notion that is intimately related to the Mosaic law: 'Behold,

21 Cf. W. M. Clark, 'A Legal Background to the Yahwist's Use of 'Good and Evil' in Genesis 2-3,' *JBL* 88 (1969) 266-78.

22 G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 63.

23 After all, the tree was *not* 'good for food' in that God had prohibited the eating of its fruit.

today I have set before you life and good, and death and evil; 'I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live' (Dt. 30:15,19). Most interestingly, life is correlated with living in the promised land, the garden of God (30:20), while banishment from Canaan is tantamount to death (Lev. 26:33,38), and both blessing and curse are contingent on Israel's relation to Yahweh: fearing God and keeping his commandments will result in blessing, but disobedience will usher into the curse. Accordingly, the two trees in the garden set before Adam and Eve the Mosaic blessing on the one hand, and the curse on the other. The tree of life in particular represents the blessing that flows from a right relationship to God, whereas the tree of knowing good and evil defines the limits in which man was free to serve God and to respond to God's design. In a real sense, this tree functions as a regulative to 2:16. For while man's likeness to God is affirmed, God does *not* wish man to be like himself (cf. 3:5,22) in the sense that the creature does not have the freedom to know good and evil apart from the fear of the Lord, that is, to acquire alternative and thus autonomous wisdom. Nevertheless, the tree of wisdom *was* man's wisdom as long as its law was obeyed.²⁴ By the same token Moses' law is claimed to *be* Israel's wisdom in the sight of the nations (Dt. 4:6: 'for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations'). This text then correlates obedience to Moses' Torah with wisdom, and shows that our understanding of the two trees is not at all incompatible with the above mentioned notion of the tree of 'wisdom'. Thus when the serpent tempted Eve with reference to the tree of knowing good and evil, its strategy involved the calling forth of the desire to seek wisdom outside of the boundaries that God had laid down. The serpent will also be the next object of our study.

III. The Serpent

What is true for the two trees certainly also obtains for the role and identity of the tempter: there has been much theorizing in the history of interpretation. Early Jewish exegesis saw in the snake a reference to Satan, the prince of the devils.²⁵ Christian interpreters of virtually all ages too have identified the snake with the devil, not least because the NT attests this correlation (John 8:44; 2 Cor. 11:3,14; Rev. 12:9; 20:2). However, while this reading is doubtlessly valid from

²⁴ Cf. p. 8.

²⁵ Rabbinical writings frequently refer to Satan as the 'old serpent,' cf. also Wisd. 2:24, 'Through the envy of the devil death entered the world.'

a canonical perspective, it remains that there is 'no trace of a personal devil in early parts of the OT'.²⁶ Thus there seems to be no substantial support for the view that the 'original'²⁷ audience would have read our text in this way. More recently, Hvidberg has introduced an important modification to this interpretation by suggesting the appearance of the snake is due to a demythologization process in the course of which an original reference to the fertility god Baal was replaced.²⁸ After all, Baal used to be conceived as the arch-enemy of Yahweh in ancient Israel. But, as Westermann points out,²⁹ this interpretation flies into the face of the fact that 3:1 makes the serpent one of the creatures 'that God had made.' It seems impossible to reconcile this with the notion of the snake embodying the Canaanite fertility god.

But how then are we to understand the serpent's function in our story? On the one hand, the author wants to convey the idea of an actual snake as one of the animals that Yahweh had made. But it is precisely this kind of referentiality that seems to entail some tension: What about the snake's ability to speak? How is it that the snake is not only more shrewd³⁰ than all the other animals, but also, at least in some sense, more knowledgeable than man?³¹ I may anticipate that if the text raises such tension (i.e. an animal and yet superior abilities), it is a purposeful and deliberate means of creating a mystery. More than that, the narrative wants to present the temptation's power and effectiveness as *resting* on this its all so mysterious nature. Viewed from this perspective, therefore, we may not expect the text to satisfy our curiosity, since it not only seeks to communicate how Eve would have been captured by the scene, but also seeks to evoke curiosity in the audience, as a literary device to draw it into the narrative and so to cause to experience the power and elusiveness of the snake 'first hand' as it were.

