

## Article

# There Is Worse: The Serpent's Curse Compared to That of Eve. For a New Order

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**Abstract:** By interpreting both the account of Creation found in Genesis 3 and the related exegetical interpretations of the text, this article aims to focus on the figure of the serpent, which has always been laden with a negative, even ruthless, symbolic meaning traditionally approached as almost entirely irrevocable. Taking ‘original nakedness’ as the key perspective, this brief study seeks to bring out and highlight the moment or condition preceding the curse, in which the serpent is revealed to be at once extremely similar to and radically different from humans, an animal as well but profoundly different from other animals: *ill-placed*. Sharing its solitude and alienation in this slippery and uncomfortable boundary position, participating in its desire, its temptation to encounter the other and to change places, to blur the boundaries of creation, this article listens to the serpent’s call to another story and follows it/him in an attempt to *reimagine* and *rewrite another genesis*, this time from its/his point of view, to displace and mix-up the established order and to find, in the end, a new dignity for itself/himself and for other animals.

**Keywords:** serpent; animals; Genesis; nudity; ambiguity; difference; feminine; writing

For so long, the snake—also in the form of a dragon—kept me bound in fear, then in panic, until even stopping my philosophical writing about it. Literally. However, it spared me the breath to speak, it left me my voice, finding serpentine expression in the “language of the other”, and it was indifferent, or perhaps, in fact, sympathetic, to my speaking aloud about the urgency of the so-called “animal question”.

It has been lying in wait for me all this time and, in the meantime, has more than once changed its skin, sloughing, altering its life, its place, its position, its figure. . .

So, who is it that is waiting for me? What animal is it? What serpent am I preparing to write about? How can I find its/their very traces and attempt to follow them, without being strangled by their all-captivating convolutions, without being drawn in by those who snake their way around everything?

It is well-known that animal symbolism, in particular that relating to the serpent which I am discussing in this paper, is very strong, very powerful, very extensive; one might even say, without exaggeration, that it has no end, that it is infinite. After all, the serpent is present in multiple cultural and ritual traditions (See Eliade 1937, 1967, 1996, 2005): the symbolism attributed to it glides through, entwines itself in and traverses all cultural history, from ancient civilisations to Harry Potter! If an essential positive aura surrounds the serpent in other cultural traditions, and in the Greek mythology in particular, it is also true that the Judeo-Christian tradition, especially the biblical one, generally considers the serpent in a negative perspective. There are some exceptions, of course. For example, the staff of Moses, transformed at the start of the Exodus (Exodus 4: 3–4), or that of Aaron (Exodus 7: 10) which shares the same fate and prevails over or swallows up the serpents of the Egyptians (Exodus 7: 12); here, the serpent symbolises strength, steadfastness, and a warning, testifying to the presence of God. One might also think of the episode mentioned in Numbers 21: 6–9, later echoed in relation to Jesus Christ (John 3: 14). The ambivalence of the serpent can be clearly seen here, first sent in large numbers as a punishment for the



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people's lack of faith in their guide Moses and in their God, then, once recreated in brass or bronze (depending on the translation), once fixed to a pole, it becomes a healing catalyst against snakebites (See [Eliade 1937, 1967, 1996, 2005](#)): it then transforms into a source of life, curing and prolonging the existence of those dying after bites from earthly serpents. Aside from these exceptions and a few others, in the Bible, the serpent—occasionally viper or asp—is interpreted negatively, most of all due to the real danger presented by its venom (Ecclesiastes 10: 11) or by the sometimes fatal bites that it can give, its nests among desert rocks or hiding in places between the stones of houses which certainly have a precise link to the geography and anthropology of Palestine at that time. Alternatively, despite being a terrestrial “animal”, it is depicted as an ocean dweller, identified as an aquatic monster (Amos 9: 3) or a great “fleeing serpent” (Job 26: 13), very much like Leviathan who, as we know, rules the sea. Moreover, before we come to the serpent of the Genesis chapter 3, we must recall, once again, if only in passing, that the most hysterical and important forms of censure, such as demonising the serpent, may be considered a failing of medieval Christian thinking throughout various interpretations of the Revelation to Saint John. In fact, there is a rather swift progression from the figure of Eve's serpent, the tempter condemned to crawl in the dust, to that of the triumphant Virgin (Revelation 12) crushing the head of the “great dragon [. . .], the serpent of old” (12: 9), then to the serpent fought by Michael and his angels, the “accuser of our brothers [. . .], the one who accuses them before our God” (12: 10) and is finally destroyed by Christ himself, by “the blood of the Lamb” (12: 11). From then on, the cursed serpent becomes not only seducer, Satan, illegitimate thief of divine knowledge, but also a demon, a dragon that perpetually stirs up revolt against the Creator, giving rise to all vices and temptations, chiefly—but not limited to—lust.

