# Serpent Intertexts: Tantalizing Twists in the Tales

ELAINE A. PHILLIPS
GORDON COLLEGE

*Intertextuality as an approach to biblical studies has received considerable attention and varied responses. Because the foundation of the enterprise is the almost limitless potential in interrelated texts, the complexity both of definition and of process is daunting. At the same time, the pursuit through this complexity yields a renewed appreciation for the richness of the biblical text in its wider cultural contexts. Tracking the serpent through the wealth of intertextual connections in the Hebrew Bible illustrates the ongoing infusion of ideas and development of interconnections. The approach does not presume the loss of the authoritative Center but acknowledges that divine Authorship does not preclude a plurality of voices as the canonical text is produced and interpreted.*

*Key Words: intertextuality, serpent, Leviathan, dragon*

## INTRODUCTION

Following the serpent through the network of related biblical intertexts is an adventure rich in interpretive possibilities. The sinuous twining of the serpent captures in a compelling metaphor the intertwining of texts and contexts that is integral to the notion of intertextuality, a term for which a firm definition and a stable exemplar seem frustratingly elusive. The lightning speed with which a serpent changes directions, darting this way and that, sometimes hardly visible amidst the surrounding camouflage, is characteristically what happens in the encounter with tantalizing but tenuous connections among words and concepts in selected biblical texts. The unexpected twists of direction might be likened to the "way of a serpent on a rock" (Prov 30:19).

## PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

At the outset, it is important to address the matter of definition or description of the presuppositions and processes that are associated

with "intertextuality." Even a brief tour through the literature of the past two decades is indicative of the large number of often conflicting ideas on what constitutes this enterprise as it has been applied to the field of biblical studies.[1] Part of the issue is whether to think of intertextuality primarily in terms of its methodological emphasis on textual interconnectedness, or whether it necessarily presumes a particular philosophical and theological stance as well. In the latter case, biblical scholars whose view of the text accords it authoritative status are disturbed by the lack of "center" and the indeterminacy of meaning that is implied by an approach, some of whose practitioners do not recognize distinct boundaries between canon, interpreters, and contexts.[2]

In spite of these potentially disconcerting aspects, there is much to be gained from the approach, which emphasizes careful attention to the intricacies of the text. The following considerations are foundational to implementing the process.[3] Every text is a complex network both within itself and in relation to other texts. While texts are mosaics of conscious and unconscious citations of earlier discourse, they also have their own distinctiveness and integrity as individual texts, a delicate balance of dependence and independence.[4] Because texts are read in specific contexts, intertextuality takes note of readers, who respond both by transforming texts and by transforming themselves.[5]

1. See, as recent exemplars, the model presented by Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and the collections of Sipke Draisma (ed.), *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Iersel* (Kampen: Kok, 1989); and Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon (eds.), *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders* (Leiden: Brill, 1997). See also Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), chap. 3.

2. "Intertextuality is the free association of diverse voices, the centrifugal force that explodes the centripetal constraint of canon. Meaning is not something located in texts so much as something that happens between them. *It is precisely because this 'between' cannot be stabilized that intertextuality undermines determinacy of meaning"* (ibid., 135—author's italics). In contemporary discussions in which texts are contrasted with books, the latter are distinct because they have boundaries. See further ibid., 103-13.

3. In addition to Vanhoozer's presentation and evaluation, see James Charlesworth, "Intertextuality: Isaiah 40:3 and the Serek Ha-Yahad," in *The Quest for Context and Meaning* (ed. C. Evans and S. Talmon; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 199-204; and Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 12. Charlesworth acknowledged the sentiment of some scholars, that intertextuality is simply a new label for the careful critical attention to the text that has characterized the methodology of good biblical study all along. Nevertheless, he suggested that the intertextual focus helps to refine this process.

4. This balance is articulated by Heinrich Plett, "Intertextualities" in *Intertextuality* (ed. Heinrich Plett; New York: de Gruyter, 1991) 5-6.

5. Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 31-51.

These processes of transformation and re-presentation reflect the life experiences of the community of readers in a way that the latter also become, in a sense, "text." As a result, interpretation is a continuous recontextualization and incorporation of the literary and ideological codes that both constrain and allow the production of new texts within the culture.[6] In the case of the biblical text, this balance of constraint and freedom is possible because canon is viewed as both stable and adaptable to new contexts.[7]

Because the biblical text may be viewed as a complex network of intertexts, blending traditions in dynamic interaction, interpenetration, and interdependence, it is the model for a text system that continues the process of absorbing and transforming, establishing continuity while renewing itself for the future.[8] The matrix is ever-growing, both expanding and developing further inner complexities.

