

# YAHWEH AND THE SNAKE GODDESS

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## THE GARDEN OF EDEN

There are two main accounts of the creation of the world in the Bible, the first, up to verse four of chapter two tells of the creation of the world in six days and how “mankind” was created male and female together. This first account, usually labeled the “Priestly account,” is considered by scholars to have been the result of editorial activity of writers after the Babylonian exile which had profoundly affected Hebrew thought and mythology. The second account, called the “Yahwist and Elohist” account after two schools of writers or two individuals writing much earlier, perhaps at the beginning of the monarchy, includes the familiar Garden of Eden and the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam. The account written earlier probably preserves more of the folk history and wisdom of the prehistorical Hebrews and also shows the effects of early influences by the cultures of the Middle East upon the Hebrew mythology, even to the point that the probable sources of some parts of the account can be guessed at.

In the second account, Yahweh forms a man out of the earth to oversee his creation. His immediate motive is that he needs someone to “till the ground and keep it.”<sup>1</sup> Yahweh is the name by which the Hebrews knew their God and was indicative of their special relationship to him. In the Middle East, to know the name of a god was to have a special relationship to him. It was written without vowels as Semitic languages were, as YHWH and was so holy that it was never to be pronounced, except by the high priest in the temple once a year.<sup>2</sup> Yahweh then tells the man that he may freely eat of every tree in the garden he had planted in the east part of Eden except of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, because He says, “...in the day that you eat of it you must die.”<sup>3</sup>

After this, Yahweh creates all the birds and beasts in an attempt to find someone to keep man company for “it is not good that man should be alone,” but after man had given names to all the beasts he still had not found any helper fit for him. So Yahweh puts Adam to sleep and forms a woman from a rib that he takes from man. And so the man and woman begin a life of bliss in the Garden.

Here the serpent, “more subtle than any other wild creature...” comes on stage and says to the woman, “Did Yahweh say, ‘you shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” to which the woman replies that Yahweh had said, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but Yahweh said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”<sup>4</sup>

But the serpent says to the woman, “You will not die. For Yahweh knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like Yahweh, knowing good and evil.” Here Eve, “The Woman,” looks at the fruit, discovers it is very delicious looking and knowing that it would “make her wise,” eats of it, and gives some to her husband to eat. And, as the snake predicted, they suddenly become wise and know they are naked, and they become

ashamed and hide.

Yaweh strolling in his very mideastern garden in the “cool of the day,” calls out to the man and woman and asks how it is that they are hiding. They answer that they are ashamed of being naked and Yaweh deduces that they must have eaten of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and he curses them, and the snake for deceiving them. The man and woman will have to work for a living and eventually die, while the snake will have to crawl around on its belly and constantly be prepared to bite the heel of man or be stepped upon.

Since the man and woman are so embarrassed at being naked, Yaweh makes them some clothes out of skins, and then says that since the “man has become as one of us, knowing good and evil;...now lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever”<sup>5</sup> he sends them out of the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which Adam was taken.

In the biblical account Eve is tempted to eat the forbidden fruit by the serpent who is “more subtle” than any creature. When Eve says that if she eats it Yaweh has told her she is going to die, the snake says, in effect, that she wouldn’t die from eating the fruit. Yaweh was just afraid that they would be like himself, knowing the difference between good and evil.

In this famous episode Yaweh, who professes himself to be a jealous god, does indeed show how jealous he is of his supremacy and also shows himself to be not a little devious. As the snake predicted, Yaweh laments not the fact that the two have done badly, but that they have become as himself. (The plural “one of us” we can presume to be a form of the editorial “we,” though if the story of the Garden of Eden has other mythical parallels the gods would indeed be plural.) And his reason for driving them out of Eden is nothing more than to prevent them from eating of the Tree of Life, from which one must conclude that if the man and woman had managed to reach that particular tree, they would have been able to circumvent the curse. Of course the problem of why they were blamed in the first place since the concepts of “Good and “Evil” were supposed to be unknown to them, is left moot. The proof that they now know the difference between good and evil is that they are aware of their nakedness. The meaning of the evil learned through the fruit of the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” is thus an awareness of the ethics of the Hebrews. (Evaluation of nudity as evil is indeed very strong, especially among Western cultures of Judeo-Christian heritage, although it might be said that there is significantly more blame put upon the nudity of women than on that of men. Even among the early Greeks the nude statues of young men, the *kuorous*, are prevalent very early while nude statues of women are virtually non-existent until late classical times, and then they are usually only those of Aphrodite. The Romans were a little more appreciative of the female nude however and used it extensively in their statuary, which later ages saw as a proof of their immorality. The Christian tradition is evident even in St. Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians where he admonishes women to pray with their heads covered saying that a man wearing his hair long is degraded whereas a woman’s hair”...is given her for a covering)<sup>6</sup>

