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# Introduction

## *When God Fought the Sea Dragons*

The twenty-four books that constitute the Hebrew Bible were written over the course of roughly one thousand years, during which time they gradually reached their final form. The purpose of these books was to teach readers about themselves: who they were, where they came from, what their relations were with other nations. Most importantly, the Hebrew Bible aimed to persuade readers of the existence of one god and of their relationship with that god. The Bible was the manifesto of the revolutionary thinkers who were its writers: it was the manifesto of the monotheistic revolution.

Though the writers of the Bible may have lived hundreds of years apart, they spoke with one another through their writings, each adding his words to the growing canon. Indeed, the Bible is not merely a collection of books but a network of connections in which stories talk to poems and laws to prophecies. Two brief examples illustrate the phenomenon.

The genealogy of David's ancestry in the book of Ruth (written in about the fifth century BCE) supplies information that was missing from the (earlier) book of Samuel, which, when it introduces the youthful David to us for the first time, relates almost nothing about his ancestry except for the name of David's father. The writer of Samuel had his reasons for not describing David's background. For one thing, he wanted David to prove himself as a leader and so to be seen as a self-made king. But the writer of Ruth, who lived a few centuries

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after the writer of Samuel, did not share that point of view. For Ruth's writer it was unthinkable that we would not know the genealogy of such a figure and that David would not be the descendant of illustrious ancestors.

As a second example, a short prophecy in the book of Isaiah about the Days to Come (Isaiah 2:2–5) tells us how, in that wondrous future, “the Law [Torah] will come forth from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” This prophecy actually converses with the Bible's paramount story about the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. That first Law was given only to the Israelites at the base of Mount Sinai when they were alone in the wilderness, in “Splendid Isolation”; on the other hand, in the Days to Come, according to Isaiah, the Law will be given to *all* the nations, and not on Mount Sinai but on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Isaiah's goal was peace, and he deemed peace to be attainable only if all the nations join together and communicate. Isaiah conveys the importance of communication by shaping his prophecy as a mirror image of the story of the Tower of Babel.

The Tower of Babel was another case where humanity united and sought to ascend (in that case, to ascend to heaven and challenge God). In Babel, however, God puts an abrupt end to the people's hubris by confusing their languages and scattering them to the ends of the earth. By using these two stories—about the giving of the Law at Sinai and the Tower of Babel—as the building blocks for his prophecy, Isaiah both reveals his disagreement with the ideology of separatism and gives humanity a second chance: again the people will join together, again they will speak and understand one another as they ascend the mountain of God—but this time with humility in order to learn God's ways and walk in God's path. This, in the prophet's view, will bring peace.

This web of connections between different writings is what we call “inner-biblical interpretation.” It happens when one text expands, alludes to, or becomes reflected in another. It is worthwhile to consider this phenomenon that created layers upon layers of interpretation

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within the biblical corpus itself. As these ancient thinkers wrote their texts, whether historical accounts or psalms, legal texts or narratives, they planted them firmly into the already growing canon, incorporating them into already-established contexts or appending them to existing texts, and, by doing so, they introduced new ideas and interpretations. They didn't erase a text with which they disagreed; instead, through additions both slight and significant, they were able to alter our understanding by interpreting the text and thus influencing our sense of it.

An interesting example of this is found in Genesis 30, which recounts the story of Jacob being swindled by his father-in-law, Laban. Jacob wishes to leave Laban, having served him for twenty years, and the two agree that Jacob will take with him for wages "every speckled and spotted animal, every dark-colored sheep and every spotted and speckled goat." Before Jacob manages to remove the goats and sheep that are now his, however, Laban hands those animals over to his sons and sends them off on a "three days' journey." Wanting to secure his rightful property, Jacob resorts to magic. He peels off the bark from some fresh tree shoots and places them into the herds' drinking troughs: "[The goats'] mating occurred when they came to drink, and since the goats mated by the shoots, the goats brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted young" (vv. 38–39). Jacob then positions the mating sheep in front of the streaked or totally dark-colored animals and thereby influences the color of the offspring to his advantage. In such a way, by his own initiative and power—and magic—Jacob manages to produce a flock for himself despite Laban's trickery.

At least one writer, however, apparently viewed as problematic the idea that Jacob used magic. For him, this notion—that a human could manipulate God's Creation—was mistaken and intolerable. Disagreeing with the story in Genesis 30 but unable to delete it, this writer managed to modify our understanding of it by describing Jacob in the next chapter as he recounts to Rachel and Leah what transpired: "As you know, I have served your father with all my might; but your father has cheated me, changing my wages time and again. *God, however, would*

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*not let him do me harm.* If he said thus, ‘The speckled shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks would drop speckled young; and if he said thus, ‘The streaked shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks would [give birth] to streaked young. God has taken away your father’s livestock and given it to me.” Jacob’s version manages to introduce God—who was entirely absent from the account in Genesis 30—into the original story. Jacob, it now seems, knew all along that it was God and not Jacob’s fiddling with sticks that gave him his rightful wage. In this way, the second writer interprets the first story for us and changes our initial reading: it was not human magic but God’s work that secured Jacob’s payment. This is the power of interpretation.