Investigating intertextual connections means probing at multiple levels, following the darting tail of the serpent. It characteristically means selecting a starting point for the investigation, a pre-text,[9] key elements of which are repeated, by quotation or allusion, and transformed in an ever-expanding matrix of texts. When there are unusual grammatical constructions, wide semantic ranges, or ambiguous gaps in the text, the subsequent lexical and conceptual connections may both clarify and add to the complexity of the picture. The process presumes a degree of conceptual significance underlying observed lexical and thematic connections. Further interwoven among these linkages are constructs, theological and/or mythological, that are reflective of the cultural codes and ideologies, themselves based on

---

6. Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 12; Paul E. Dinter, "The Once and Future Text," in *The Quest for Context and Meaning* (ed. C. Evans and S. Talmon; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 385; Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 15.

7. Vanhoozer claims that ". . . [i]ntertextuality both confirms and challenges the traditional idea of canon" because, while it demonstrates the intricate networking among canonical texts and the rich layers of meaning implicit therein, it also allows free association with voices across time and beyond canonical boundaries, thus blurring the lines of authoritative canon (*Is There a Meaning in This Text?* 134-35).

8. In addition to the previously noted collections, see also Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); and *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

9. This may be perceived as an arbitrary choice because, for some, intertextuality is a method that deemphasizes chronological development of texts and traditions and instead focuses on the matrix of texts. See Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Signification of שלום and Its Semantic Field," in *The Quest for Context and Meaning* (ed. C. Evans and S. Talmon; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 75-79. On the other hand, Hays addressed the more linear connections between specific biblical texts as he articulated criteria for recognizing "echoes" (*Echoes of Scripture*, 29-32). For example, reading Romans may be viewed as "an intertextual conversation between Paul and . . . that powerful ancestral presence with which Paul grapples" (p. 35).

interpreted texts. Negative and positive valences may surface at each of these levels, and subsequent generations of readers determine how to balance them in light of their own textual and experiential matrices.[10]

## TANTALIZING TWISTS: PRE-TEXT AND INTERTEXTS

The rather obvious pre-text from which to track the serpent is its initial appearance in Gen 2:25-3:1.[11] The creature's bold entrance, however, must be considered in the context of the previous prohibition, which introduces significant language tensions and complexities that are exploited by the serpent: "From every tree of the garden, you *may certainly* eat but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you *must not eat* because *in the day of your eating* from it, you will surely die" (Gen 2:16-17). The objects in the first case are every (or "any") tree (מכל עץ הגן); in the latter two clauses, the prohibition and pronouncement focus on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, whose relationship to the tree of life is stunningly ambiguous (Gen 2:9). Temporality and finitude threaten ominously in the last clause: ". . . when you eat, you will *surely die*." Edenic existence is represented in terms of polarities—life and death, good and evil—but polarities that nevertheless sustain ambiguity. So it continues into the temptation scene itself: "You shall be like אלהים, knowing good and evil . . ." (Gen 3:5).

   In the interval, Eve was created, Adam and Eve came together, and they did so in innocence. "The two of them were naked (ערומים), the man and his wife, but they were not ashamed. But the serpent was more wise (ערום)[12] than all the creatures of the field which Yahweh God had made and he said to the woman: 'Indeed God said, you shall not eat from any tree in the garden" (Gen 2:25-3:1). The temptation scene itself had become a discussion in hermeneutics: How were they

   10. One example of profiling the positive and negative implications of a key concept is that the presentation of the figure of the serpent in the biblical text is not always one that is damaging. While we think primarily of the deceptive serpent of Genesis 3, the bronze serpent of Numbers 21 is a source of healing.
   11. The fact that this event occurs prior to the serpent's being condemned to slither sinuously along the ground (Gen 3:14) should not be overlooked. Its twisting, the hallmark of deception, does not yet characterize it. While the nature and date of this narrative is the subject of much question, from the canonical standpoint, it remains the logical starting point.
   12. The pun unavoidably connects the nakedness of Adam and Eve, something physically beguiling, with the equally beguiling intellectual prowess of the serpent (James Crenshaw, *Trembling at the Threshold of a Biblical Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 17). Thus, good and evil are brought together in the temptation at several levels. The positive connotations of ערום will be considered below.

to interpret and apply the spoken word of God?[13] Generally translated as a question that distorted the prohibition, the serpent's utterance is syntactically allowed to be an emphatic falsehood. In fact, no other instance of this construction in the Hebrew Bible is translated as an interrogative.[14] Whichever interpretation is selected, the serpent intentionally changed the positive command to eat from all trees of the garden, with one exception, to a comprehensive prohibition.