Correspondingly, the snake is used in ANE sources as a highly

26 G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 72.

27 Of course, it is not at all clear when the temptation story was presented in this form for the first time. But even the latest dating of the J source (seventh century BC) would require caution in identifying the snake with the devil, simply because we have no evidence for such an interpretation prior to the second century BC (cf. Wisd. 2:24).

28 F. Hvidberg, 'The Canaanite Background of Gen. 1-3,' VT 19 (1960) 288-90. This theory has been elaborated by J. A. Soggin, J. Daniélou, J. Coppens.

29 C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 323-24.

30 As for the meaning of the term *'arûm* see below.

31 The context clearly supports this notion (cf. 3:4,7,22). In fact, it seems to be suggested that the snake possessed the 'knowledge of good and evil,' since otherwise the tempter could not have argued about the tree's fruit in the way Genesis 3:1-5 describes it.

ambivalent symbol, embodying the notions of life,³² wisdom,³³ and evil in the widest sense of the word (i.e., slander,³⁴ death,³⁵ lust or evil inclination,³⁶ potential rivals to God³⁷). As far as Talmudic and biblical literature is concerned, Tabick has identified three major themes with regard to the symbolism pertaining to the 'serpent', which basically correspond to the above mentioned ideas.³⁸ We can certainly see wisdom and evil or opposition to God embodied in the serpent in the temptation story. At least 'within the world of the OT animal symbolism the snake is an obvious candidate for an anti-God symbol, notwithstanding its creation by God',³⁹ since the serpent openly contradicts the divine warning (3:4-5). And as far as wisdom is concerned, we note that the tempter is said to be 'wiser than all the animals of the field'.⁴⁰

It has been claimed that the wisdom of the serpent here is ambiguous in that the reader is not told whether it is good or bad.⁴¹ But even the very first verse in the temptation account seems to militate against such a view; for how would the Israelite audience react to the tempter's questioning of God's command, which gives expression to

32 Because the serpent sheds its skin it came to be viewed as a symbol of immortality.

33 Cf. K. R. Joines, 'The Serpent in Gen. 3,' *ZAW* 87 (1975) 1-11. The idea of the cleverness and shrewdness of the snake is indeed proverbial, and is evinced in many different cultures. Jesus too makes reference to it, cf. Mt. 10:16.

34 The poison of the snake used to be correlated to slander (cf. Is. 59:3-7; Ps. 140:4; Midrash Genesis Rabbah 20:4).

35 The Gilgamesh epic mentions a snake that by swallowing a magical plant deprives Gilgamesh of immortality.

36 Cf. Phil, *Legum Allegoriae* III, XVIII.71f.

37 The OT too shows relics of the so-called 'combat myth' of the creation mythology current in the Middle East, cf. the sea-serpents in Ps. 74:13, 'You broke the heads of the sea-serpents on the waters,' or in Job 7:21: 'Am I the sea, or a sea serpent, that you should set a watch over me?' Particularly interesting is the connection that the OT draws between Pharaoh and the sea-serpents. Thus Ez. 29:3 says: 'Declaration of Yahweh God: Behold I am against you Pharaoh, king of Egypt, great sea-serpent that crouches in the Nile and says, 'My Nile is mine and it is I who made it.'

38 J. Tabick, 'The Snake in the Grass,' *Religion* 16 (1986) 155-67.

39 G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 73. Snakes are listed among the unclean animals (Lev. 11; Dt. 14).

40 The phrase can be rendered 'wise in distinction from all the animals' (i.e. no other animal possessing such characteristics), or as a comparative construct, 'wiser than all the animals.' The latter rendering is to be preferred, since the context deals with a form of exalted knowledge. Either way, the difference between the two readings is minor and does not affect our interpretation in any decisive way.

