The Tempter of Gen. 3 in the Light of a Later Identification with Satan

The most important distinction with which one should begin an analysis of the figure of the Tempter in Gen. 3 is the recognition that the serpent is not in the Book of Genesis itself called Satan. It is, however, presented in such a way that later Jewish and Christian tradition could recognize in it the activity of a personal adversary of God. Historical-literary exegesis asks primarily who the serpent is within the narrative of Eden itself, whereas canonical reading considers how its mysterious figure was interpreted in the light of later revelation. The answers given on these two levels are not identical, but they need not be mutually exclusive. The first protects the text from being ascribed meanings it does not yet explicitly utter, while the second allows one to perceive the development of the biblical understanding of personal evil.

The narrator introduces the Tempter with the words: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals that the JHWH God had made” (Gen. 3:1). The Hebrew expression וְהַנָּחָשׁ הָיָה עָרוּם (*wəhan-nāḥāš hājāh ʿārûm*) characterizes the serpent, נָחָשׁ (*nāḥāš*), as a being crafty or shrewd. The text does not name him *śāṭān*, a demon, a rebellious angel, a fallen cherub, or the ruler of the world of evil. It also does not mention any prior expulsion of him from heaven. On the contrary, it counts him among the animals created by God. The qualifying phrase “that the JHWH God had made” rules out understanding the serpent as an independent, primordial deity of evil. Even this mysterious adversary remains within creation, so the biblical narrative does not adopt a dualistic vision of two coequal principles, good and evil.

At the same time the serpent clearly exceeds the ordinary properties of an animal. He speaks, knows God’s prohibition and the possible consequences of its transgression, interprets God’s motives, consciously undermines His word, and leads humanity to violate the boundary established by the Creator. The narrator does not explain either his capacity to speak or the source of his adversarial knowledge. This restraint need not be treated as a literary gap. It belongs to the theological power of the narrative, in which evil appears in the garden as a foreign voice of unexplained origin. Man does not know its full provenance, but must decide whether to trust the word of God or accept the alternative interpretation of reality offered to him.

Even the transition between Gen. 2:25 and Gen. 3:1 reveals an intended wordplay. The man and the woman are עֲרוּמִּים (*ʿărummîm*), that is, naked, while the serpent is עָרוּם (*ʿārûm*), i.e., crafty. The similarity of sound contrasts the innocent, defenseless openness of the humans with the incisive strategy of the Tempter. Nakedness does not yet mean shame, but existence without masks or fear, in full transparency before the other person and before God. The serpent takes advantage of this unprotected innocence. After the encounter with the “crafty one” the people discover that they are “naked,” and innocent openness is transformed into ashamed self-awareness. The wordplay therefore expresses the tragic transformation effected by the temptation.

The Tempter does not begin with an open denial of God’s existence or with an explicit call to rebellion. He asks: “Did God really say, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?” His strategy develops gradually. First he distorts the picture of God’s generosity. God had permitted

man to eat freely of every tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16–17), so the starting point of His command was an abundant gift limited by a single prohibition. The serpent reverses the proportions and presents God primarily as One who withholds. The first temptation thus does not concern the fruit itself, but the image of the Creator. Man is to begin to suspect that God's command does not protect life but stifles his development.

Next the Tempter draws the woman into a conversation conducted on his terms. The woman indeed defends the command, but at the same time she modifies it, saying: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden God has said, 'You shall not eat it nor touch it, lest you die'" (Gen. 3:3). The previous utterance of God did not contain a prohibition against touching the tree. The woman thus extends the restriction, and she softens the decisive formula "you shall surely die" to "lest you die." This may indicate that God's word had already begun to be perceived as more restrictive and at the same time less certain than it really was. Only after this preparation does the serpent move to a direct denial: "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). The Hebrew לֹא־מוֹת תְּמֻתוּן (*lōʾ-môt təmutûn*) almost exactly inverts God's מוֹת תָּמוּת (*môt tāmût*), "you shall surely die." The Tempter does not propose an alternative religion. He offers an alternative hermeneutic of existence according to which God does not speak the truth about the consequences of human choice.