After Eve's rejoinder, which intensified the original prohibition, the serpent's response flatly contradicted God and went on to promise that eating would make Adam and Eve "like אלהים, knowing good and evil." Eve saw that the tree lived up to its prior qualifications, being "good for eating, pleasing to the eye (cf. 2:9) and pleasant (נחמד) for enlightenment (להשכיל) . . . " (3:6).[15] Hence, she indulged in the fruit along with Adam. The knowledge that they acquired seems somehow to have affected their perception of nakedness. The word is now slightly different in form (עירמים); perhaps knowledge has altered perceptions and, for that matter, introduced fear. The serpent was cursed (ערור instead of ערום) above all creatures of the field; it was reduced to slithering and would eat dust. Enmity, "striking head and heel," would characterize the relationship between serpents and humans. The knowledge of *good and evil* gained by both Adam and Eve resulted in distortion of their own spheres. Perhaps perception and representation come to be characterized by sharper polarities that are less than accurate.

13. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* 330. See also p. 361 n. 240, regarding Satan's intervention at the critical level of language, suggesting his own reading of God's word as authoritative.

14. אף כי. See E Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952) 65 [BDB]. E. A. Speiser interpreted the expression as reflecting a deliberate distortion of the fact, not a question (*Genesis* [AB 1; New York: Doubleday, ]964] 23).

15. The initial two conclusions that Eve reached were based on the correspondence between her observations and reality as described in Gen 2:9. Every tree was "pleasant" (נחמד) to see and good to eat. Regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, however, she had to connect what she saw with something beyond empirical evidence. She had to take "on faith" what the serpent said in regard to gaining "enlightenment" from eating the fruit of the tree. This is not the standard Hebrew word for wisdom (חכמה). The word להשכיל is often interpreted as "gaining wisdom" in Gen 3:6, but the basic meaning is debated. The verbal root seems to be related to seeing, giving attention to, and pondering; derivative meanings range from having insight to being wise or prudent and acting circumspectly (BDB 968). While it is God who gives this kind of insight (1 Chr 22:12; 28:19; Dan 1:7; 9:22; Prov 19:16), the issue in Genesis 3 is that humans will acquire it through disobedience (Terence E. Fretheim, "שׂכל" *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997] 3.1243).

Along with the verbal complexities in this narrative is a stunning gap; absent is a transcendent identity for the serpent. Nevertheless, by the first centuries BCE and CE, the serpent had become linked with the malevolent figure of Satan, the devil, the great dragon. This connection is most comprehensively articulated for the Christian community in Rev 12:9 and 20:1, but some aspects of the identification are evident in extracanonical texts as well.[16] In the interval, serpents and related figures in the biblical text crossed the flexible boundaries between good and evil. This is not without parallel in the wider cultural context of the ancient Near East, where the serpent held both significant positive and negative valences, serving as a metaphor for a vast complex that included life, fertility, and wisdom, as well as chaos and death.[17] What was the matrix of First Testament texts and extracanonical contexts from which emerged this supremely malevolent figure? How did the serpent come to "work" as a metaphor or symbol for Satan, as a textual way of mediating that dreadful reality?[18]

It is important to determine what words and contexts came to be associated with נחש. Serpents were recognized and feared denizens of the great and terrible wilderness, which was inhabited by both the נחש and the שרף, along with the scorpion (Deut 8:15). In Num 21:6-9, God sent הנחשים השרפים and they bit the people. Moses prayed for the נחש to be removed. God told him to make for himself a שרף and put it on a standard. Moses made a נחש נחשת and set it on a standard and all who looked at it lived.[19] It is suggested that the root meaning of

---

16. See *Apoc. Mos.* 15-21; *Life of Adam and Eve* 12-16; *2 Enoch* 31:3-6; Wis 2:23-24; *Apoc. Abr.* 23. While these narratives connect the serpent with the devil, only the last describes it as a dragon with multiple wings and other fearsome characteristics. Rev 12:9 reads: "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray . . . " (NIV).