Of course, the phenomenon of interpretation never ceased. New books continued to be written, and even the existing books continued to be changed. (We see evidence of this in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Bible that was used by the Jews of Alexandria—where we find not only that the books are ordered differently but that some, like Esther and Daniel, have been significantly expanded, and many new books have been added [e.g., Judith, Maccabees, Ben Sira].) This is because of the significant role that the Bible continued to play in society: in fact, it was precisely this process of interpretation that saved the Bible from becoming obsolete. The exegetical work of explaining and interpreting Scripture is known as “midrash.” It reinvigorates old texts by breathing new life into them, maintaining their relevance over changing times by generating fresh meanings and ever-pertinent lessons. The exegetical work that so famously blossomed in extra-biblical literature, however, in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Rabbinic literature, medieval commentaries, and so on, is found already within the pages of the Bible, in the careful maneuverings of those ancient writers who, by interpreting already established texts, sought to persuade readers of their views and opinions.

When did interpretation begin? Is the first written expression of a tradition necessarily the beginning of that tradition? Did a tradition come into the world only when it was first scratched onto a stone or tablet or written on a piece of papyrus or skin? The Bible is not like

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a book written by a modern author who sits behind a desk, wrinkles his or her brow, and imaginatively concocts new characters and plots. The writing of the Bible involved the recording of ancient traditions that had been passed orally for generations from teachers to pupils, from the society's elders to its youngest members—an idea expressed in Exodus 13:8: "And you shall tell your son." Indeed, this book is our attempt to recover the pre-biblical traditions and to offer a glimpse of the rich lives the traditions lived before they became molded into the written forms that we have inherited.

In fact, we often become aware that the official, written version of a story (i.e., the Bible's version) was meant to dispute views and opinions that were accepted when the story still made its way orally through the world. By fixing stories in writing, biblical writers aimed to establish what they deemed to be the "correct" tradition, the tradition that was worthy of preservation, and to eliminate traditions and viewpoints that they considered unsuitable or impossible to accept. For various reasons that we will soon discuss, many of these popular traditions were problematic for the biblical writers who censored them—by interpreting them—for their readers.

Uneasiness with the beliefs and worldviews of the ancient traditions tended to surface around a number of themes, four of which will be explored in this book: the world of myth; cult and sacred geography; biblical heroes and their biographies; and relations between men and women.

### **The World of Myth**

Israel's break with its pagan past was hardly instantaneous and certainly not painless. Many stories carried their mythic foundations within them and spoke about gods and the progeny of gods and semidivine beings; these stories told of these beings' heroic antics and their involvements with humans. Such stories are familiar to us from Israel's neighbors, such as Sumer and Babylonia, ancient Egypt, and Canaan. The Bible, as we will see, did its best to resist these polytheistic traditions and to purify the religion of Israel and its Scripture from any and all mythological-pagan elements.

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### **Cult and Sacred Geography**

Cultic elements—customs, objects, and relics—that were legitimate in the context of one culture (e.g., a polytheistic one) naturally provoked anger in a different (monotheistic) culture and period. Moreover, a place that is holy to one population is not necessarily so to another, whose members might question and even challenge its sanctity. Disputes over the legitimacy of cultic sites often assumed a nationalistic dimension when antagonisms between tribes or kingdoms (e.g., the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah) became focused on questions concerning the sanctity and foundation of these sites. In a number of chapters we will see how the Bible sought to establish correct cultic behavior and to mark the sanctity of one or another site, often by fighting beliefs and ideologies that it refused to tolerate.

### **Biblical Heroes and Their Biographies**

Controversies tended to gather around the status of heroes and historical figures who were admired by one or another group. Some heroes were depicted by the oral tradition in ways that were considered incompatible with Israel's sacred writings. A character, for example, whose mischievous pranks and schemes provided laughter-filled entertainment for a gathering of friends would hardly be appropriate in literature that aimed to refine the characterizations of the central figures in the history of Israel. On the other hand, when that character was a political or national opponent, traditions might be allowed to besmirch a reputation severely. And while oral traditions often reflected unbridled admiration for human heroes, the written Scripture of a monotheistic religion could not tolerate a human whose heroic stature might compete with God's, perhaps even outshine God. As we will see, the Bible's war against the threat of personality cults was constant.