The final stage of the temptation is the accusation of God's hidden jealousy: "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God [or: like gods], knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). The prohibition is presented not as protection of the human, but as a safeguard of God's privileged position. The Tempter suggests that the boundary was not established for the good of the creature but because the Creator fears its possible exaltation. In this sense the serpent already in Gen. 3 plays a role corresponding to the later designation *diabolos*, that is, the slanderer: he maligns God before man and thereby severs the bond of trust.

The particular danger of his words lies in the fact that they do not consist solely of obvious falsehoods. After eating the fruit, the eyes of the people do indeed open; they acquire a certain kind of knowledge of good and evil, and God declares: "Behold, the man has become like one of Us" (Gen. 3:22). They do not die immediately in a biological sense either. The lie of the Tempter therefore consists in extracting fragments of truth from relation to God and silent omission of their full consequences. The eyes of man open, but the first discovery is not divine power, but their own nakedness. The acquiring of knowledge is accompanied by the loss of innocence, mutual trust, freedom to be before God, harmony with creation, the safety of the garden and access to the tree of life. The serpent promises growth while hiding dissolution, and divine knowledge while omitting that man will not receive the divine capacity to bear its burden. His action is diabolic not because every sentence is literally false, but because part of the truth is used to destroy trust in the whole truth about God.

At the center of the narrative is not appetite nor a magical power of the fruit, which the text in any case does not call an apple, but "the knowledge of good and evil." This expression may

signify moral maturity, plenary discernment, a royal capacity to render judgment, or a claim to independently establish what is good and evil. The last dimension carries particular weight. The temptation does not limit itself to calling man to know more, but inclines him not to accept the measure of good and evil from God and to assume himself the right to define them. Original sin thus becomes a hermeneutical rebellion: man rejects God's interpretation of reality, chooses the Tempter's interpretation and attempts to occupy the place of the final judge of the world.

The fact that the serpent addresses the woman does not mean that the text presents her as by nature more susceptible to evil. The man is not an innocent, absent victim of later manipulation by his wife. The sentence "She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate" (Gen. 3:6) contains the Hebrew עִמָּהּ (*ʿimmāh*), "with her," suggesting at least his presence at the climactic moment. The serpent speaks, the woman considers, the man is silent, but each of them participates in the disintegration of the proper order of speech. Later tradition sometimes simplified the narrative by one-sidedly burdening Eve, as does Sirach 25:24: "The beginning of sin is from the woman, and because of her we all die." This, however, is not the only biblical way of interpretation. Paul, explaining the entrance of sin and death into the world, assigns representative responsibility to Adam: "through one man sin entered the world" (Rom. 5:12).

The apparent truthfulness of the assurance "you will not die" requires attention to several dimensions of death. Adam and Eve do not fall dead on the day of eating the fruit, but precisely then an irrevocable judgment is pronounced. They are cut off from the tree of life; therefore death becomes their certain terminus, although the biological execution of the sentence will occur later. There immediately also appears relational death: man hides from God, spouses begin to accuse one another, fear is born, and the garden is lost. Gen. 3:22–24 also indicates that man did not possess unconditional immortality, but could live by access to the tree of life. Exile deprives him of the possibility of living forever. The serpent therefore utters a half-truth: man does not die immediately biologically, but his act introduces him into a state of rupture from the source of life, the inevitable end of which is death.

The sentence pronounced upon the serpent corresponds to his role in the fall: "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock… On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat" (Gen. 3:14). The text does not explicitly claim that the serpent previously had legs. Crawling and eating dust belong to the language of humiliation, for "to lick the dust" in the Bible is an image of defeat and subjugation. It is also significant that the serpent remains the only living participant of the scene directly called cursed. The earth is cursed because of man, but the formula "you are cursed" is not pronounced against Adam and Eve. This distinction favors the later recognition that the serpent is the bearer of an action more deeply opposed to God's purpose than the instinct of an ordinary animal.