17. Werner Foerster, "οφις," *TDNT* 5.568-72; Karen R. Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," *JBL* 87 (1968) 245-65; Robert C. Stallman, "נחש" in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 3.85. In the Gilgamesh Epic, for example, the serpent was responsible for the hero's losing his opportunity to gain immortality (tablet XI; *ANET*, 96). On the other hand, serpent figures appeared in Egyptian, Babylonian, and Greek contexts where the expectations were hopeful, especially in terms of healing and restoration.

18. Clearly, this is part of the larger picture in which supernatural forces, both good and evil, appear with increasing frequency and clarity in a variety of texts over the course of time. In focusing on the matrices of texts and communities, I do not discount the theological issues of revelation, divine discourse, and canon. That is another set of questions altogether.

19. This was not necessarily an anomaly in the wider culture. At the excavations of an Egyptian temple at Timnah, a small copper snake was unearthed (Benno Rothenberg, *Timna* [Thames and Hudson, 1972] 129ff.; quoted in Gordon Wenham, *Numbers*: *An Introduction and Commentary* [Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1981] 156).

שָׂרַף, "to burn," underlies the adjectival usage in Numbers; the bite of the serpents caused burning because of the venom. Others suggest that the reddish color associated with the serpents accounted for this attribution and go on to explain נחשת as a reflection of this characteristic as well.[20] Isaiah noted both of these wilderness creatures as he represented the continuous presence of hostile forces in an oracle directed against the Philistines: "From the root of the נחש will come out a צפע and its fruit will be a מעופף שָׂרַף" (Isa 14:29).[21] The connection between נחש and שָׂרַף begins a matrix, within which further conceptual linkages and possible cosmic identities develop.

Before exploring those, however, it is important to note one pivotal text that connects two additional words to נחש and moves the sphere of activities from barren wilderness to tumultuous water. It is Isa 27:1: "In that day the Lord will visit with His hard and great and strong sword against Leviathan, the fleeing serpent (נחש ברח); against Leviathan, the twisted serpent (נחש עקלתון); He will kill the תנין that is in the sea." At this point, the matrix of texts expands considerably, both with verbal connections and also, conceptually, with God's punishment of some monster(s) of the sea, called Leviathan and תנין, whose identity(ies) is/are linked with the serpent.[22] The same motif is evident in Ps 74:13-14: "You [God] divided by Your might the sea; broke the *heads* of the תנינים over the water; You smashed the *heads* of Leviathan and gave him (as) food for the people of the desert." That the תנין was construed as a Formidable presence is also suggested by Job 7:12: "Am I the sea or תנין that you place over me a guard?" The "fleeing serpent" of Isaiah appears as well in Job 26:12-13, which addresses the sovereign power of God over creation and may be an adumbration of what God himself will say in Job 38– 41: "By His power He disturbed the sea, and by His understanding He shattered Rahav (רהב); By His spirit the heavens are clear; His hand pierced the fleeing serpent."

The parallelism between Rahav and the fleeing serpent suggests another intertext: "Awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the Lord. Awake as in the days of old, the everlasting generations. Are not you the one who cut apart Rahav, who pierced תנין? Are not you the

20. See citations in Robin Wakely, "נחש," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* 3.1289-91.

21. The movement indicated by מעופף has been understood as "darting" rather than flying when it comes to texts about literal serpents (D. J. Wiseman, "Flying Serpents?" *TynBul* 23 [1972] 108-10). Nevertheless, the use of this same verbal root in Isa 6:2 will contribute further to the discussion.

22. The close identity of the tn1 with the pin is also evident in the early Exodus narratives. When the rod of Moses first became a serpent in the wilderness of Sinai, it turned into a נחש (Exod 4:3); in the Nile context of Egypt, it turned temporarily into a תנין (Exod 7:9-12). In Amos 9:3, we read of the נחש at the bottom of the sea.

one who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep?" (Isa 51:9).[23]
Thus, around the central figure of the נחש, zoologically a dry-land
creature, are watery glimpses of the mythic and shadowy Leviathan,
Rahav, and the תנין, all of which represent a creature opposed by
God.[24] It is likely that this malevolent cosmic figure is lurking below
the surface of the "crocodile"-infested waters of Job 41, a subtle but
powerful closure to the contest with which the book commenced;
while Job could not restrain Leviathan, God does.[25]