### **Relations between Men and Women**

Recording tales in writing necessitated also a change in the depiction of male-female relations. We will observe how writers eliminated



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sexual elements from oral traditions as they were incorporated into written Scripture in an attempt to preserve the more lofty tone that such a context required.

The writers of the Bible did not argue openly or directly with these unwanted traditions. Instead, the battle they waged against oral traditions was, for the most part, a covert one fought through interpretation. These writers presented a new or different version of a known story that did not openly oppose the views it disputed but, instead, interpreted them. The polemicist of this sort often finds himself between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, if he wants his readers (who know the old version) to be willing to accept his rendition, he must reproduce faithfully, as much as possible, the popular tradition. On the other hand, he is committed to his beliefs and ideology, which require him to change the familiar tradition. The art of the biblical story can be found in the delicate balancing act performed by these writers, who tread carefully between the old and the new.

Our enterprise of detecting ancient oral traditions and lifting them from under their written versions is one that we call “literary archaeology.” The archaeologist of this sort retrieves hidden treasures from the *literary* past. We have established three strategies for recovering these ancient traditions. Each can be used alone, or, as is always preferable, two or more can be used together.

### 1. Identifying Duplicate Traditions within the Bible

We find many cases where the written tradition (i.e., the Hebrew Bible) includes more than one version of a tradition. A careful comparison of these duplicate versions will often betray a conflict between the more ancient, problematic elements and those that were intended to challenge, obscure, or even replace them. At times we find the older, unwanted version in the Bible’s margins, banished to the textual periphery far from the primary recording of the tradition. Sometimes a tradition’s double is found outside the main body of biblical historiography in some other of the Bible’s literary genres, such as prophecy

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or psalms. In this way, for example, a polemic that in the biblical narrative was handled covertly may become overt in a prophetic context, an occurrence that certainly facilitates our identifying the polemical elements in the narrative. Another useful source can sometimes be found in parallel traditions that relate the same story about different characters; with both in hand, the older tradition can often be reconstructed.

### 2. Considering Traditions from the Pagan World

We have an abundance of sources from the ancient Near East, on whose soil Israel's culture was born, and from the classical world, cultures that were both separated from and connected to Israel by the Mediterranean Sea. Both of these vast reservoirs of traditions—from cultures in which Israel grew and was in contact—can help us identify elements that the biblical writers endeavored to disown.

### 3. Reading a Story's Subsequent Renditions in Post-Biblical Literature

A rich literary world was erected on the foundations established by the biblical stories: Jewish-Hellenistic literature, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the writings of the Dead Sea sect, Aramaic Targumim (translations), Rabbinic literature in all its various expressions, ancient liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*), and even traditions related to the Hebrew Bible that are found in Samaritan writings, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. This enormous corpus preserves more than a few remnants of ancient traditions that the Bible barred from its pages but that continued nonetheless to be told and retold, transmitted orally until much later. When they were no longer deemed threatening to anyone's beliefs or ideologies, they reemerged and were recorded. Here we notice what distinguishes literary archaeology from its more physical cousin: a "real" archaeologist must dig deeper and deeper through layers of dirt and stone in order to unearth the earliest strata, whereas the literary archaeologist is likely to find ancient elements specifically in the later and younger literary texts.

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Let us present one example of our methods as an appetizer of what is to come. This is a case where we have been able to reconstruct a pre-biblical story that was rejected from the Bible's central narrative stream. The example we've chosen was first studied by Umberto Cassuto, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Cassuto wanted to show how the Bible's Creation story (Genesis 1:1–2:3) was an attempt to dispute another account of the Creation that was then prevalent in the ancient Near East: that the world had resulted from a war between gods, a battle fought between the chief god of the pantheon and the god of the sea and his allies, the primeval marine creatures. Cassuto reconstructed the ancient story by using all the methods that we have mentioned: traditions from the ancient Near East (Babylonian and Canaanite), echoes of the rejected tradition that he found inside the Bible, and later retellings of the story from post-biblical literature.

Cassuto showed how the story that welcomes us into the Bible presents a restful, quiet, and orderly Creation in which, with mere utterances, God creates the world in a wondrous progression over the course of seven days. Light/day and darkness/night, heaven and earth, vegetation, heavenly bodies, marine animals and birds, land animals and humans, male and female: God creates one after the other over six days of productivity, which are followed on the seventh with the Creator resting from all that work.

The creation of the animal and plant kingdoms is presented in Genesis using general categories: “seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it” (day three); “and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms and all the winged birds of every kind” (day five); “wild beasts of every kind and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth” (day six). Amid these general designations of plants and trees, creeping creatures and flying birds, beasts and cattle, one phrase draws our attention. It describes the creation

1. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Adam to Noah*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961); *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1973–1975).