Strangely, many people who have seen the frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, do not notice that the snake depicted tempting Eve is a woman, at least the upper body is that of a woman. If we ask why Michelangelo would portray the infamous

snake of the Garden of Eden as a woman, those acquainted with the Renaissance and Michelangelo would certainly say that the artist himself was apparently somewhat of a male chauvinist who, when he had to portray women, such as in the Medici Chapel in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, did so in a rather perfunctory way, eliminating the penis and adding breasts to rather manly torsoes. Even the snake on the Sistine Chapel ceiling is a quite muscular temptress. Like the Greeks, however, he did not hesitate to decorate his paintings with nude men, not only the *ignudi* of the Sistine ceiling, but also in his *tondo* of the Holy Family in the Uffizzi in Florence where nude young men form the main background making a very incongruous setting for Jesus, Joseph and Mary to be depicted in. They might also say that the typical attitude of Renaissance Christianity was that most of the evils of this world stemmed from woman, and she was therefore the most appropriate symbol of the epitome of evil. There is a very nubile Renaissance nude of Eve presented as Pandora who brought all the evils into the world in Greeky mythology.

"The entire ancient world, from Asia Minor to the Nile and from Greece to the Indus Valley, abounds in figurines of the naked female form, in various attitudes of the all-supporting, all-including goddess; her two hands offering her breasts; her left pointing to her genitals and the right offering her left breast; nursing or fondling a male child; standing upright among beasts; arms extended, holding tokens—stalks, flowers, serpents..."<sup>7</sup> These positions and accessories were all indications of fertility and life, of course, the female body being the most natural symbol of fertility.

In church history however, "woman is the cause of the Fall, the wicked temptress, the accomplice of Satan, and the destroyer of mankind. The fury unleashed against Eve and all her kind is almost flattering (to women), so exaggerated is the picture of the female's fatal and all-powerful charms and the male's incapacity to resist." St. John Chrysostom ("golden-mouthed" John) warns that "The whole of her bodily beauty is nothing less than phlegm, blood, bile, rheum, and the fluid of digested food...If you consider what is stored up behind those lovely eyes, the angle of the nose, the mouth and cheeks you will agree that the well-proportioned body is merely a whitened sepulchre."<sup>8</sup>

Whence this revilement of woman? Where did this paranoid revulsion toward the feminine arise?

## THE SNAKE GODDESS

The perception of nudity as evil and the idea of depicting the snake of the Garden as a woman can be traced to one central figure, certainly much more exigent to the Hebrews of the Old Testament in the period when their culture and traditions were forming and their scriptures beginning to be written down. They were basically a sheep and goat-herding society moving in among, and mingling with settled agricultural societies. The Hebrews, typically patriarchal and therefore typically depicting their god as a man, were therefore in constant contact and conflict with societies which had Mother Goddesses as central dieties. In fact, many of the "infidelities" that the Hebrews were accused of by the prophets involved worshipping the gods and goddesses surrounding them which had a mother goddess as their central deity, with the serpent as the chief symbolic associate of the Mother, or Earth Goddess.

The three terms, Great Mother, Earth Mother and Snake Goddess all represent basically the same goddess, but focus on different aspects and functions. The Great Mother of course emphasizes the role of giving birth to all life and to nurturing it in which she is cast as the Good Mother, but it also includes the opposite idea of death and the inexorable return in death to the womb, in which she becomes the Terrible Mother. An extensive explanation is given concerning the concept of the Great Mother by Erich Neumann.<sup>9</sup> Neumann, however, follows Jung in calling the Great Mother concept an archetype, meaning that it is not the product of a particular mythology or mythologies, but found among people in any part of the world as a natural result of the human condition.

The Earth Mother is more truly a mythological concept, albeit a natural derivation of the concept of the Great Mother. The idea of an Earth Mother is usually connected to agricultural societies for whom the earth is seen as the source of all life and especially the fruits of the earth in the eternal revolution of the seasons. The Earth Mother, however, is most often seen as requiring a consort to supply the seed for the future harvests and so she is often worshipped along with a male god, often a sky god such as Osiris in Egypt or Baal who hurls thunderbolts and brings the rain, etc.

The Snake Goddess emphasizes the eternal return of life and death and the oracular power that sees the future as well as the past.

For at least 7,000 years before the composition of the Book of Genesis the serpent had been an object of worship in the Levant<sup>10</sup> and there are a myriad of archaeological findings depicting the snake with the Earth Mother, often in a manner very similar to that of the snake on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, with a snake or snakes winding about her lower body.