The motifs that recur in these passages were also part of the
mythologies of cultures surrounding ancient Israel. The *Enuma El-
ish* depicts the violent battle between Tiamat and Marduk, when all
the gods rallied to her, forming a council to prepare for the fight.
Among them were " . . . monster-serpents, sharp of tooth, unsparing
of fury . . . roaring dragons she has clothed with terror, has crowned
with haloes, making them like gods. . . . " In the end, Marduk crushed
her skull and split her body in two (tablets III, IV).[26] Closer to Israelite
culture, in the Canaanite myth of Baal and Anat, we read the cry of
Anat when she was approached by Baal's messengers:

> Did I not, pray, muzzle the Dragon?
>> I did crush the crooked serpent;
>> Shalyat the seven-headed.[27]

As indicated earlier, however, שרף, with its connotations of burning,
brilliance, and light, is also associated with the נחש. While the שרף of
the Negev may have "darted" rather than flown and been known to
emit venom, Isaiah's superlative experience of these burning creatures
(השרפים) indicated that, having been endowed with six wings, they
were well prepared to fly, they voiced continually the praises of the
Lord, and one of them transported a live coal to cleanse Isaiah's lips
(Isa 6:2-7). The supernatural character of these creatures opens up the
stage to a host of additional potential cameo appearances: the כרובים
of Ezek 10:20; בני האלהים, who are accompanied by השטן in Job 1:6;
2:1, and who appear in conjunction with כוכבי בקר in Job 38:7; and

---

23. See also Ps 89:9-10, "You rule over the pride of the sea; when its waves mount
up, You still them. You have crushed Rahav as one of the slain; with Your mighty arm,
You have scattered Your enemies."

24. Even this strong negative depiction is not, however, necessarily absolute. Le-
viathan "frolics" (לשחק) in the sea (Ps 104:26).

25. See John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988)
521-22.

26. *ANET*, 65-67.

27. *ANET*, 137-38. This reference to a dragon or serpent with seven heads seems
to be a refrain; it recurs several times. See also D. Winton Thomas (ed.), *Documents from
Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) 129-30; and the rendition of
John N. Day in "God and Leviathan in Isaiah 27:1," *BibSac* (Oct/Dec 1998) 428.

the הילל בן־שחר in Isa 14:12. This last figure has its counterpart in the oracle about the king of Tyre (Ezek 28:12-15), behind whose human presence lurked in some way the כרוב ממשח, whose perfection, wisdom, and radiant beauty turned corrupt. All of these creatures inhabited the regions of brilliant and radiant light, and yet there is a sinister intrusion of negative personalities among the intertexts.[28]

A final set of First Testament intertexts is wound around ערום, a word that, along with להשכיל, suggests the wisdom tradition. The word ערום describes the wisdom of the serpent that set it above all the other creatures that God had made. This is a dramatically different image from the monster in tumultuous waters and, while the connotations of the word are negative here, it appears in a series of proverbs with primarily positive emphases,[29] again illustrating the potentially shifting valences. Likewise, the homophonic ערומים ("nakedness") was positive at the outset of the narrative but, after the encounter with wisdom (ערום), it was weighted with the heavy burden of shame at the end; even the form of the word changed (Gen 3:7, עירמים). A further wordplay crosses the boundaries between good and evil as the serpent who was ערום is doomed to be ערור. The wisest of the creatures that God made was now cursed; the wisdom that had appeared to be so good to Eve brought with it a curse. The description of the tree with the potential for enlightenment (להשכיל) indicated the inevitable presence of both good and evil as part of knowledge. Some later readers of the text seem to have posited that the tantalizing fruit held out to Eve, that she and Adam might become like אלהים, like divine beings, was an offer that this articulate serpent would know exceedingly well. Perhaps they read this in the context of the wisdom tradition found in Job 1:6 and 2:1 that forcefully made the connection between בני האלהים and השטן.

The tension between good and evil that appears in the context of the primordial serpent's character and activities surfaces again. In Num 21:6-9, serpents were the source of death but, in obedience to the word of the Lord, looking to a representation of the serpent on the pole brought healing. The historical narrative of Hezekiah's destruction of the bronze serpent reversed once again the sense of what was good

---

28. Perhaps this cluster of allusions served as a foundation for Jesus' declaration to His returning 72 workers: "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall injure you" (Luke 10:18-19).