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of a specifically named animal type that was created on the fifth day: “God created the great sea dragons” (v. 21).

Cassuto argued that the particular identification of the sea dragons in the context of the Creation was polemical in nature. It was meant, he proposed, to remind the reader that these enormous creatures were created beings like all others: they were not divine, nor were they mythical creatures with powers to challenge God, the Creator. The polemical nature of these few words will become evident when we examine the three groups of sources that we mentioned above. They will help us to reconstruct the very Creation story that the writers of Genesis sought to deny.

The peoples of the ancient Near East—the Babylonians and the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Ugarit (a large Canaanite city in what is today Syria whose rich library of inscribed clay tablets was discovered only during the twentieth century)—knew many stories about the great war between the gods at the world’s beginnings. According to the Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish*, the god of the heavens, Marduk, waged war against Tiamat, the goddess of the sea, and defeated her. Marduk then created the world from Tiamat’s corpse (notice the word *tehom* in Genesis 1:2, “with darkness over the surface of the deep [*tehom*],” suggesting that this mythic figure left her mark here as a physical term). According to an Ugaritic myth (which will now occupy most of our attention), Baal, the god of the heavens and the head of the pantheon, battled Mot, the god of the netherworld. Mot’s allies included the “prince of the sea” along with Leviathan the Twisting Serpent, Leviathan the Elusive Serpent, and the sea dragon (or dragons). The people of Ugarit told how the seas challenged Baal at the earth’s beginnings: how the sea and the rivers, along with their allies, the great sea creatures, aspired to conquer the world and how they rose up. Baal appeared against them in a great tempest, amidst lightning and thunder, and loudly denounced them; he launched an attack against the rebellion and won. The disgraced oceans were quieted and found themselves confined by shores, while the creatures that had joined the insurrection were either trapped or killed by Baal.

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No trace of this story is evident in the first chapter of Genesis (except for the brief mention of the sea dragons). But it seems certain that the people of Israel told a similar story about their own god—we find no reason to believe that the ancient Israelites were not like the other nations in whose midst they lived—and we find allusions to it in many of the Bible's other books. This is because traditions that the Pentateuch tried to suppress did not disappear entirely from Israel but found their way into writing, probably when the ancient myth no longer posed a threat to the burgeoning monotheistic religion. We'll illustrate this with a few of the many possible examples.

A war that God waged against a multitude of challengers—the deep, the sea, Rahab the sea monster, the rivers, Leviathan the Twisting Serpent, Leviathan the Elusive Serpent, and the sea dragons—is referred to in the psalms, the prophecies, and other writings. We find, for example, in Isaiah 51:9–10: “Awake, awake, clothe yourself with splendor. O arm of the LORD! Awake as in days of old, as in former ages! It was you that hacked Rahab into pieces, that pierced the Dragon. It was you that dried up the waters of the great deep [*tehom*].” The prophet pleads with God to repeat the great wonders of the past—God's killing of Rahab and the sea dragon, God's defeat of the sea and of the “great abyss”—in the prophet's own day, the period of the return to Zion from Babylonian exile. The same can be seen in the psalmist's words: “You rule the swelling of the sea; when its waves surge, You still them. You crushed Rahab; he was like a corpse; with Your powerful arm You scattered Your enemies. The heaven is Yours, the earth too; the world and all it holds, You established them” (89:10–12). So, too, in the words of the prophet Nahum: “He travels in whirlwind and storm, and clouds are the dust on His feet. He rebukes the sea and dries it up, and He makes all rivers fail” (1:3–4). Again, the psalmist:

Smoke went up from His nostrils, from His mouth came devouring fire; live coals blazed forth from Him. He bent the sky and came down, thick cloud beneath His feet. . . . Then the LORD thundered from heaven, the Most High gave forth His voice, hail

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and fiery coals. He let fly His shafts and scattered them; He discharged lightning and routed them. The ocean bed was exposed; the foundations of the world were laid bare by Your mighty roaring, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of Your nostrils. (Psalm 18:9–16)

These are but a few of the biblical verses that describe the great battle at the beginning.

A number of verses speak about the sea dragons that participated in this war and that were defeated by God, such as these words in Job 7:12, where Job bewails his fate: “Am I the sea or the Dragon, that You have set a watch over me?” In Isaiah’s vision of the future we hear a request to repeat the events of the past: “In that day the LORD will punish, with His great, cruel, mighty sword, Leviathan the Elusive Serpent, Leviathan the Twisting Serpent; He will slay the Dragon of the sea” (27:1). We find the sea dragons also in a poet’s praise of God’s actions in Psalm 74: “It was You who drove back the sea with Your might, who smashed the heads of the dragons in the waters; it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan, who left him as food for the denizens of the desert” (vv. 13–14).