41 Cf. C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 325.

the snake's craftiness?⁴² No matter whether we are here dealing with a neutral term or not, a contextual analysis will lead us to the conclusion that the serpent is depicted not only as being rebellious against God, but also as displaying an evil kind of cleverness in engaging the woman.⁴³

With respect to the use of *'arûm* it has long been pointed out that the adjective is providing a literary bridge to Adam and Eve being naked (*'êrôm* 2:25),⁴⁴ which word itself forms an inclusio with 3:7. I would argue that the verbal link between 2:25 and 3:1 also suggests that the mentioning of the serpent's wisdom is far from neutral as to its ethical qualities. First of all, the nudity of Adam and Eve and the disclaimer that they felt no shame is meant to convey the idyllic state of humanity. The man and the woman are as innocent as vulnerable⁴⁵ in their childlike naivete, but it is precisely this vulnerable state of primeval humanity that the wise serpent attacks. In this sense, then, the *nakedness* of Adam and Eve was susceptible to exploitation by the dark *wisdom* of the intruder, so that the link between 2:25 and 3:1 seems to imply more than merely a neat conjunctive literary device.⁴⁶

Be that as it may, what the serpent's wisdom and strategy is like, is above all exposed in what it *says*, which brings us to the words of the serpent. I shall refrain from discussing the precise meaning of *'p ky*, namely whether it is to be construed as a question or an expression of surprise. However one translates the phrase, though, it is certain that the first words of the serpent (3:1) are designed to cast doubt on the truthfulness of God's words. Thus the tempter's wisdom is illustrated by his initial utterance, and utterance that deserves some more specific attention. We note first of all that the serpent's strategy centers on the meaning of language, in that God's words here (for the

42 A comparison of 3:1 and 3:14 is also quite revealing in regard to the kind of wisdom in view: *'arûm mkl hyt hšdh* (3:1), *'arûr mkl hyt hšdh* (3:14); the play on words seems intentional, evincing both phonetical correspondences (*'arûm*, *'arûr*) as well as repetition. Thus it seems that it was precisely the serpent's elevated knowledge that led to the curse.

43 Cf. V. P. Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 188. Hamilton believes that it is 'best to take 'astute, clever' as an appropriate description of the snake, one that aptly describes its use of a strategy of prudence when it engages the woman in dialogue.'

44 Cf. B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 76.

45 Nakedness as a sign of vulnerability and in fact sometimes humiliation before the enemy shows in Job 1:21; 24:7,10; Is. 20:2-4; 58:7; Ez. 16:4-22,39, etc.

46 In connection with this, I would take the break in narrative sequence (*w* + noun + verb, 3:1) as adversative: the description of the idyllic state of man and woman in the garden takes an abrupt turn as the naïve nature of humanity is contrasted with the serpent's craftiness. With this tension the serpent's appearance poses a potential threat to the stability of this vulnerable life.

first time in the OT) become subject to interpretation. Now the tempter's allusion to 2:16-17 (God's command concerning the trees of the garden and in particular the tree of knowing good and evil) is meant to direct the reader back to God's own words to review what exactly had been enjoined. Again, the power and wisdom of the snake's strategy is drawing the reader into the narrative, as he or she undergoes the same process of reviewing God's command as Eve does. But in looking up 2:16-17 we come across a rather interesting feature in the text that is absent from the serpent's words. 2:16 says 'the Lord God *commanded* saying', yet in 3:1 God's commandment is reduced to a mere saying.⁴⁷ Perhaps this omission is intentional, for it seems to diminish the authority of God's words by removing them from the category 'command' and presenting them as a saying that is open to criticism and evaluation.⁴⁸ At any rate, the fact that the serpent refers to God simply as Elohim instead of Yahweh Elohim, which is characteristic of Genesis 2-3, may also suggest the serpent's distance from God. God is the remote Potentate, perhaps even arbitrary, and not the immanent covenant God Yahweh, who in the course of history is to become the God of Israel.

But let us now take a closer look at the initial speech of the tempter in juxtaposing it with the corresponding parts of 2:16-17:

<p>2:16 The LORD God commanded <i>Of any tree of the garden you may freely eat</i>, 2:17 but of the tree of knowing good and evil you shall not eat of it.</p>	<p>3:1 Really, did God say You shall not eat of any tree of the garden.</p>
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The serpent's allusive remarks suggest that it knew the command (not 'saying') in the same way as the reader has heard it in 2:16-17. But if this is the case, the tempter seems to deliberately rearrange God's command in jumbling material from 2:16-17 in such a way as to create a new meaning. Indeed, we might call the serpent's interpretive method 'picking and choosing,' and its selective approach converts the originally very generous words with only one exception into a highly ambiguous prohibition which in the worst scenario can be read to imply the total denial of food.⁴⁹ But however one may translate 3:1b, it is clear from the text that the notion of the goodness and generosity of God is seriously damaged. Evidently, the words of