Perhaps nothing symbolizes birth, life and death so well as the snake. "The wonderful ability of the serpent to slough its skin and so renew its youth has earned for it throughout the world the character of the master of the mystery of rebirth."<sup>11</sup> The most ancient hero myth still extant, that of Gilgamesh of the third millennium B.C. concerns itself with the quest of Gilgamesh for eternal life, and the tragedy that occurs when a snake eats the herb of eternal youth Gilgamesh has fetched from the bottom of the sea. In Greek myth, Aesclepius is able to create wonderful medicine from the deadly venom of the snake. In fact, the medicine is so wonderful that Aesclepius is able to bring people back from the dead with it (for which he is struck dead by a thunderbolt thrown by Zeus acting on behalf of an irate Hades who feared that his domain would be depopulated). The caduceus, of which we will speak later, with its twining snakes, has become the symbol of the medical profession and the ability to renew health and youth. We must also mention that the celestial sign of death and rebirth is the moon, "...waxing and waning, like the serpent sloughing its shadow and again waxing. The moon is the lord and measure of the life-creating rhythm of the womb, and therewith of time, through which things come and go: lord of the mystery of birth and equally of death—which two, in sum, are aspects of one state of being." The serpent... "When imagined as biting its tail, as the mythological *uroboros*... suggests the waters that in all archaic cosmologies surround—as well as lie beneath and permeate—the floating circular island Earth."<sup>12</sup>

Thus the snake also represented the ultimate principle of life, the Great Mother, the Earth Mother. The Snake Goddess of Crete brandishing a snake in either hand is probably the most outstanding example of a joining of the Great Mother Goddess and the serpent.

It is, however, certainly an expression of the Great Mother in her Terrible aspect.

While the Great Mother may be symbolized by the *uroboros*, with the mouth of the snake symbolizing the vulva, the tail being swallowed is identified with the phallus. Thus, while the Great Mother is a female principle, she is also the male principle, albeit, the male principle is in the position of being subsumed by the female principle. By the same token, she is both giver of life and destroyer. In this way the Great Mother, or the Earth Mother was seen by the peoples who depended upon her largess for their livelihood, especially the agricultural cultures, to be both generous and jealous. The eternal cycle included a yearly or multi-yearly return to a point of death and rebirth; without birth there could be no death, and without death, no birth, and every aspect of existence was seen in relation to this constant returning or revolving.

## THE SEED

The Earth Mother, while being the source of life, was in need of the seed as were the fields in which she created the harvest. The seed of life was the male principle. While there is evidence that there were cultures unaware of the male role in the transmission of life, believing women were impregnated by the north wind, etc., as agriculture became prevalent, the necessity of the seed was perceived and, judging from the plethora of phallic symbols remaining from prehistoric sites, the role of the male in procreation was well understood, albeit the actual bestowal of life remained with the mother. It was, however, important that the seed supplied to the Earth Mother be of the highest possible grade in order that the life-harvest to be supplied to the people through the next cycle be of the highest quality. Thus it was that there had to be systems of selection for the consort of the Earth Mother = e.g. the priestess in charge of the care of the shrine of the Earth Mother. The shrine may have been at Nemi, Olympia, Delphi or the Yucatan Peninsula, but it was always required that the men show their fitness to be the source of the seed for next year's life and to contributing his own life as the seed through a selection process that usually included some kind of competition.

It was for this reason that the Mayans held contests very similar to soccer matches, and had the winning captain become the sacrifice for the next year's harvest. It was also probably for the same reason that the various Greek "games" began. At Delphi the Pythian games were named in honor of the Python of Gaea, the Earth Mother. Although Delphi came to be associated with Apollo after the conquest of the Greek peninsula by the Achaeans, and the games a series of contests to show the prowess of the competitors, and show them honor, the Pythian games, and probably also the Isthmian and Olympian games were originally means of selection of the "seed" for future harvests. Today the explanation of the religious nature of the early Greek athletic contests rests on the premise that by showing his strength the contestant gives thanks to Zeus from whom the strength was received. This, however, is certainly a later interpretation, and does not coincide with Greek thought which never considered Zeus a creator. To the Greeks Zeus was a ruler who, in fact, usurped the throne to achieve his power. It is also blatantly patriarchal, assuming that the male is the model of the gods. (The Greek gods and goddesses are even more anthropomorphic than those of

the Hebrews.) The early games were apparently started well before the later Greeks' date for the original Olympiad, 776 B.C., probably in the pre-Greek Mycenae period or perhaps during the dark ages between 1200 B.C. and 800 B.C., and they were indeed limited to men, but hardly because women were thought to be inferior. Much later, after "patriarchy" became the norm, women were allowed to participate in a sort of ancient "women's liberation" movement. Today the explanation of that event is attributed to a more broad-minded attitude of the Greeks. Actually, the games were all male originally because a woman could hardly become the seed of a future harvest. The male was, however, superior to the female in strength, which was literally "vital" to the pre-Greeks to the extent it would provide better seed. For that reason the seed with the best potential was desired, but life itself came from the Great Mother.