The pre-biblical sources from Ugarit that we mentioned above, along with the biblical texts that we have just cited, provide more than sufficient evidence to argue that the verse “God created the great sea dragons” was not a trivial detail but a sharp riposte aimed at overthrowing, in one swift parry, an entire complex of mythological beliefs. Still further evidence can be culled from post-biblical sources where, though some traditions were created in order to interpret these same verses, others clearly preserve pre-biblical traditions.

An example of this can be found in the apocryphal Prayer of Manasseh, whose writer turns to God with the epithetical, “You who made heaven and earth with all their order; who shackled the sea by your word of command, who confined the deep and sealed it with your terrible and glorious name” (vv. 2–3). The writer of the book of Revelation, in the New Testament, used the ancient tradition in order to

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describe the future Apocalypse. He tells of an angel descending from heaven who “seized the dragon, that ancient serpent . . . and threw him into the deep and sealed it over him” (20:2–3).

Numerous indeed are the sources in Rabbinic literature that tell of the sea’s rebellion or of the uprising of the “prince of the sea” and of the war between God and the rebellious forces that brought their defeat at the creation of the world. We bring here but a few examples.

At the time when the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to create the world, he said to the angel of the sea, “Open thy mouth and swallow all the waters of the world [in order to reveal the dry land].” He said to him, “Lord of the Universe, it is enough that I remain with my own.” Thereupon He struck him with His foot and killed him, for it is written, “By His power He stilled the sea; by His skill He struck down Rahab” (Job 26:12). (B. *Bava Batra* 74b)

The Holy One blessed be He, said, “The dry land appear.” The waters said, “Behold, we fill the entire world, and until now we’ve been constrained: where will we go now?” The One Whose Name is blessed trampled on the ocean and killed it. . . . When the rest of the waters saw how He had trampled the ocean, to the sound of [the ocean’s] screams, . . . [they] fled. As it is said, “They fled at Your blast” (Psalm 104:7). And they didn’t know to where they were fleeing. . . . He struck them and said to them, “I told you to go to the place of the Leviathan. . . . ‘You set bounds they must not pass’ (v. 9).” (*Exodus Rabbah* 15:22)

When the Holy One blessed be He created the sea, it went on expanding, until the Holy One blessed be He rebuked it and caused it to dry up, for it is said, “He rebukes the sea and dries it up” (Nahum 1:4). (B. *Hagigah* 12a)

Rabbinic literature also contains references to the war that God fought against the sea dragons. Rabbi Yohanan explicitly identifies

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the Creation story's "great sea dragons" as "Leviathan the Twisting Serpent" and "Leviathan the Elusive Serpent" (B. *Bava Batra* 74b). The Talmud goes on to relate, in the name of Rab, that God "castrated the male" sea dragon and "killed the female" in order to prevent their mating with one another and destroying the world with the force of their sexual act. In the future, according to the apocalyptic description of the End of Days, when there will be a sort of return to the beginning of history, a number of years are set aside for "the wars of the sea dragons" and others for "the war of Gog and Magog, and the remaining [period] will be the Messianic era" (B. *Sanhedrin* 97b). The identification of the sea dragons with the Leviathan, another great sea creature, resulted in a whole group of traditions about God's victory over that threatening creature, with which God "plays" (see Psalm 104:26; Job 40:29) or which God kills, using the meat to feed the righteous in the future (e.g., B. *Bava Batra* 85a; Aramaic Targum to Psalm 104:26).

Cassuto's work demonstrates how the verse in Genesis that states "God created the great sea dragons" represented but the tip of an iceberg that tried to hide an entire bustling world of other, competing traditions. Explicit references to these can be found in pre-biblical literature, in the Bible itself, and in post-biblical literature. Revealing these traditions restores the full and powerful significance to the short phrase in Genesis.

Now that we've exemplified our methods and reconstructed an ancient tradition, we should probably emphasize that *the act of revealing ancient traditions has nothing whatsoever to do with recovering historical facts*. This rule will be confirmed in every chapter of this book. Uncovering historical and biographical facts about figures from the past is not within our powers, nor are we interested in reconstructing them. By recovering traditions that relate to such personalities and events, however, we are able to contribute to the understanding of the history of ideas and the history of culture. It is unimportant, in our opinions, whether or not (for example) the Exodus from Egypt, as described in the Bible, actually took place. It is enough that, as Jews



