

Why Demonize the Mother of All Living?

Visual Clues from the World Behind the Text

Most interpreters use grammatical, lexical and intratextual markers to help decipher their biblical texts. (e.g., *mashal*, to rule over, and *teshukah*, desire in Gen 3). There are, however, other sources of meaning which lie outside the domain of language, but which are not always considered when making interpretations. This results in a loss of meaning, and some serious opportunities for unnuanced proclamations for behavior codes recommended to believers. Genesis 3 offers a devastating example: a powerful curse with ongoing outcomes like eternal second class status meted out to one half of humanity. Visual Theology may help elucidate the levels of meanings in a text, showing the impetus for such transformations.

Visual Theology consists of visual motifs and images which are bundled together in a bricolage to present a collaborative perspective (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Myth and Meaning). Motif analysis is a much beloved technique of folklorists working with oral texts to trace origin and reuse. Since we no longer have oral informants for our texts in question, we must go a little further to understand how motifs function from one usage to the next. Fortunately, we have many parallel texts in the ANE which help us strengthen our use of this method, as well as copious examples of the motifs in the arts of surrounding peoples and later interpreters.

While it is quite true that a mythic motif's meaning often varies from one culture to another, when contiguous cultural groups "borrow" the image of a tree, an egg, or a snake, it is often the case that the image brings along some or all of its meaning to its new composited context. An analysis of the key images and motifs of Genesis 1-3 show this to be the case, but one resulting in a deliberate negative view of the Mother of All Living as an evil intruder into the perfect garden the Creator has provided for humanity. Presented here are a variety of visual motifs from parallel texts and visual presentations that offer us clues to solving how and why the Universal Mother was transmuted into a secondary, suspect presence that holds power even today.

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