Particular significance for canonical reading lies in the announcement of Gen. 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he will bruise you on the head, and you will bruise him on the heel." The Hebrew זֶרַע (*zeraʿ*), "offspring" or "seed," has a collective character, and the verb שׁוּף (*šûp*), used in both parts of the sentence, most

probably means to attack, strike, or crush. On the historical-literary level the text describes a lasting hostility between humans and serpents: man reaches the head, while the serpent attacks the heel. It does not yet unambiguously speak of the Messiah, the cross, or the final annihilation of Satan. In light of the later identification of the serpent with the devil, however, the conflict gains a deeper dimension. The woman's seed may represent humanity faithful to God, and ultimately the Messiah, who is wounded yet defeats the adversary. Calling Gen. 3:15 the *protoevangelium* is therefore justified in canonical reading, provided one does not present the developed Christological sense as meaning fully manifest to the first hearers. The text rather establishes a pattern of conflict: the adversary wounds the human, but his own head is ultimately reached.

Gen. 3 primarily describes the mechanism of temptation, not the genesis of the Tempter. The narrator does not say whether the serpent hates God, envies the human, previously rebelled, desires to seize dominion, or consciously aims at human death. He also does not explain from where he knows the consequences of eating the fruit. The serpent appears without a biography and, after the pronouncement of the sentence, disappears from the foreground of the narrative. It is precisely this interpretative space that later Jewish texts began to fill.

A decisive step is taken by Wis. 2:23–24: "For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity; but through the envy of the devil death entered into the world, and they that do hold of his side do find it." The Greek sentence φθόνῳ δὲ διαβόλου θάνατος εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον (*phthonō de diabolou thanatos eisēlthen eis ton kosmon*) attributes the entrance of death into the world to the envy of *diabolos*, the adversary or devil. The line of thought clearly alludes to Gen. 1–3: man was created in the image of God, his destiny is indestructibility, death does not belong to the Creator's original design, but enters human history as a result of the activity of the adversary. The Book of Wisdom therefore supplies a motive that Genesis did not reveal. The adversary envies the human for the likeness to God, the vocation to immortality, dominion over the earth, and nearness to the Creator. Unable to take away the divine image himself, he incites him to reject the relation that is the source of life.

Envy here should be distinguished from ordinary desire to possess another's good. The envious person does not always seek to acquire what the other possesses; he may principally desire that the other be deprived of it. Thus the Tempter's aim is not to win the garden for himself, but to detach man from participation in God's life. Traditional interpretation applies Wis. 2:24 to a personal devil identified with the serpent. The immediate context of the creation of man, the motive of immortality, the entrance of death into the world, the allusion to Gen. 1–3, and later Jewish and Christian tradition all argue for this. This is one of the earliest attestations linking death with the activity of a personal adversary, although the serpent itself is not named in this verse.

One must, however, honestly note also the hypothesis that *diabolos* in Wis. 2:24 means Cain. It is he who envies Abel, who out of envy commits the first fratricide and is the first to inflict death upon man. The wicked ones of Wisdom 2 recall him when they, out of envy, plan the murder of

the righteous. This interpretation corresponds well to the immediate motif of persecution of the righteous, but less well explains the reference to the creation of man for incorruption. A composite approach is also possible, in which “the adversary” signifies the primordial pattern of evil afterward reenacted by humans: the serpent seduces the first parents, Cain kills his brother, and subsequent wicked persons persecute the righteous. The most natural canonical reading remains, however, that Wis. 2:24 interprets the fall of Gen. 3 as the consequence of the envy of a personal adversary.

The second part of the verse, which says that death “is experienced by those who belong to him,” deepens this interpretation. The Greek οἱ τῆς ἐκείνου μερίδος ὄντες literally means people belonging to his share or party. It cannot only mean biological death, because the righteous also undergo it, whose souls according to Wis. 3:1–4 are in God’s hand, and whose apparent destruction proves to be a passage into peace. Death thus has a biological dimension common to all, and a spiritual-eschatological dimension proper to those who consciously adopt the adversary’s mode of existence. A person does not belong to the devil simply because he was deceived, but when he accepts his logic of envy, slander, violence, and rejection of justice, calling death life and life foolishness.