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read every year in the Passover haggadah, “every generation must see itself as though it went forth from Egypt.” The Exodus is charged with ideological and symbolic meaning for the Jewish people and for the people of the Western world generally, even while that meaning may change and assume directions that were unimagined by the ancients. Our inquiry is not into what actually occurred. Rather, our interests lie in knowing what people told about the history of their world, their people, and their heroes. All that we have done is to search for those traditions that were excluded from the Bible or that were reported only faintly. In this volume we examine thirty biblical stories and try to reveal the more ancient traditions hidden behind them using the tools we have mentioned: inner-biblical parallels and allusions, traditions collected from cultures that surrounded the society that produced the Bible, and later retellings of stories from post-biblical literature in all its various expressions. (We should note that, with regard to Rabbinic literature, we usually bring only the most complete version of a tradition without referencing all of its many parallels.) We are not certain that we succeeded in uncovering the hidden tradition in every case. But even if occasionally we have made mistakes or have fallen short of our goal, we are nonetheless confident in the correctness of our methodology and certain that it is in the power of the literary archaeologist to recover intriguing chapters in the cultural-literary heritage of the people of Israel.

It is our hope that this book will enable readers to peer between the lines of the Hebrew Bible and discover a bit of the great wealth of traditions that preceded the present shape of Scripture. We have wanted to offer a bit of the tremendous intellectual satisfaction that our research has given us along with the thrill of peeking “behind the curtain” at ancient culture. From here on, we hope, readers’ appreciation of the Bible—even of the many stories that we have not dealt with—will be less naive and all the more profound.

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## Eden's Winged Serpent

The very first creature we meet once the world has been created is the serpent: “Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild beasts that the LORD God had made” (Genesis 3:1). The polemical nature of the verse is clear: the serpent, this verse teaches, is only one more of God’s creatures. Job says this specifically in the course of his sketch of the creation process: “His hand created the elusive serpent” (26:13). Genesis 3:1 disputes the belief that the snake was an independently divine being whose battle with God marked the beginning of the Creation. An echo of that ancient myth (as we saw in the introduction) can be found mouthed by the prophet Isaiah: “In that day the LORD will punish, with His great, cruel, mighty sword, Leviathan the Elusive Serpent, Leviathan the Twisting Serpent; He will slay the Dragon of the Sea” (27:1).

Placed at the very beginning of the Torah, the story of the Creation and the Garden of Eden teaches us how nothing preceded God’s creating the world and that the snake, who was created by God, sought to ruin God’s plans by tempting the first couple to eat from the Tree of Knowledge so that they would become “like God who knows good and bad” (Genesis 3:5). The serpent’s deed provoked God’s punishment and established that animal’s physical form and most identifying characteristic: “On your belly shall you crawl and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life” (3:14). This image of the snake and its punishment became the symbol of the enemy who was forced to capitulate, as we hear when the prophet Micah speaks about the enemies of Israel: “Let them lick dust like snakes, like crawling things on the ground!”

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(7:17). An allusion to the same characteristic is found also in another prophet's promise to Israel—"Kings shall tend your children, their queens shall serve you as nurses. They shall bow to you, face to the ground, and lick the dust of your feet" (Isaiah 49:23)—as well as in Psalm 72, which speaks of the king, "Let desert-dwellers kneel before him, and his enemies lick the dust" (v. 9).

But what was the snake's appearance before its divine punishment, before it was reduced to slithering on its belly? In order to answer that question, we must first address a different issue, one whose relevance will only later become clear, concerning the relationship between the primeval Garden of Eden and the Temple, the House of God in Jerusalem. Isaiah, for example, in his prophecy concerning the future "shoot" from the "stump of Jesse" (chapter 11), envisioned an idyllic image of a return to Eden, of a period of peace and tranquility between all God's created beings. The serpent's role in this reincarnated garden will be as a tamed pet for a child's amusement: "A babe shall play over a viper's hole, and an infant pass his hand over an adder's den" (v. 8). The snake will no longer cause harm; indeed, "in all of My sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done" (v. 9). Isaiah 11:9 makes it clear that this new Garden of Eden will in fact be the Mount of the Lord, where the Temple stands. Another prophecy, in Isaiah 65, quotes from the picture drawn in chapter 11 and strengthens (even accentuates) the connection between the story of Eden and that of the future Garden/Temple: "And the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and the serpent's food shall be dirt. In all My sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done" (v. 25).

Recognizing the relationship between the Garden of Eden, the serpent, and the Temple may teach us something about the appearance of the serpent in the Temple, which may then help us determine its previous appearance in Eden. In Isaiah's inaugural vision in chapter 6, in which he accepts the prophetic mission, Isaiah carefully describes the divine entourage: "Seraphs stood in attendance on Him. Each of them had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly" (v. 2). Seraphs, then, have wings, legs, and even hands, as we learn later, in verse 6: "Then one of the

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seraphs flew over to me, and in his hand was a live coal, which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.”