It is significant that the winners of the Pythian Games were awarded a laurel wreath, as at Olympia, and at the Isthmian Games, celery. Again the current wisdom assumes the significance of these awards to be a natural "crown" which would indicate "kingship," or some kind of superiority. Indeed "kingship" was symbolized by these awards, and it was the kingship by which the possessor signified the prowess enabling him to be consort to the Earth Mother Queen and to afford the strength to create an abundant harvest. The crown signified the worth of his life substance, so valuable that, in the end, it must be given to the goddess. But the crown itself was awarded by the goddess and signified Her. Therefore it had to be a symbol of Her abundance that all representations of the goddesses included, the apple held by Aphrodite, the wheat held by Ceres, the pomegranate by the Virgin Mary. The crown indicated her chosen, who would literally give his life to Her.

Whether the sacrifice was carried out immediately, or whether the king enjoyed a reign of a year or several years, or whether there was a substitute made so that the king could avoid the fatal conclusion to his reign, the meaning of his kingship remained the same, the contributing of his life substance as seed to the queen, the soil, and the common good. The basic idea behind human sacrifice is not the killing but the offering of life to some higher being that in some way has need of or is pleased with the gift of life. In return that being awards the giver of the life substance some boon, in most cases life itself in the same and other forms. Thus it is that the ancient corn goddesses such as Demeter would return the lives offered up to her in the form of grain or other crops as well as children.

The "seed" for the Hebrews however, had an entirely different role in the sense that for them, as patriarchs, the seed *was* life and the woman a mere receptacle who cared for and nurtured it. In the final part of the curse that Yahweh makes on the snake he states that he will make enmity between the snake's "seed" and the "seed" of the woman, and "he" (the seed) will crush the snake's head. (Actually, the seed in this text is referred to with the neuter "it" but is thought by Christian exegetes to refer to Christ as the descendent of Eve. A mistranslation by Jerome had, for a long while, expressed it in the feminine "she" which gave rise in the Catholic Church to the many portrayals of Mary as the "Immaculate Conception" crushing a snake underfoot.)<sup>13</sup> The use of the term "seed" to indicate the "descendants" of Eve emphasizes the masculine role in birth and thereby the system of patriarchy. In matriarchy the children would certainly be referred to as "fruit" rather than seed, as can be seen by the various fruits held in the depictions of ancient goddesses. In the case of the curse of Onan for "spilling his seed,"<sup>14</sup> his fault was not the sin of masturbation as is often assumed

by latter day moralists, but *coitus interruptus* when he was having intercourse with his dead brother's wife, a duty under the law that she may have children by him. Onan "wasted" his "seed" and was punished because he was purposely trying to circumvent the patriarchal law which would give offspring to his dead brother and thereby reduce his own inheritance.

## THE GODDESS SUBVERTED

The Acheans and Dorians, as they invaded the Greek peninsula from the 14th to the 12th centuries B.C., also established the supremacy of their male gods over the occupying goddesses, and subverted the character of those goddesses to make them demonic, or at least subject to the chief male divinity, Zeus. In the case of Gaea to whom the shrine of Delphi belonged along with the oracular power, the god Apollo took over the shrine and the oracle by force. It seems that after Apollo had been born of Leto and Zeus, Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus, sent the serpent Python to pursue Leto all over the earth. Later Apollo went to Delphi and killed the oracular Python and took over the shrine for himself out of revenge. In any case, the Earth Mother was dispossessed and her powers of prophecy, symbolized by the serpent, usurped.

In the case of Athena, she was said to have been born of Zeus who had lain with the Titaness, Metis. But when Zeus heard from the oracle of Mother Earth that it would be a girl child and if Metis bore him another child it would usurp his throne, he swallowed Metis whole. That was the end of Metis but, in due process, he was taken with a terrible headache which was relieved by Hephaestus who wedged open Zeus' skull out of which jumped Athena, fully armed. This account is a blatant theological expedient to rid Athena of matriarchal conditions and at the same time force the attribution of wisdom, which had been the sole prerogative of Athena, to her father Zeus. This is almost perfectly paralleled in the second account of creation in Genesis in which Eve is created (born) from a rib of Adam. Adam is thus made the source of Eve's life in an inversion of the natural relationship and confirming that life comes from the male, not the female.

The reputation and power of the Moon Goddess, Medusa, who became a symbol of terrible ugliness, was successfully subverted in the story of her decapitation by Perseus. Originally beautiful, she was turned into a horrifying witch by Athena who had become angry at Medusa and Poseidon lying together in the precincts of a temple of Athena. But after her destruction by Perseus, the head of Medusa, with its hair of snakes still attached, was given to Athena who fixed it on the aegis she had received from her father, Zeus. The story, thus told, accounts for the snakes associated with both Medusa and Athena without reference to the former connection with their status as Great Mother or Moon (=Snake) Goddess.

These and many other stories in the mythology of the Greeks attest to social revolution achieved by the Achaeans. Great Mother goddesses were subjugated to male gods, or demoted from the rank of divinity and destroyed. The process, of course, extended over centuries and the alteration in the mythologies happened in fits and starts, catching up with the changes in thought and social structure sometimes only long afterwards. Actually, the process was never really complete, and for that reason the evidence of the matriarchal society of the pre-Greeks can still be read.