47 G. Savran makes the same observation, *Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 70.

48 In other words, the original command is now discussed as though it was nothing but a debatable opinion.

49 In this case, I have translated *kl* as 'any,' while the alternative, 'every,' will slightly change the meaning.

the serpent are shrewdly shaped to lure the woman out of her defenses, i.e. to manipulate her. And that this strategy works is seen in the response of the woman, who, unlike the snake, adds to the command, albeit beginning to reveal the same critical agenda that tends to underrate the generosity of the divine provision. For the woman's answer strongly suggests that in her mind not only the eating of the forbidden fruit but also the touching of the tree will lead to death, a notion that is not attested in 2:16-17.⁵⁰ Thus the serpent does not bother misquoting and ultimately diminishing from the command of God, and the woman does not either, except that she adds to the command by making it more stringent than it was intended.⁵¹ It is therefore quite likely that the original Hebrew audience, at least in regard to the woman's addition, would have read the discussion about the command of God in light of Moses' warning: 'You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor shall you diminish from it, that you may keep the commandments of Yahweh your God' (Dt. 4:2).

Be that as it may, we have yet to account for another curious textual feature relating to the snake, namely, its ability to communicate with man. The problem can be avoided by assuming that the material in Genesis 2-3 is entirely symbolical, and that the author does not even wish to evoke the idea of physical entities.⁵² But considering the signals that our text transmits,⁵³ as well as the macro-genre of Genesis and the Pentateuch, it seems more likely that the author wanted his audience to think of physical entities, despite the fact that the material evinces some mythological features.

Likewise, it will not do to simply assume that certain species (at least snakes) used to be capable of speaking with humans, for then the question arises why they no longer possess this gift.⁵⁴

50 Note the language of 3:3. At least the most natural reading would come to the above conclusion: 'neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'

51 Cf. C. F. Keil/F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (trans. J. Martin, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 95.

52 This interpretation with its high symbolism goes back to Philo and Origen, whose spiritualized reading of the said chapters was then appropriated by the Latin Fathers, who thus posited the exegesis of the 'thinking man' (Ambrose, Augustine), according to which approach Genesis 1-3 betokened higher spiritual truths that one need not be ashamed of (in part this exegesis was also triggered by Manichean slanders), cf. E. A. Clark in G. A. Robbins (ed.), *Genesis 1-3 in the History of Exegesis* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1988) 99.

53 Consider also the curse pronounced on the snake in 3:14; it would seem to be deprived of all force if the subject of it is to be construed as something other than a real creature in the first place.

54 Genesis 3:14f. lists the divine curses, but there is no indication that the snake would be deprived of its ability to communicate.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the capacity to express oneself articulately is as central to the definition of human identity as it is to the relationship between God and humans. When therefore in only two cases animals are endowed with such prerogatives, we face a very peculiar break with the common standards. Besides Genesis 3:1-6, Numbers 22:22f. (Balaam's ass) contains the only other reference to 'bestly speech' in the Pentateuch (and in fact in the entire Scriptures). Without extensively elaborating on aspects of intertextuality between these two texts,⁵⁵ it can be said that at least Numbers 22 affirms a miraculous event in the animal's ability to speak.⁵⁶ In both texts the animal exhibits a deeper understanding of the relationship between God and man than do their human interlocutors. Both cases center on the themes of obedience and disobedience and lead to blessing and curse respectively.⁵⁷ Hence Numbers 22 appears to be a deliberate inner-biblical interpretation within the Pentateuch. Again, I wish to point out that these connections do not necessarily warrant the assumption that Genesis 3, analogously to Numbers 22, describes a miraculous event in that this text invests the snake with human speech.⁵⁸ Still one has to affirm that this notion would have seemed ambivalent in the eyes of the original addressees, particularly in light of the fact that the serpent too was a subordinate creature and presumably deemed inappropriate as a helper for the man.⁵⁹ At any rate, the speaking serpent has an air of inexplicable mystery,⁶⁰ and so challenges the hierarchical order of the universe as it has been created.