But what, indeed, is a “seraph”? We find the answer to that question also in Isaiah: “For from the stock of a snake there sprouts an asp, a flying seraph branches out from it” (14:29), and also “of viper and flying seraph” (30:6). From these verses it becomes clear that seraphs were in fact flying serpents: the temple envisioned by Isaiah was filled with serpents with arms, legs, and wings, and it seems likely that this was the tradition that Isaiah knew regarding the primeval serpent in the Garden of Eden, before God transformed it into a dirt-slithering animal. Indeed, this is the image of the paradisiacal snake that we find in the pseudepigraphic book *Life of Adam and Eve*. Here, when God curses the serpent, God says, “You shall crawl on your belly, and you shall be deprived of your hands as well as your feet. There shall be left for you neither ear nor wing” (26:3).

Other ancient sources also represent the pre-sin serpent as having legs, hands, or wings. So we find in the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities* (1.1.4) and in a number of different Rabbinic sources, for example, *Genesis Rabbah* 20:5 (“When the Holy One blessed be He told him ‘on your belly you shall crawl,’ the ministering angels came down and cut off its hands and feet”) and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to Genesis 3:14. This same winged serpent with arms and legs can be found flying about in texts from the ancient Near East, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.

The presence of a snake in the Temple during the time of Isaiah or King Hezekiah, a king who reigned Judah at that time, is mentioned in the book of Kings in the course of a description of the cultic revolution that Hezekiah instituted: “He abolished the shrines and smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred post. He also broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until that time the Israelites had been offering sacrifices to it; it was called Nehushtan” (2 Kings 18:4). When Hezekiah decided to eradicate all cultic practices from the Temple in Jerusalem, practices offensive in his eyes, he destroyed the bronze serpent that had previously been perceived as something

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intrinsically divine (if not, the Israelites would not have “offered sacrifices to it”).

The writer of Kings, who refers to Hezekiah’s actions, explicitly links the serpent to Moses. At least on the face of it, he seems to refer to the serpent that Moses created in the wilderness (as described in Numbers 21) after the Israelites had been attacked by a swarm of serpents and God had directed him to make a seraph, a copper image of a snake: “Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover” (v. 9). On the other hand, the tradition in Kings may refer to a more ancient tale, against which also the verse in the book of Numbers is directed, according to which the sculpted image of the snake represented a divine being or a member of the divine assembly. The Torah, alarmed at the image of the people of Israel sacrificing to the serpent in the Temple, makes it clear in the story in Numbers that the bronze snake does not represent any divine, mythological being but was only a device, an object determined by God and fashioned by Moses—a mere human—for the purpose of healing snake-inflicted wounds. The story in Numbers 21 is therefore the beginning of a process whose end is reflected in Hezekiah’s act: the story from Numbers did not stop the people from worshipping the snake, and so Hezekiah felt the need, finally, to forcefully remove and destroy it.

The idea that the snake in the Garden of Eden was a seraph with legs, arms, and wings suggests that also the story in Genesis was part of the polemic against the serpent-seraph that was installed in the Jerusalem Temple. The story in Genesis remarks that, with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, God stationed cherubim—also winged creatures—“to guard the way to the tree of life” (3:24). It seems that in the course of the cultic revolution in the Temple in Jerusalem, these winged cherubim—explicitly linked with the Ark of God in Exodus 25:18–22 and other places—replaced the winged serpents as the official flying guards in the divine entourage (see also, e.g., Ezekiel 10:2).

Returning to the story in Genesis, we find that though the account of the Garden of Eden admits that the snake was “the most cunning

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of all the wild beasts” (3:1), to which no other creature could compare in its cleverness, nevertheless the snake’s knowledge is that of one of God’s creatures: it is not divine wisdom. What’s more, “cunning” (*ormah*, from the root ‘-r-m) in this context is hardly a positive attribute of wisdom (as we find, e.g., in Proverbs 1:4, 8:5, 12) but rather denotes evil scheming, as we find in Exodus 21:14, “when a man schemes against another and kills him cunningly” (see also regarding the people of Gibeon, who “resorted to cunning” [Joshua 9:4]). The serpent in our story uses his cunning deceitfully when he tempts man with his scheming words, all in order that man might win the sort of knowledge that would position him to challenge God.