In many cases the figures of the gods and goddesses found on ancient vases and elsewhere, called "icons" by Robert Graves,<sup>15</sup> are found to have entire myths created to explain them. Such, for example is the figure of Aphrodite holding an apple. As mentioned above, this would certainly label her a form of the Earth Mother, but the presence of the apple in her hand was reinterpreted to be the "apple of discord" supplied by Eris disgruntled at not being invited to the wedding of Thetis and Peleus and given as a prize by Paris to Aphrodite whom he had selected as the "fairest of the goddesses." It is difficult to imagine that there was any direct influence of this myth on the story of the Garden of Eden, but there are several coincidental points which suggest at least an indirect connection. The fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, (usually depicted as an apple), does not symbolize the fertility of the Garden, but is the cause of the rift between Eve and Yahweh, as Aphrodite's apple caused a rift among the gods and goddess and eventually the Trojan War in myth, an "apple of discord." Eve hands the fruit to Adam, as Aphrodite proffers this symbol of fertility to man in her icons. The snake could also be seen as representing Eris, the Goddess of Discord in a subversion of the role of the Great Mother for whom the snake is the usual symbol.

Robert Graves goes further in analyzing the story of Adam and Eve stating that, "Clearly, (Yahweh) did not figure in the original myth. It is the Mother of All the Living... who casts Adam out of her fertile riverine dominions because he has usurped some prerogative of hers—whether caprifying fig-trees or planting grain is not clear—lest he should also usurp her prerogative of dispensing justice and uttering oracles. He is sent off to till the soil in some less bountiful region."<sup>16</sup>

Not only in Greece but all over the Middle East and the Mediterranean matriarchal societies and their goddesses were subverted by patriarchal hunting, gathering and herding peoples. In Sumer, for example, the story of Gilgamesh recounts the hero's refusal of Ishtar's offer of marriage in which he relates the horrible way in which she has destroyed all her former lovers, a reference to the system in which the king-consort of the goddess-priestess was sacrificed to gain the fertility for the harvest.

In the case of the Hebrews, entering into Canaan in three distinct waves from the 18th to the 13th century B.C., there is, on one hand, considerable adoption of Canaanite mythology into the Hebrew scriptures, while at the same time condemnation of the rites and customs of the Canaanites. The familiar god Baal, featured as an abomination throughout scriptures, lends much of his character to Yahweh. Baal rides the clouds, sending lightning and thunder to show his power, but also dispenses kindly rains in their season to make the earth fertile.<sup>17</sup> Baal's conquest of the forces of disorder and chaos is depicted as the slaying of the seven-headed dragon Lotan (the Hebrew Leviathan) where there seems to be evidence of the influence on Canaanite mythology of the Akkadian myth of the slaying of the dragon Tiamat by Marduk. Tiamat was the great-great-great grandmother of Marduk and, like Eve, the mother of all, that is to say, the Great Mother. Scholars remark that the name of this mother monster, *ti'amat*, is related etymologically to the Hebrew term for "deep," *tehom* of the second verse of Genesis where "the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the *deep*; and the Spirit of Yahweh was moving over the face of the waters."<sup>18</sup> After Marduk conquered chaos-dragon Tiamat, he proceeded to order the universe and build the temple-ziggurat of Esagla in Babylon.<sup>19</sup> And when Yahweh overcomes Leviathan in

Psalm 74:14.<sup>20</sup> a similar account of Yahweh's creation is given:

"Thou didst divide the sea by thy might; thou didst break the heads of the dragons on the waters.

Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan, thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.....

Thine is the day, thine also the night; thou hast established the luminaries and the sun.

Thou hast fixed all the bounds of the earth; thou hast made summer and winter."<sup>21</sup>

Thus we see that just as the Great Mother is overturned in the Akkadian creation myth, in this Psalm, Yahweh brings order out of chaos after crushing the heads of the Snake-Goddess, Leviathan.

Though the Hebrew patriarchal tradition valued the "seed" as the bearer and transmitter of life, the curse of the snake in Genesis is to have enmity between the snake and the woman, Eve, and her seed, not man and his seed. We find here another latent reference to Eve as the Great Mother since there the patriarchal thought would make the "seed" that of Adam and not Eve.