The path from the mysterious serpent to a clear identification with the devil did not run in a straight line. In the Book of Job and the Book of Zechariah *haś-śāṭān* appears as an accuser belonging to the heavenly court and subordinated to God, but these texts do not connect him with Eden. In 1 Chr. 21:1 Satan, appearing without the article, takes on the profile of a more autonomous figure and incites David to conduct a census. Second Temple literature develops several models of the origin of evil. 1 Enoch links the genesis of the evil spirits primarily to the fall of the Watchers and the fate of the giants; the Book of Jubilees develops the figure of Mastema; traditions about Adam and Eve increasingly attribute their seduction to the devil; while Wis. 2:24 connects the entrance of death to the envy of *diabolos*. Jewish demonology therefore developed on multiple tracks before the various traditions were integrated in the Christian canonical reading.

The full and explicit identification occurs in Revelation. Rev. 12:9 speaks of “that ancient serpent called the Devil and Satan, who leads the whole world astray,” and Rev. 20:2 portrays the binding of “the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan.” The dragon, the ancient serpent, *diabolos*, the slanderer, and *satanas*, the adversary, become designations of the same personal reality deceiving the world. “Ancient serpent” indicates the canonical return to Eden. Revelation not only recalls Gen. 3, but interprets salvation history as the unfolding of the conflict between the serpent and the seed of the woman.

The later identification explains the serpent’s extraordinary intelligence, his knowledge of God’s prohibition, his supra-animal strategy, and his desire to undermine God’s credibility. Wis. 2:24 supplements the silence of Gen. 3 by indicating envy as the motive of the action, and tradition develops it as jealousy of the divine image and destiny of man. This identification also allows one to perceive the unity of seduction and accusation. The serpent accuses God before man,

suggesting that the Creator hides from him the due good. Satan in the Book of Job accuses man before God, claiming that Job serves Him only for gain. The mechanism remains the same: the slanderer undermines God's goodness toward man and man's sincerity toward God, tears apart mutual trust, and then points to the resulting guilt as confirmation of his own accusation. Satan is therefore not merely the one who prompts a single sin, but an adversary seeking to destroy the covenant through mutual accusation.

Recognizing the activity of the devil in the serpent does not, however, remove human responsibility. In Gen. 3 the serpent is responsible for the seduction, the woman for reception and handing over of the fruit, and the man for conscious eating and earlier silence. Both are also responsible for hiding and shifting blame. The Tempter can falsify the image of the good and supply a false interpretation of reality, but he does not force a person's choice. The Bible therefore allows neither a reduction of evil to purely human frailty nor the ascription to the devil of a guilt that would annul human freedom and responsibility.

The deepest paradox of the temptation is that the serpent's promise is ultimately fulfilled not by rebellion but by God. The Tempter promises man that he will become "like God," urging him to achieve this end through distrust, appropriation, transgression of the boundary, and autonomy from the Creator. Meanwhile, according to Gen. 1:26–27 man was already created in the image and likeness of God. He therefore attempts by rebellion to attain what he had received as a gift, and destroys the likeness he possesses by trying to realize it on his own terms. Wis. 2:23 confirms that he was created for incorruption and as the image of God's eternity. The devil proposes him a shortcut: divinity without trust, knowledge without obedience, and life apart from the source of life. The consequence of this apparent emancipation is death.

On the historical-literary level then the serpent of Gen. 3 remains a mysterious, speaking creature representing a crafty wisdom directed against God's command. The text does not call him Satan nor expound a doctrine of a fallen angel. On the level of later Jewish and Christian reading his mode of action is, however, recognized as an instance of personal evil: he undermines God's word, maligns His intention, deceives by means of half-truths, promises life while leading to death, arouses the desire for autonomous divinity and destroys trust between the Creator and the creature. Wis. 2:24 makes the decisive interpretive move by attributing to the adversary envy of the man created for incorruption, while Revelation brings this line to an explicit identification of the ancient serpent with the devil and Satan.

This does not mean that later books merely extract from Gen. 3 a hidden name that had been fully present in the text from the beginning. Rather they recognize in the first Tempter the same pattern of personal evil that, in the further history of revelation, receives increasingly explicit form. The serpent's deepest work is not merely handing over the fruit, but persuading man that God stands in the way of his fulfillment. From that moment every sin repeats the logic of Eden: man seeks outside God a good that can exist only as God's gift.