Now, at last, we move on to the scene that irrevocably brings about the serpent's negative stigmatisation, that of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the decisive scene from the book of *Genesis/Bereshit* 3: 1–15, which starts with a whole different story and where, unlike in a certain Vulgate, the serpent is not immediately identified as Satan, nor presented as a sinister figure, however surprising this may be. Indeed, this great narrative involves a transformation, an evolution, or, rather, an involution, of the serpent as well, and not only the human couple falling into the abyss. A closer following of biblical exegetes, or, perhaps, at least, the lizards present in the “Cracks in the Wall” (See [LaCocque 1998](#)) by André LaCocque in his dialogue with Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, allows us to discover that the serpent is already demythologised in the first verse. It is simply referred to as a being created by God (3: 1) and, therefore, described as a creature, as an “animal”: “the serpent [. . .] is first envisaged in its status of *animal* before its choice makes it a monster of sorts. In this respect, the serpent's evolution is paralleled by the human fall into disgrace. We are indeed within the stream of J's [the Yahwist's] demythologization. “*The serpent is just a snake*” ([LaCocque 1998](#), p. 12, my emphasis). It retains its mythological traits and special qualities, however, because the text credits it with cunning and malice, although “these attributes are not unambiguously pejorative” (Ibidem). The serpent is above all an “animal”, then; an “animal” endowed with cunning and guile—even, according to the verse, “more cunning than any animal of the field which the Lord God had made” (3: 1). The Jewish tradition also views the serpent of the Genesis as a remarkable beast because it was the most intelligent of all creatures, and because its appearance greatly resembled that of humans. Indeed, according to one account, “he had the most excellent qualities, in some of which he resembled man. Like man he stood upright upon two feet, and in height he was equal to the camel [. . .]. His superior mental gifts caused him to become an infidel” ([Ginzberg 2007](#), p. 71).

There is nothing grave or problematic about any of this, so far. Cunning, guile and intelligence are not necessarily negative characteristics, although they can be means of seduction towards a potential change and an alteration in the relationship between the serpent and the human and, hypothetically, between the serpent and God. The biblical scholar specifies, without being too explicit about the issues arising from this idea, that the serpent “is the animal par excellence, the leader in the animal realm, its representative.

Speaking with the snake, Eve speaks with *the* animal. [...] she represents *the* human. The human is turning toward the animal" (LaCocque 1998, p. 13). This original relation between humanity and animality may be surprising, but it must be said that it is only one part of the human, the feminine part, that turns towards "the animal": it is, in fact, Eve who comes onto the scene, entering into communication and dialogue with this "animal", with the serpent. It is *she*, the woman, who makes the gesture of listening to the beast—not *him*, the man, Adam. Following this same line of interpretation, we might also read the serpent's intervention, its intromission, as "revenge by the animal kingdom against its defecting kin", against one who is absent, though still seen as foremost or distinguished, and who will only appear later on in the scene of the curse. In short, Eve and the serpent are very close, since they converse with each other, they are both called to serve as Adam's helpers (Genesis 2: 18)<sup>1</sup>, they are able to get along very easily due to their shared subordination and, perhaps, in pursuance of their shared designs of insubordination. . . As a woman and an animalist, I am perhaps exaggerating the temptation to start another narrative of the curse and the fall, from the perspective of Eve, certainly a temptation that the rabbinic sages have already explored, albeit in a different way<sup>2</sup>, but also to envisage another narrative from the perspective of the animals, in this case the serpent.