If we examine the three curses pronounced upon the snake, the woman and the man, the snake is cursed "because (it) has done this." The "this" apparently being the deception referred to by Eve in the preceding sentence. The Catholic version of the Bible has the woman say; "The serpent deceived me and I ate," while in the Revised Standard Version she says that the serpent "beguiled" her. The word "beguile" would seem more fitting here since, as mentioned previously, the actual fact of deception is hard to determine. The beguilement involved was the invitation to "knowing what the gods know," to be as wise as Yahweh. It would seem that the punishment meted out to the serpent as well as to Adam and Eve is indeed sinning against an arbitrary commandment of Yahweh; "arbitrary" because the fruit of a tree in the natural order would be for eating, not for *not* eating. The snake is cursed among all the beasts of the field and must crawl on his belly, that is, it apparently loses its legs in an aetiological event, and will be enemies with the woman. There is the assumption that there is now a kind of special inimical relationship between the snake and the woman which negates a previous one, one in which, perhaps, the woman and snake were symbiotic. This is reinforced by the curse that the woman shall long for the man and the man shall rule over her, a proclamation of patriarchy by Yahweh which may indeed be an aetiological statement of the reason for the *status quo* of Hebrew society as opposed to matriarchal ones. It seems to indicate a previous condition of equality between Adam and Eve, or perhaps even supremacy of Eve which would contradict Eve's secondary creation. More likely, seeing surrounding matriarchal societies, the story affirms the "proper" state of society as determined by Yahweh.

In the corollary of this curse, Yahweh curses Adam because he "listened to (his) wife," and ate the fruit of the tree. Obeying his wife indeed seems to be the only thing that Adam is blamed for and, in a bit of mythological overkill, he is condemned to a life of hard labor and eventual death for it.

The hostility of the originally nomad Hebrews towards agricultural peoples such as the Canaanites meant that in militarily overcoming them, their myths which reflect their cul-

tural background and customs would also reflect the perceived inferiority of those societies, just as the patriarchal Achean myths overcame and transformed the pre-Greek myths as the Achaeans themselves infested the Greek lands. But in the same way, the transformed myths do retain elements of their previous matriarchal "Great-Mother" character. The Bible can be expected to contain elements of these pre-existing myths, and it does indeed. It is replete with hidden references to the Great Mother and her symbols. The prophet Hosea, writing sometime in the 8th century B.C., "came into contact with the Canaanites's fertility cult and its central drama of the annual marriage of the god Baal to his sister Anat, consummated in order to unleash the forces of nature. Hosea...boldly adapted this rich nuptial imagery of the rites of Baal to describe the relations of Yahweh and his faithless bride, Israel who plays Anat to Jahweh's Baal. For Ezekiel, the Babylonian captivity is the revenge of an infuriated spouse, Yahweh, on his chosen people's adultery with other gods, the idols of Egypt and Assyria and Chaldaea."<sup>22</sup>

The soil, the dust, out of which Adam and Eve were taken, was, of course, the goddess Earth, deprived of her anthropomorphic features, yet retaining in her elemental aspect her function of turning the substance into which the new spouse, Yahweh, had breathed the breath of her children's life. And they were to return to her, not to the father, in death. Out of her they had been taken, and unto her they would return. Like the Titans of the older faith, Adam and Eve were thus the children of the mother-goddess Earth.<sup>23</sup>

Adam calls the woman "Eve, because she was the mother of all the living." As mother of all the living, Eve herself, then, must be recognized as the missing anthropomorphic aspect of the mother-goddess. And Adam, therefore, must have been her son as well as spouse; for the legend of the rib is clearly a patriarchal inversion (giving precedence to the male) of the earlier myth of the hero born from the goddess Earth who returns to her to be reborn.

The snake's appearance in the Garden is hardly its last in the Bible. Yahweh himself is an aspect of the serpent power, the partner to the serpent goddess, Mother Earth, on the caduceus, reappearing as the magical serpent rod by which Moses was to frighten Pharaoh. "Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will be changed into a snake." This same rod was the instrument by which the Nile turned to blood, that called frogs up on to the land, that brought water from the rock in the desert. When the people murmured against Yahweh in the desert, he sent fiery serpents among them, and they bit the people and many died. Then Yahweh had Mose make a bronze serpent and set it up on a pole (again the caduceus), and everyone who looked at it lived.

This caduceus formed by the rod with one or two snakes winding around it has to this day the meaning of giving health or even new life, being the symbol of the American Medical Association, among others. The word derives from the Greek *kerikon*, meaning herald. Originally the rod was an olive branch with snakes twined about signifying that the bearer was sacred and not to be harmed. The *kerikon* also symbolized the vitality of the earth, plant growth and, of course both death and resurrection. It also often symbolized the Tree of Life, not only for the Hebrews, but other even earlier cultures which have left relics with this symbol on them. Heinrich Zimmer has traced the caduceus back to Mesopotamia, detecting it in the design of the sacrificial cup of king Gudea of Lagash (2600 B.C.).<sup>24</sup> For Christians it has been used to symbolize the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil with the snake representing the source of sin and death, thus obversely prefiguring the cross of

Christ. Mythologically speaking, were it not for the Biblical connotations held by most Christians, the caduceus would not only symbolize the cross, but Christ on the cross, since the snake is presumed to renew its life when it sloughs its skin, a perfect prefigurement of Christ's death and resurrection.