29. See A. Luc, "ערם," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* 3.539-41. It may mean prudent, sensible, clever, shrewd, crafty. While Job 5:12 and 15:5 also suggest negative implications, the contexts in Proverbs generally set it in opposition to biblical folly and simplemindedness. See Prov 12:23; 13:16; 14:8, 15, 18; 22:3; 27:12.

and what was not. In the wilderness, an image of the deadly שָׂרָף was lifted up on the pole, suggesting burning, healing, cleansing.[30]  When, however, Hezekiah determined that the bronze serpent had become a snare for Israel, he ordered it to be destroyed (2 Kgs 18:4). In the material realm, the "good snake" became a static idol (נְחַשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת), was "evil," and was therefore broken (cf. Gen 3:15).

Because the cause and effect pattern evident in Numbers 21 was unlikely apart from faith, it served as the paradigm for Jesus' reference to lifting up the Son of Man in John 3:14 and the necessity of belief in the unlikely prospect of a crucified Messiah. The horrifying falsehood of the serpent's declaration "you shall not die . . . but become like gods, knowing good and evil" was comprehensively reversed by death itself. As Paul put it: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

## OBSERVATIONS: CANONS AND INTERTEXTUALITY

*The Intertextual Matrix for the New Testament*

Certain patterns in the First Testament come forcefully together to suggest a complex personality behind the figure of the serpent. This shadowy cosmic identity has parallels in ancient Near Eastern texts that allude to dragons and serpents, creatures with multiple heads. Nevertheless, in the Hebrew Bible it lacks the definitive identification as the adversary and the devil that appears in the extracanonical literature of the first centuries BCE and CE. When readers confront these terms specifically articulated in the context of the apocalyptic, seven-headed "dragon" of Revelation 12, it is evident that additional mergers have occurred.

First, the identity of the serpent itself specifically as a dragon in Revelation may have a relatively simple textual grounding in the LXX. Characteristically, the Greek text renders the wilderness נָחָשׁ as οφις, while the water-based תַּנִּין is δρακων.[31] Nevertheless, in Isa 27:1, the critical passage that combines the נָחָשׁ with both Leviathan and תַּנִּין, the identification is explicitly stated: The serpent that flees and the crooked serpent is the δρακων. In fact, both Leviathan and תַּנִּין are translated δρακων. The Leviathan and תַּנִּין of Ps 74:13, 14 are likewise rendered δρακων, and the Leviathan of Job 41 is also a δρακων. A par-

---

30. In conjunction with cleansing, note again the function of one of the seraphim in Isaiah 6 in cleansing the lips of the prophet.

31. This is demonstrated when Exod 4:3 is juxtaposed with Exod 7:9. In the former case, Moses' rod became an οφις; in the latter, it became a δρακων. It is evident that δρακων is initially a water serpent. See Foerster, "δρακων," *TDNT* 2.281.

ticularly telling passage in this regard is Job 26:12, 13, in which the
נחש ברח ("fleeing serpent") is rendered δρακοντα αποστατην ("the
apostate dragon"). The opposition of this creature to God is assumed.
Further, the apocalyptic nature of Revelation draws on Daniel im-
agery throughout the book. Perhaps the cosmic conflict of Revelation
12 highlights the personalities alluded to in Daniel 10 but dresses one
of them with a more focused version of the terrifying beast of Daniel
7. The dragon figure associated with נחש, Leviathan, and תנין, already
rich with theological and mythological backgrounds, may have be-
come intertwined with the apocalyptic adversary of Daniel. The com-
munity for which Revelation was written was facing what appeared
to be the ultimate force of evil.[32] The primordial serpent, complex,
brilliant, wise, and false, was re-presented for this community as a
solely malevolent monster, due for defeat in the eschaton.

*A Rabbinic Response to Genesis 3: Genesis Rabbah*

By way of contrast, the rabbinic community[33] seemed to avoid estab-
lishing a larger-than-life mythic identity for the serpent, which was
personally involved in cosmic conflict with the forces of good and
with God Himself. In fact, their description at the outset linked ערום
with Qoh 1:18, decrying the fact that with more wisdom and knowl-
edge come greater vexation and pain. For the Sages, separate sets of
intertexts formed an equally complex network but one that profiled
Torah and the values embedded in Torah, instead of the Word Incar-
nate. The rabbis gave to the serpent a malevolent personality but one
that functioned on the level of a very clever, logical, and articulate
human being. It was, after all, ערום, which was also a fundamentally
desirable quality within the wisdom tradition.