Yet without being able to reread this magnificent biblical account in full, without being able to follow the growing number of interpretations from sages and readers, it is, nonetheless, necessary to consider another essential part of the narrative which concerns not the curse of Eve, nor of Adam, but just (however unjustly) the abasement or the curse of the serpent. In effect, what is the moment of the serpent's transformation, its change into something negative? Where is the apical moment in the narrative of the serpent's ruin? What is the moment when the parabola begins to slope downwards? More explicitly, where is the start of its affliction, the start of the serpent's decline which sees its status radically change from being "more cunning" (Genesis 3: 1) than any other animal to being "cursed [...] more than all the livestock and more than any animal of the field" (Genesis 3: 14)?

There is a moment, or, rather, a condition, even before the divine punishment, which seems essential to understand this transformation of the serpent: I am thinking of nudity.

Attention is usually focused on Adam's and Eve's discovery of their nakedness immediately after having eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree, the moment when "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3: 7). However, perhaps, we need to take a step backwards to understand this narrative from the perspective of the serpent and consider the originally nakedness, before the infraction, of all three protagonists in the story, serpent included, which is astutely addressed by exegetes. Indeed, following the traces of the lizards, silent witnesses hidden in the wall around the garden<sup>3</sup>, LaCocque highlights the "stroke of genius" on the part of the story's author (the so-called J or Yahwist) in using the same Hebrew term (*'arom*, naked)—as well as the same wordplay between *'arum* (cunning) and *'arom* (naked)—in relation to both the first couple (Genesis 2: 25) and the serpent (Genesis 3: 1). This wordplay takes place at a strategically important moment, namely in the course of two consecutive verses that separate one chapter (that of creation) from another (that of the fall). The first man created from the soil (Chouraqui's *glébeux*) and his wife, as well as the serpent, are, all three of them, naked, unlike other creatures of whom nothing is said at this point; they are naked long before the fall. However, in the proximity about this nakedness, there is a difference between them, a real, sharp distinction:

The humans are naked but not empty (they have no shame, which is not a sign of naiveté but of holy simplicity), while the nakedness of the serpent means emptiness. It has no companion of its kind [...] unlike Adam and Eve. It is alone and alien, already an "enemy" (Genesis 3: 15), before becoming one by being cursed. Feeling alienated from creation, it breaks the boundary set by the Creator between species; it literally transgresses the difference and brings about confusion. It invades another genus, only to corrupt it and pull it down to its

own isolation. Its cunningness, potentially its wisdom, is of a bitter kind; worse, it is deadly. (LaCocque 1998, p. 16)<sup>4</sup>

This idea of proximity and of the serpent's separation from the other two strikes me as very important: on the one hand, the serpent is one of God's creatures, but different from other animal creatures due to its excess of cunning/guile/intelligence and due also to its isolation, from which, perhaps, its alienation derives; On the other hand, it resembles the two humans, because it is cunning and naked like them and speaks with the woman who can understand it, but it is also unlike them because it is all alone. It is, thus, undoubtedly *ill-placed*, because its proximity and distinction in relation to the animals—already differentiated “according to their kind” (Genesis 1: 20–25), already paired and destined to multiply (1: 22)—and to the humans—already differentiated from each other, male and female, already united in one flesh—puts it in a very slippery and uncomfortable boundary position. Hence, perhaps, the serpent's desire, its temptation to change places, to mix things up, to blur the boundaries of creation since its own position, its domain, its lot are not so precise or clear-cut. They are connected to ambiguity. They are ambiguous. Consequently, the serpent becomes ambiguous itself.

It should also be added that, at the beginning of the story, and this applies to all three protagonists, nudity can be understood as availability, virginity, openness to any eventuality:

Among the possibilities discovered by the three who are said to be *'arom/'arum*, there is evidently the one of mating. Eve's nudity, in particular, is like an *invitation* (the serpent, like Adam, is a phallic being). Her nakedness was not shameful when facing Adam's nudity, and vice versa. But when there is another nudity interfering, then all nudity becomes an occasion for shame. The third party holds, so to speak, a mirror for each to look at him/herself and, what was formerly openness towards the other, becomes withdrawal within the self. (LaCocque 1998, p. 16)