This being the case, can the idea of a speaking serpent perhaps also be related to some aspect of the deuteronomic code? At first sight, this may seem too far fetched, but I think closer examination could

55 A work that has been done by G. Savran, 'Beastly Speech: Intertextuality, Balaam's Ass and the Garden of Eden,' *JOT* 64 (1994) 33-55.

56 Numbers 22:28: 'And the LORD opened the mouth of the ass'.

57 Another salient correspondence is the divine messenger with the drawn sword (cf. Gen 3:24; Num. 22:23). The appearance of the *nhš* in Numbers 23:23; 24:1 may also suggest a linking of the accounts.

58 Although one could argue for the conclusion, a reference to Numbers 22 by itself does not seem to carry too much force.

59 Although the idea of procreation is in the foreground of the concept of the 'zr in 2:19-20, one must not suppose that its meaning is thereby exhausted. The ancient Hebrews' experience with animals would have allowed them to see that animals are not only an inappropriate help for man become of *sexual* inappropriateness. The animals' inability to communicate would have been understood as being implied, too.

60 This element of mystery corresponds with the narrator's purpose to depict the events in the garden as belonging to primeval history, to a distant world, the ante-diluvian Golden Age, which has almost legendary character. Cf. C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 324.

lead to the opposite conclusion. Let us recall that the wise serpent enters the idyllic scene as a shrewd intruder seeking to undermine or challenge God's authoritative claims. For the ancient Israelites it would have been natural to associate this notion with the deuteronomic teachings on the false prophets and the heathen cults. Thus, Deuteronomy 13:1-3 says: 'If there should arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and give you a sign or a miracle, and the sign or the miracle comes to pass, of which he spoke to you: 'Let us go after other gods, which you have not known, and let us serve them,' then you shall not listen to the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, for Yahweh your God tests you, to know whether you love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul.' That the events narrated in 3:1-6 qualify for a test in the above sense can be regarded as given. And even if we refrain from seeing a miracle-like feature in the irruption of animal speech into the human world, there is another interesting fact to be considered here, namely that the serpent gives the woman a sign that does indeed come true: 'in the day you eat of it [i.e. the tree of knowing good and evil] your eyes will be opened, and you shall be as God, knowing good and evil' (3:5, cf. 3:7,22). The snake as the false prophet introduces an alternative way of knowledge, in fact, it suggests a way of becoming like God which essentially entails the attainment of a forbidden knowledge of God. The tempter thus initiates a new cult that has the serpent as a competing lawmaker and so ultimately as a rival god. That the serpent acts like a rival god is also suggested insofar as the tempter himself must know 'good and evil' in the first place, since otherwise the promise that is connected with the eating of the forbidden fruit (3:5, eyes being opened, etc.) remains inexplicable.⁶¹ Rather, the serpent, as a paragon of wisdom, can afford the promise because the snake has personal knowledge of good and evil, which consequently makes it 'like God' (3:5,22).

As we saw a correlation of law and wisdom in the text about the two trees, so the snake too seems to combine these ideas: the theme of the false prophet betrays deuteronomic concerns, while the presence of wisdom motifs surrounding the role of the snake can hardly be overlooked. The juxtaposition of these two themes is not surprising. After all, we already cited Deuteronomy 4:6 (p. 8) as deuteronomic

61 The idea that the serpent made an intelligent guess and turned out to be right in regard to the crucial tree is not acceptable. Nor is the serpent merely trying to get some information it did not possess in the first place, for the fact that it knew more about the tree than Adam and Eve (cf. 3:5) presupposes an awareness of the command issued in 2:16-17.

link between (Torah) obedience and wisdom. The temptation story seems to adapt the same theology.

The word *nhš* itself may underscore the sinister implications of a false cult. As a matter of fact, serpents were objects of worship in Israel (cf. 2 Kings 18:4, *nhštn*; Ez. 8:10⁶²), as in other ANE cultures.⁶³

For the said reasons, then, the serpent, as an intruder into the garden of God, can be seen analogous to the false prophets of ancient Israel whose objective was the inauguration of apostate cults. At the same time, the snake also acts like a rival god.

The role of the woman in the temptation story remains to be analyzed.