The primeval snake, according to this story, was able to converse with humankind, speaking with his mouth and hearing with his ears. The snake wreaks havoc with humankind by using his voice, his powers of rhetoric, and even when this avenue of deceit is denied him, he continues to endanger his victims with his poisonous tongue: “He sucks the poison of asps; the tongue of the viper kills him” (Job 20:16). About evil men, writes the psalmist, “they sharpen their tongues like serpents” (Psalm 140:4). Perhaps the words of Ecclesiastes—“If the snake without utterance [*lahash*] bites [i.e., a snake against whom there is no charm], then there is no advantage to the trained charmer [lit., One with Tongue]” (10:11)—should be understood differently, as a rhetorical question: “Does the snake bite without [first] whispering? Does the eloquent have no advantage?” The snake’s hissing is here credited with the power of first paralyzing the victim, thereby rendering him helpless, and the eloquent man is credited with a similar capacity. Let us add that such riddles—equivocal sayings that were meant to be understood in two different ways—are a common phenomenon in biblical literature. Be that as it may, the curse spoken by Jeremiah aligns with the first understanding of the riddle: “Lo, I will send serpents against you, adders that cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you” (8:17).

According to Psalm 58, charms are powerless over snakes not because of the serpent’s ample cunning nor because of any innate fac-

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ulty for withstanding the enchanter's powers but merely because of its own deficiency, the defect to which it was condemned, meaning its lack of ears: "Their venom is like that of a snake, a deaf viper whose ear is closed so as not to hear the voice of charmers or the expert mutterer of spells" (vv. 5–6). We now recall the snake's punishment according to *Life of Adam and Eve*, which included also the snake's ears amongst the organs then denied him. The snake's deafness is also alluded to by Micah when he compares Israel's enemies to snakes: "Let nations behold and be ashamed despite all their might; let them put hand to mouth; let their ears be deafened; let them lick dust like snakes, like crawling things on the ground" (7:16–17). This depiction of the snake's deafness serves a double function, both mocking the snake's supposed wisdom and power while also casting doubt on the assumed powers of the spell-casters whose charms are powerless on creatures that cannot hear.

Aside from the physical appearance of the paradisiacal snake—with wings, arms, legs, mouth, and ears—this creature, in its pre-fall form, seems to have possessed one more significant characteristic. The serpent, like God, apparently lived eternally. Just as with the granting of knowledge, the snake gave to Adam and Eve what he himself already possessed—wisdom, insight, shrewdness—so it is possible that he also was about to grant them eternal life. The story of the Garden of Eden, it appears, was also meant to challenge that belief.

The immortal serpent as the source of life plays a role in the mythologies of the ancient Near East. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, for example (tablet 11, lines 289–301), the snake steals from Gilgamesh a special plant that has the power to reinvigorate, to retain one's youth, and so gains what he denies humankind: immortality. Perhaps this belief developed out of snakes' regular shedding of their skin and their re-emergence as though reborn. The Rabbis, unlike the ancient Babylonians, underscored what is not overtly stated in the Torah: the snake is mortal, and the excruciating pain that it experiences from shedding its skin is just one more of its punishments: "And [God] punished him that he will shed his skin once every seven years with great suffering" (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 14).

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With God's curse, the serpent—who was the source of life before being punished—becomes, according to Genesis, a source of human mortality: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel” (3:15). The story's ambivalence toward the snake—whose tongue contains the potential of both life and death—is hinted at also in the story we discussed above, the story of the serpent-seraphs through which God punishes the Israelites (Numbers 21:4–9). In that story the snake was the source of suffering, while its bronze image brought healing. Of course, according to the religious-monotheistic worldview of the Bible, God was the source of both the Israelites' punishment and mercy. Beneath the biblical narrator's words, however, it seems that we still hear the rush of older currents, of more ancient belief systems, in which the source of death and life was the snake.

The image from Numbers 21, of the seraph that is fastened to the pole, “and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover” (v. 9), is familiar to us from a different source, from the tradition amongst the ancient Greeks about the god of medicine, Asclepius, son of Apollo, who knew the secret of resuscitating the dead. Images of Asclepius from the ancient world show him as a vigorous young man holding a staff on which a snake is curled.

The story in Genesis, we have found, actively argues against ancient traditions that were deemed unsuitable to the biblical writers for inclusion in their great work. The primeval snake, that mythological being who fought against the Creator before the creation of the world (see the introduction), is transformed into a creature like all other created beings after he springs a last-ditch attack on God by attempting to sabotage the harmony in God's created paradise. That divine creature, the winged serpent-seraph who had arms, legs, ears, and the power of speech and who occupied a prominent place in the Temple cult in Jerusalem, in our story is stripped not only of his limbs and ability to speak and hear but also of his immortality and is expelled both from Eden and the Temple. Even the snake's God-like wisdom becomes



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reduced to a mundane and even devious intelligence: “the most cunning of all the wild beasts.”

Here again we have seen how pre-biblical traditions from the ancient Near East, along with echoes of a tradition that we found in the Bible and traditions about the story from post-biblical sources, can be brought together to re-create, in all its glory, an ancient story that—almost—disappeared.