> *Genesis 19:3: But from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the
> garden. . . .* Thus it says: *Do not add to His words lest He rebuke you and you
> be made a liar* (Prov 30:6). R Hiyya taught: You must not make a fence
> [for] more than the root [עיקר] so that it does not fall and cut off the
> plants. Thus the Holy One Blessed Be He said: *When you eat from it, you
> shall surely die* (Gen 2:17). But she [Eve] did not say this but *God said: You
> shall neither eat from it nor touch it.* And when he saw her lying thus, he
> took and thrust her against it [the tree] and he said to her: Have you

died? Just as you were not stricken through approaching it, so will you not die when you eat of it, for God knows that when you eat of it. . . .

Genesis 19:4: Joshua of Sikhnin in the name of R Levi: [The serpent] began speaking slander of his creator. He said: From this tree He ate and then created the world; then He said to you: You shall not eat from it, so that you may not create other worlds, for every person hates his fellow craftsman. R Judah in the name of R Shimon: He said: Whatever was created after its fellow, dominates it. [A list follows of the key features of each creative day as described in Genesis 1, demonstrating that each successive one dominated its predecessor.] Now you were created after everything in order to rule over everything; hurry and eat before He creates other worlds and sets them to rule over you. As it is said: *And the woman saw that it was good . . .* (She saw the words of the serpent).

Likewise, when the Sages encountered God's pronouncement against the serpent, they first emphasized the deleterious consequences of lying and slander with appropriate citations from Ps 140:12 (Heb.) and Prov 16:28. Then they proposed that the creature was so clever that God had to be careful not to be outdone by it!

Genesis 20:2: *And the Lord God said to the serpent:* With Adam he discussed the matter, with Eve He discussed the matter, but with the serpent He entered into no discussion. But the Holy One Blessed Be He said: This serpent is evil and ready with answers; if I discuss it with him, he will answer me: You commanded them and I commanded them; why did they ignore your command and follow mine? Therefore, He pronounced his sentence. . . .

## TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS: THE INTERTEXTUAL ENTERPRISE

Pursuing the twisted trails of the serpent has drawn the reader through a veritable thicket of intertexts, venturing across boundaries between good and evil and boundaries delineating canon(s). What conclusions surface as a result of this exercise? First, the biblical text as it presents truth manifests a richness of intricacy and depth. Further, its own multiple meanings, interlocking connections, and conceptual linkages are inextricably bound with wider cultural themes and mythological expressions. There appear to be ongoing infusions of ideas and development of interconnections. Investigating all possible intertexts, canonical and beyond, increases the readers' sensitivity to the profound complexity of truth. The approach does not presume the loss of the authoritative Center but acknowledges that divine Authorship does not preclude a plurality of voices as the canonical text is produced and interpreted.[34]

34. There is fullness and diversity in the text's unity of meaning. See Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* 416-24; and the evaluative comments of Thiselton, *New Horizons,* 113, 497-507.

Second, communities were an integral part of this intertextual process. Their theologies and ideologies shaped the text's development just as they were shaped by it. In the rabbinic community, Torah, its interpreters, and its values were of central importance. This scene allowed the Sages to teach important lessons on the damaging effects of misrepresenting truth. Approaching the biblical texts from multiple angles, their message was captivatingly "at the edge," keeping the audience thinking of the implications of unusual connections in Torah.

For the Christian community receiving the Revelation of John, the ancient serpent and great dragon was a powerful metaphor. Wise, shrewd, quick, beguiling, and terrifying, it had been in opposition to God in the age-old conflict between good and evil, the reality of which was expressed across cultural boundaries and a part of which was enveloping the Church in the Roman Empire of Late Antiquity. Even its defeat was not instantaneous; the "head" of the serpent, struck by the death and resurrection Jesus Christ, would bear one final blow. Because the Word Incarnate came to defeat sin and death as initiated by the scenario in Genesis 3, all of the intertextual hints through the First Testament could and did come together in a powerful picture of a cosmic force that would be ultimately and completely defeated to accomplish the purposes of God.