IV. The Woman

Is there a message conveyed in the fact that it is the woman that the serpent engages? The history of interpretation has witnessed a variety of approaches that have answered the question in the affirmative.⁶⁴ We shall argue that like the trees and the serpent, the role of the woman too can be viewed as being somewhat paradigmatic of the history of Israel in the Pentateuch and in the deuteronomistic history. But before we get to this point, a literary analysis may help to lead us into the discussion of the woman as an important feature of the temptation story. In actuality, the following observations are in some sense still intimately related to the strategy of the tempter, but the treatment of this aspect has been postponed until now because it seems more convenient to conduct it under the present heading.

Our foremost concern here is to understand the appearance of the woman in the temptation story as a 'logical' feature within the narrative framework of Genesis 2-3. More precisely, the meditative pronouncements of 2:23-24, together with the laconic remark about man's nakedness (2:25) form an introduction to 3:1f. Now with respect to the woman, 2:23-24 are of special interest for us. First the essential unity of the man and woman is affirmed (v. 23). Then,

62 Although Ezekiel 8:10 uses the collective term *rmš*, the fact that it is modified by *kl tbnit* ('every form') in construct, makes the conclusion that snakes were among the 'creeping things' quite likely. The identification of the snake as a *rmš* is made explicit in Leviticus 11:41-42; these verses, together with 11:10-12, also indicate that all serpent-like creatures were to be regarded as unclean. Hence water creatures without fins or scales (snakes have skin) could not be part of the Israelites' diet.

63 Cf. K. R. Joies, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament* (Haddonfield: Haddonfield House, 1974) 2f.

64 Cf. The most frequently argued position that centers on the woman as the 'weaker vessel,' C. F. Keil/F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 94.

building on this thought (*ʿl kn*, v. 24), the consequences for this unity are pointed out: 'For this cause shall a man forsake⁶⁵ his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife.' What is made explicit here is that the man's fate is inextricably bound up with that of the woman. So strong is the force of the attraction, that profound sociological reshaping will take place. Perhaps the language betrays some prediction of unrest, tension, or even potential instability for the idyllic, peaceful garden community. Decisive changes will come about on account of the woman, and these sociological transformations will introduce some element of uncertainty. One could say that the appearance of the woman in her absolutely unique relationship to the man raises some questions in addition to the other, even more pronounced conundrum of the narrative, namely, the two trees of the garden. The latter have been mentioned in 2:9 in such a way as to hold the reader in suspense, until ch.3 will resolve at least some of the tension. On a literary level, something similar, though not as explicit, is achieved by the statements of 2:23-24.

Whether or not the tempter knew about these statements is only of secondary concern when one considers the literary function of 2:23-24. In the narrative framework of J, these verses function as an introduction to the temptation story, so that the serpent's engaging of the woman is logically connected to what precedes it.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, I think that even the role of the woman is meant to anticipate some aspect of the Sinaitic covenant and thus the history of pre-exilic Israel.⁶⁷ Time and again Israel has been warned against defection from the Mosaic covenant once Israel would possess the promised land. The words of Deuteronomy 7:3-4 can be viewed as representative of texts that speak to the same effect: 'You shall not make marriages with them [i.e. the Canaanite nations]. You shall not

65 The verb *'zb* has a rather wide range of meaning, and can even convey the idea of 'apostatizing' (Jud. 10:10). The point here is not that the man moves away from his parents to establish his own household at a different location, since in fact Israelite marriage was usually patrilocal. Hence the preferable rendering here is 'forsake,' expressing the idea of changing priorities: the husband's first responsibilities are now toward his wife and no longer toward his parents.

66 On the other hand, one could argue that the serpent is deliberately depicted as being aware of 2:23-24, as it also seemed to have had knowledge of the command contained in 2:16-17. In light of what we have said about the literary function of 2:23-24, then, the serpent's tempting the woman may actually display another facet of the tempter's wisdom.