If this is the case—and I am interpreting both the text and the interpretation of the text—then, there would be an originally nakedness which may be understood as openness, availability, virginity, invitation to the other, but which would, as such, already presuppose the presence of *the other* and, in this sense, we should bear in mind Eve's creation with the aim of addressing Adam's solitude and giving him “a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2: 18). Similarly, though different because it is experienced in solitude, there would be an originally nakedness for the serpent, apparently the only creature alive to be without a companion, leading it to compare itself with others but without finding *its other*, and, consequently, driving it to seek out *the other in itself*, to put itself in front of itself—that is, to turn in on itself, to keep solitary company with itself, seeing nothing but itself: it sees itself as if in a mirror, it sees itself as another, perhaps, and comprehends that it has been put in a place that is not pleasant or honourable enough in its already opened eyes. Perhaps. It is perhaps in this way that it distinguishes itself from others, including humans—through this *mirror comprehension*, so to speak, thanks to this solitary and *mirror-sophical* discernment which makes it “the most cunning” being not only among all animals but also among all naked living beings, *more astute* than Adam and Eve with regard to their own nakedness which is only perceived as such later on, and very bitterly. For the serpent, being “the most cunning”, that is, having *more*, a *(sur)plus*, paradoxically implies a *minus*, an inevitable deficit. In other words, its *mirror understanding*, its autistic astuteness, reveals to the serpent its own nudity, but shows it as deprivation: the serpent realises that it is the only one to be alone, the only one that is not in the company of the other. So, it offers itself as, and offers nothing more than, the mirror in its seduction, a mirror that shows its own place in creation. . . In short, it is because of its surplus of *'arum* that it discovers its nudity as deprivation, as a lack of the other, and that it moves towards its curse, towards its singular penance/suffering which consists of a subtraction, a mutilation, by means of a concrete amputation.

What a castigation for the poor serpent! No right of reply, no more right to speak, no right to walk upright, no distinction, no more majesty! Unlike the two humans who are able to defend themselves before God, even if, truth be told, they do so without any great dignity, each laying blame against the other (Adam against Eve, Eve against the serpent), the serpent itself is bound to silence and quickly brought down to the ground. Henceforth, it must crawl, because its legs have been amputated: the first mutilation and the first castration in the strict sense of the term. It must eat dust—it must feed on nothing, on emptiness. It must remain alone as it was, widowed and barren, all the more so now that it will also be rejected by others. It will consume nothing but hostility. The curse inflicted on the serpent by God is the worse, the most terrible, even according to the rabbinic sages whose commentaries are included in Louis Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*. God curses it without giving it any possibility of replying to defend itself because, being a "villain" and a "good debater", it would have answered: "'Thou didst give them a command, and I did contradict it. Why did they obey me, and not Thee?'" (Ginzberg 2007, p. 75). God being unwilling to argue with it, he immediately inflicted ten punishments: its mouth was closed and its power of speech removed, it was given mouthfuls of earth and dust, its hands and feet were cut off, additional suffering awaited it every time it sloughed its skin, there was to be nothing but hostility and enmity between it and humans, the latter trying to crush it at every moment, it would be punished a second time in the world to come, being the only one denied the mercy that awaited other creatures, and would vanish forever from the Promised Land if Israel kept to the ways of God. But in punishing the serpent so harshly, does God really manage to prove that it was in the wrong? Apparently so, although I still have my doubts. Indeed, to these terrible and afflicting punishments, God adds severely:

"I created thee to be king over all animals, cattle and the bests of the field alike; but thou wast not satisfied. Therefore thou shalt be cursed above all cattle and above every beast of the field. I created thee of upright posture; but thou wast not satisfied. Therefore thou shalt go upon thy belly. I created thee to eat the same food as man, but thou wast not satisfied. Therefore thou shalt eat dust all the days of thy life. Thou didst seek to cause the death of Adam in order to espouse his wife. Therefore I will put enmity between thee and the woman". How true it is—"he who lusts after what is not his due, not only does he not attain his desire, but he also loses what he has!" (Ginzberg 2007, p. 76)

Word of God!