In the second century B.C., amulets, usually found in graves, depict Yahweh in the manner of Egyptian, Grecian or other gods, and "Anguipede," the Snake-footed God.<sup>25</sup> One is reminded very strongly of Erichonius, serpent-footed stepson of Athena who was born of Mother Earth and a bit of semen of the god Hephaestas who had been trying to rape Athena. He was said to have become the king of Athens and introduced patriarchy and monogamy, projects very much in line with the later Achaean-Dorian-Greek as well as Hebrew tradition.

There is no doubt that the Hebrews were much more aware of the traditions of the Great Mother, the Earth Mother, the Snake Goddess, etc. than their theological descendents, Western man, for whom it is difficult to find a female element present in a god. In fact, the prevalence of the spirit and devotion to the Great Mother was surely one of the major causes of the strict exclusive nature of their religion. Their prohibitions against putting "other gods" before Yahweh were certainly chauvinistic in that they were political. "Other gods" meant the specific gods of the cultures around them. The name Yahweh was to distinguish "him" from the others and the commandment not to take the lord's name in vain was meant for the Hebrews to keep it to themselves, since to know the name of a god was to have a special relationship to him. But they were undoubtedly chauvinistic in the modern use of the term as well, that is "male-oriented," since the religions that surrounded them were much more female-oriented, most admitting the existence of an Earth Mother or a Great Mother, although they often had strong male gods as well. Yahweh, himself, was apparently worshipped together with a female goddess in a Hebrew settlement in the southern area of Egypt by Jewish settlers who had asked and gained permission from the ruling Assyrians to build a temple in which to worship Yahweh, against the Hebrew law which said that Yahweh could only be worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Great Mother is present in several aspects within the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Her presence there can be traced to the mythologies which preceded the Hebrews in the Middle East from Sumer to Egypt, and perhaps even from pre-Greek mythology in the Greek peninsula and Crete. We have not treated the most outstanding Egyptian Great Mother, Isis who could have had a large influence on that portion of the Hebrews who spent time in that land. Still, sufficient material has been presented to draw five conclusions.

- 1) We see the Great Mother as the Earth Mother giving birth from her own substance to Adam, to which Yahweh supplies the seed of life, his own breath. When Yahweh says to Adam that he must till the ground from whence he was taken and to it he shall return, the Earth Mother has lost her anthropomorphic state, but nevertheless, Adam was not "From Yahweh" though he had breathed life into the man. In the typical pattern of the Earth Mother, giving birth to man but, in the end gathering him back to herself.

2) The symbol of the Great Mother, the snake, the most subtle of all the animals, shows antagonism towards Yahweh and his works for reasons not directly explained but understandable if the symbolism does indeed include the Great Mother. Throughout the ancient world a symbol of wisdom, the companion to the Goddess of Wisdom, Athena and the giver of oracles at Delphi, the snake is also the symbol of life and resurrection. The selection of the snake as the perpetrator of the temptation to Adam and Eve to sin seems hardly coincidental; previous background imagery concerning the snake is patently involved. The snake must have had a specific image already in the minds of those who produced the original story, and, with little doubt, the image can be attributed to that prevalent among the cultures surrounding the Hebrews as a mysteriously wise and wily animal. On the Tree of Wisdom the "most" subtle of all the creatures, the snake gives an "oracle" to the "Woman" and offers the "fruit" of the tree to her in imitation of the role of the Earth Mother as fertility goddess. The snake is also the companion of Eve in tempting Adam to eat this fruit as the Snake Goddess.

3) Eve also symbolizes the Earth Mother, giving the fruit of the tree to her husband-son, Adam-man. She is "mother of all the living" which perforce includes Adam, and is thus the Great Mother, Adam's mother as well as his wife. She is condemned by Yahweh to be subject to the man, which would only make sense if it had been otherwise previously. Adam is punished because he "listened to the voice of (his) wife."

4) Yahweh is found in the role of spouse to the Earth Mother as he cooperates in the creation of Adam, breathing life into the figure made from her substance, a pattern present in ancient agricultural societies where the male role is to supply the seed to the Earth Mother of fertility.

5) The Great Mother is subverted and overthrown in several ways: her role of motherhood removed in taking a rib from Adam to create Eve; her authority removed by the same; her wisdom and her central position in the eternal repetition of life, death and rebirth are taken from her as enmity between her and the snake and her seed and its seed is established. And thus matriarchy is condemned and patriarchy divinely established with Yahweh's curse.

The evidence points to Genesis, and indeed many other parts of the Old Testament, being written against a background inhabited by, and in a spirit of hostility toward the Great Mother and, more important for the modern world, the female in general, a spirit sufficiently vehement to last down even to the present day.

The Eastern and Western worlds have both made woman an inferior being and relegated her to minor roles in society. The method by which this situation came about in other cultures is not the subject of this paper, but in the Western cultures including America, Europe and the Middle East, and all of the other areas of Judean, Christian and Islamic influence which have the sources of their cosmological views in the Hebrew Bible, the role of woman has been *divinely* relegated from her creation to that of serving man. This was the belief of the Hebrews as well as other non-agricultural cultures around the Mediterranean. It was the Hebrews, however, who eventually had the greatest influence on the cultures that came to be dominant in the West. Today's Judeo-Christian-Islamic culture can trace its roots to Hebrew mythology epitomized in Genesis which chronicles the decisive defeat of the Great Mother, the Earth Mother, Snake Goddess, and Eve, all of whom only managed a somewhat beleaguered extension of life in the West in the cult of the Virgin Mary.