67 Cf. A. Gardner, 'Genesis 2:4b-3: A Mythological Paradigm of Sexuality or of the Religious History of Pre-exilic Israel?', *SJT* 43 (1990) 11-23. Gardner develops a view quite similar to the one proposed in this paper. See also W. Park, 'Why Eve?', *VTQ* 35 (1991) 127-35.

give your daughter to his son, nor shall you take his daughter for your son. For they will turn away your son from following me in order to serve other gods.' Throughout the Pentateuch and the deuteronomistic history the heathen nations of Canaan are depicted as a potential threat to Israel's relationship to God. What is interesting here, is the fact that in many instances the role of the women is key to Israel's apostasy. Thus intermarriages are placed side by side with the rise of idolatrous practices: 'For you shall not worship any other god', lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go whoring after their gods ' and they call you to eat of their sacrifices. And you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters go whoring after their gods and make your sons go whoring after their gods' (Ex. 34:14-16). Numbers 25:1f., Jud. 3:6 and other texts inform us that in part the plight of Israel's history was intimately related to the role of women in introducing Canaanite religions. In this sense, the fall of Solomon is somewhat paradigmatic for the sin of Israel as a nation: his many women 'turned away his heart after other gods' (1 Kings 11:4).

When therefore the woman is the object of the tempter's interest and ultimately becomes instrumental in the man's transgression (3:6b), we may discern here an important aspect not only of the fall of man but also of the fall of pre-exilic Israel in the garden-like promised land. We should also note that the depiction of the woman's role, because of its juxtaposition with idolatrous cults, is closely linked with the theme of the false prophet.⁶⁸

V. Conclusion

The present study has shown the merits of reading the temptation story as a prelude to the Pentateuch and the deuteronomistic history. It seems rather plausible that the original addressees would have understood the text as being closely related to the present situation as well as the history of Israel in the promised land.

On one level, this idea implies significant shaping of the account on the part of the author, a notion that one will have to come to terms with. The conclusion that the final version of Genesis 3 was penned after the close of the deuteronomistic history seems almost inevitable given the numerous deuteronomistic allusions.⁶⁹ On the other hand, the parallels expounded in this paper do not necessitate the view that Genesis 3:1f. is a completely fabricated narrative, fash-

68 Cf. p. 15.

69 That is to say that the present version of Genesis 3 was generated by the final editor/author with deuteronomic presuppositions.

ioned after the main contours that describe God's dealings with his people Israel.⁷⁰ The story sustains its own character despite its deuteronomistic flavor. The narrative's 'unlikeness' to Deuteronomy suggests that it existed as a story apart from Deuteronomy at some stage. Still, for the ancient Hebrews, events that transpired in the course of time and found their way into the OT canon, *had* to have a connection with Israel's history. After all, everything that the God of Israel did in the past was for the benefit of and pointed to Israel. The ideology of the Pentateuch and eventually the entire OT would have us see God as the sovereign God of history, patterning the passage of time and events according to Israel's paradigm, and turning the world on its hinges for his own nation. But also in regard to the modern interpreter the conclusion that history (in this case: *biblical history*) repeats itself seems inevitable.⁷¹ How one responds to these claims constitutes a question of a different quality.

Abstract

The paper elucidates the theological tenets that moved the author/editor of the temptation story in giving the account its final shape. Genesis 3:1-6 furnishes a number of clues allowing us to conclude that the author/editor had the deuteronomistic history 'in front of him' when he carried out his task.

As for the garden setting, it is indeed not difficult to see how the agrarian culture of Israel, who used to view her land as the garden of God, impacted the process of shaping. But more specifically, all the major elements and characters in the text seem to betray a deuteronomistic orientation. The study seeks to demonstrate that the idea of the two trees is heavily influenced by deuteronomistic (retribution) theology, as they function like the Mosaic blessing and the curse respectively. The intruding snake too assumes a role analogous to the false prophets of ancient Israel, whose objective was the introduction of apostate cults. Finally, the depiction of the woman's role in the temptation story is closely linked with the theme of the false prophet. For as the role of women in the deuteronomistic history is often key to Israel's apostasy, so Eve's role in Genesis 3 is key to the fall.

70 So: J. Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 66. Of course, Blenkinsopp does not only argue for a reflective recapitulation of Israel's history, but also makes much of the use of familiar (eastern and western) mythic themes in the composition of the Eden story.

71 One should note that this conviction (i.e. history repeats itself) is held by a great variety of schools of thought.