Being unable to complete an interpretation of these verses from Genesis 3, and although the serpent which dominates this scene is a significant and necessary step in my discussion, what is most important here is to try and displace the almost one-sided image that has survived to the present day, that of the serpent as an evil tempter, a source of evil, or, more simply, the symbolic figure of an all too human, a drama in favour of other ideas, other avenues of interpretation that are more promising for the purpose of this paper: not only the idea of the "hermeneutic serpent", already a philosopher, having forever opened humanity up to "the era of suspicion" (Ricoeur 1998, p. 42), or the highly thought-provoking idea of questioning the forbidden as a structural component of the created order, ushered in by the serpent wanting to "mix up" creation, but also the less common idea that allows us to go one step further, which present the serpent as *representing "the animal" in general*, as being "the animal" par excellence, in both good and evil, for better and for worse. For the serpent of the *Genesis*, and only the serpent of the *Genesis*, is the first "animal" to be considered in its singularity as a unique creature, in its solitude and by its specific characteristics, the first to appear there alongside and on the same level as humans, to be their equal in dignity and even in position, in nakedness, in conning and in understanding. It is the first to be able to speak and to get along with the woman, as well as suffering the first punishment, the first mutilation whilst having no possibility of appeal, no possibility of response, compelled to silence in the face of the mutilating punishments laid down against it. It is also the first to appear there as a scapegoat, the first to play this

role—at least in the structure of the narrative, whether through the place it is given by the narrator or in the justification given by the two humans for their fall. The serpent is the source of evil, the one who introduces it into the narrative, it is the serpent who carries its load, even on its skin, and it is thanks to the serpent that the other two are ultimately able to find some semblance of innocence. . . . In short, the serpent is the first to be sacrificed, the first to have to endure useless suffering. Moreover, it must be admitted that it is the first which we dare—I dare—imagine could have been seduced by *the temptation of writing*, by that other Promethean enterprise of *rewriting another genesis*, in its own way, perhaps already poetic. Most importantly, it might have written a genesis story specifically from the perspective of an “animal”, one which would have opened a “breach in creation”, which could have modified the roles of one, humans, and the other, animals. But it failed to rise to the occasion and, in the end, garnered nothing but downfall and damnation. Or rather, it is the narrator who made it fail in its project, relating nothing but its curse. Nonetheless, the serpent calls for *another story*, a narrative that is yet and entirely to be written—a narrative that greatly tempts me in this reading/writing: the serpent wishing to *rewrite its genesis*, to displace and mix up the established orders, to find a new dignity for itself and for other—all—animals, according to my reading which exceeds a simple exegesis and try to *reimagine* or to *re-write* this story (See also [Ombrosi 2022](#)): *to write another genesis of his own*, which would still deal with his subjects, namely origin, writing, nudity, commencement, recommencement, authority.

The Snake of the Lawrence poem (D. H. [Lawrence 1999](#)), “*like a king*” and “*one of the lords of life*”, maybe reminds the serpent of the Genesis, the most cunning of animals, that it still has an *entire kingdom to restore, to redeem*, and that it has another history to write or rewrite. “*The underworld*” of life and living beings awaits it for this kingdom to come. . . . Perhaps, that was his/its promise, the promise of Snake of Lawrence but also of the Serpent of *Bereshit*, a promise extended towards “the incalculability of another thought of life” ([Derrida 2005](#), p. 5), that is, that of giving life another chance. His/its “fidelity to come, to the to-come” ([Derrida 2005](#), p. 4). Which is to come.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In reference to the serpent’s aid, the rabbis say that it was a “great servant” and could have been a valuable helper to humanity, much more so than the camel or donkey. See *Aboth de-Rabbi Nathan*, A 1.10, quoted by LaCocque in a footnote to [LaCocque \(1998](#), p. 15).
- <sup>2</sup> See [Ginzberg \(2007](#), p. 89) which contains a chapter entitled “Eve’s Story of the Fall”.
- <sup>3</sup> I insist on featuring the lizards, not only because they are reptiles, related to the subject of this text, but also because they represent, as Ricoeur says, a “breach in Creation”. See [Ricoeur \(1998](#), p. 40).
- <sup>4</sup> On the heels of his co-author, Ricoeur also reminds us that “within the realm of the good Creation, nakedness is exempt from shame (2: 25); shame at being naked only arises under the reign of the Fall. But shame is far from being a curse. This feeling [. . .] constitutes a considerable cultural acquisition”; see [Ricoeur \(1998](#), p. 44). We could, therefore, say that the serpent’s shame anticipates that of the humans, because the serpent’s offence is an antecedent to theirs. The discovery of its nakedness brings shame because the serpent finds itself lacking the other, in default of the other. But when does the serpent’s offence begin?

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