## Footnotes

1. Genesis, Chapter 2, Verse 5; New Catholic Edition of the Holy Bible; Moshy Brothers; New York, 1954.
2. In most present-day editions of the Bible the "name" of god is simply rendered as "God." The Hebrews, however, used a specific name in the Bible for their god to distinguish him from the gods of other tribes. As it is explained in a preface to one of the editions of the Revised Standard Version, the "Tetragammaton" of the divine name, YHWH, has been pronounced variously, but "...while it is almost...certain that the Name was originally pronounced 'Yahweh,' this pronunciation was not indicated when the Masorettes added vowel signs to the consonantal Hebrew text. To the four consonants YHWH of the Name, which had come to be regarded as too sacred to be pronounced, they attached vowel signs indicating that in its place should be read the Hebrew word *Adonai* meaning "Lord" (or *Elohim* meaning "God"). The ancient Greek transtators substituted the word *Kyrios* (Lord) for the Name. ...The form "Jehovah" is of late medieval origin...(but)...does not accurately represent any form of the Name ever used in Hebrew; and the use of any proper name for the one and only God, as though there were other gods from whom He had to be distinguished, was discontinued in Judaism before the Christian era..." The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version; Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd.: London, 1957; p. iv-v.  
 In spite of the protestation that to give a name to God would deny his singularity, this was exactly the reason why the Hebrews of the first and second millenneums B.C. had such a name. In fact, the meaning behind the commandment of "not taking the name of the Lord God in vain" was that people who knew the "name" had a special relationship to god and had to keep it secret lest others learn of it and find the way to use the powers of that god which would be reserved for a particular trip, in this case the Hebrews. We have chosen here to use the name "Yahweh" in this paper even where the texts now say "God" to emphasize the awareness of the Hebrews of the gods and goddesses surrounding them, also to help the reader feel the full mythological content of the story.
3. Genesis Chpt. 2 Vrs. 17, Rev. Std. Ver. p. 2.
4. Genesis Chpt. 3 Vrs. 3, Rev. Std. Ver. p. 2.
5. Genesis Chpt. 3 Vrs. 22, Rev. Std. Ver. p. 3.
6. I Corinthians Chpt. 11 Vrs. 15; Cath. ed. p. 223. This epistle also makes very explicit the early Church's insistence on patriarchy being the divine will. In the same chapter, verse 8 and following, Paul writes, "For man was not from woman, but woman from man, For man was not created for woman, but woman for man. This is why the woman ought to have a sign of authority over her head,..."
7. Campbell; p. 44.
8. Warner, Marina; Alone of All Her Sex; Pan Books Ltd.; London, 1990; p. 58.
9. Neumann, Erich; The Great Mother; Princeton University Press; Princeton, 1974.
10. Campbell, Joseph; Occidental Mythology, The Masks of God; Penguin Books, 1976; p. 29.
11. Campbell; p. 10.
12. Campbell; p. 10.
13. To have a doctrine of the Church based on a mistranslation is embarrassing enough, but added to that is the problem that most Catholics do not even understand the term, believing it to mean that Mary conceived Jesus without having intercourse, a confusion with the Virgin Birth. The title "Immaculate Conception" states that Mary was not affected by original sin, meaning that she was free of the effects of the curse of Yahweh on Adam and Eve, pain in child birth and death among them. If this is accepted then the Virgin Birth and the Assumption are easily accepted doctrines. The iconography of

the Immaculate Conception usually includes, beside the snake at the foot of Mary, a new moon and stars about her head in reference to chapter 12 of Revelations, and the moon is most certainly an inheritance from the ancient Moon Goddess.

14. Genesis, Chapt. 38 Vrs. 8ff; Cath. Ver. p. 58.
15. Graves, Robert; *The White Goddess*; Noonday Press; New York, 1991.
16. Graves; p. 257.
17. Hooke, S.H.; *Middle Eastern Mythology*; Penguin Books; London, 1963; p. 82.
18. Genesis, Chpt. 1 Vrs. 2; Rev. Std. Ver.
19. Hooke; p. 106.
20. Campbell; p. 85.
21. Psalm 74, Vrs. 13-17; Rev. Std. Ver.; p. 456.
22. Warner; p. 123.
23. Campbell; p. 29.
24. Munoz, P.; "Origins of the Caduceus," *Maryland State Medical Journal*, October 1981, pp. 35-40.
25. Campbell; p. 275.
26. Fox, Robin Lane; *The Unauthorized Version*; Penguin Books; London; 1991.;

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