

Siegmar Döpp, *Eva und die Schlange. Die Sundenfallschilderung des Epikers Avitus im Rahmen der bibelexegetischen Tradition*. Kartoffeldruck-Verlag: Speyer, 2009.

Reviewed by Shoshana Borocin-Knol, Manchester, UK

Siegmar Döpp's book on "Eve and the Snake" describes how the story of the Original Sin is depicted in literature and art throughout history. His emphasis is on an epic of the Late Latin poet Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus, who lived in the late fifth/early sixth century in Vienne, a city currently in Auvergne, France. Döpp's interest in Avitus' epic is threefold: he will analyse the epic from its Biblical origin (Gen. 3:1-6), exegetical explanations and poetical interpretations. Avitus used many exegetical sources and it is not possible to follow every single source, especially in light of the fact that it is not clear how well the Christian authors of Late Antiquity were familiar with the Jewish tradition of exegesis. A more general overview of exegetical sources has been given and several important examples are highlighted.

Avitus' work stood in a long tradition of biblical epics, which have been known since Hellenistic times. There was a big boom of biblical epics in Late Antiquity and this continued throughout the Dark Ages into modern times. The first biblical epics in Hellenistic times were written by Jews (third/second century before the Common Era); predominantly the works of the Elderly Philo and Theodotus are known. Only in the fourth century of the Common Era did Greek poets start writing biblical epics again. This only continued though till the first half of the seventh century. The first Latin biblical epics were written between the fourth and sixth century. Some important names are Iuvencus, Paulinus of Nola, Victorius, Sedulius and Arator. Biblical epics in Latin continued being written throughout the Dark Ages (for instance, Hildebert of Lavardin, Laurentius of Durham and Matthaëus of Vendôme) well into the Renaissance (for instance, Hieronymus Fracastorius, Ulrich Bollinger, Johannes Mellius (Joan Melo) de Sousa and Alexander Ross). From the late ninth century onwards one can also find biblical epics in the vernacular which are

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often based on Latin examples. Important works in this category are John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1663) and *Paradise regained* (1671). The last biblical epics have been written in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (for instance, Friedrich Rückert, Max Waldau, Friedrich Wilhelm Helle and Jens Baggessen).

Biblical epics from Late Antiquity vary intensively in language and theological content, but they also share a few common grounds. The first common ground is the fact that they all have a didactic intention: the poets want to enlarge or strengthen the biblical knowledge of their Christian recipients, to explain the meaning of the biblical stories and to strengthen the reader's faith. Another common ground is a love for hymnal tone to praise the works of God. The praise of God is used to highlight man's sinfulness and moral wickedness. A last common ground is the preferred use of poetry above prose: poetry is believed to have a higher influence on its reader than prose has due to its repetitive form. A problem which the Christian biblical epic writers encountered was how they can use the Latin hexameter for their poetry when this is known to have been used for pagan epics? Basing themselves on Ex. 3:21, they believed that they could transform the hexameter form as used in pagan poetry into something good: the myths and polytheistic elements of pagan literature would be left aside. It is therefore quite common that the biblical epic writers of Late Antiquity base their epics on the works of Homer, Vergil and other well known epic writers from Antiquity.

The poets from Late Antiquity did not only use the pagan literature as a source for their biblical epics, they also used, as can be expected, Scripture itself. The texts used were either the *Vetus Latina*, the Latin translation of the Bible which was commonly used in Italy, or the *Vulgata*. How can the biblical epic writers use the Bible as a source for their epic writing when it is the Bible they are writing about? The fact that the Hebrew Bible was regarded as divinely inspired and the New Testament as canonically accepted gave them little room for inventing their stories. Due to the authority of the Bible the biblical epic writers were obliged to hand down the content of the biblical text as correctly as possible. One can however find biblical exegesis in biblical epics. The biblical epic writer would partly rely on biblical

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exegesis for this and would partly perform biblical exegesis himself. Biblical exegesis of Late Antiquity can be found in homilies and in works by the church fathers, but also in works of prose compounded between the second century before and the second century of the common era by Jewish authors and their interpretation by Christian authors. Important works for this are the in Qumran found *Genesis-Apokryphon* and the *Liber Iubilaeorum*; the *Apocalypsis Mosis* (written in Greek) and the *Vita Adae et Euae* (written in Latin, Georgian and Armenian).

Avitus' work on the Original Sin bases itself on Gen. 3:1-6. In this short passage it is told how the snake, a creature made by God, convinced Eve to eat from the tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. Eve saw that the fruit was good to eat, ate and then gave one to Adam as well who was with her. Before explaining how Avitus dealt with this passage, Döpp first gives examples of other interpretations of this passage in the Bible, in exegesis of the time of Antiquity and in modern day exegesis. The Bible passage brought up several questions, such as was Adam present at the time of the conversation between Eve and the snake? The fact that the text says "who was with her" can be interpreted as that Adam was present and overheard the conversation. There are however scholars who believe that either Adam was in a different part of the garden, or that he was asleep next to Eve. Either way, he did not hear the conversation between Eve and the snake. Another question to be answered is why the snake spoke? What was his motivation to entice Eve and subsequently Adam to eat from the forbidden tree? As time progressed, the snake was more and more viewed as being the devil; either the devil had transformed himself into a snake or he used the snake as his mouthpiece. In Christianity the devil has become viewed as a fallen angel who wants to be equal to God. He became jealous of Adam and Eve who lived a tranquil life in the Garden of Eden and wanted to bring them down just as he had fallen down. He therefore seduced Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. The question on who is to blame for the Original Sin has more and more been answered with Eve, because women are regarded to be persuaded easier to do evil than men are. In Christian exegesis the sin of one woman (Eve) is counter parted by the holiness of another woman (Mary), and the sin of one man (Adam) who brought death to the

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whole of mankind is restored by one man (Jesus) through whom they believe eternal life will come. In the Bible, however, all three characters are punished for their part in the Original Sin. The final question that exegetes felt needed to be answered is what kind of fruit Adam and Eve ate? In Jewish tradition several options are named: date, *etrog*, fig, wine grape or wheat. In Christian sources, of which Avitus was one of the first to mention this, the fruit became an apple. This is, as Döpp explains, due to the almost similar Latin word for “evil” (*malum* with a short *a*) and “apple” (*malum* with a long *a*).

In the ninth chapter, Döpp finally writes about Avitus’ epic on Gen. 3:1-6 which can be found in *De spiritalis historiae gestis* 2:1-260. In his epic Avitus uses an all-knowing narrator, who informs the reader not only about the present but also about the future. For his language and style Avitus based himself extensively on Vergil, Ovid, Lucan and Statius. Avitus does not only use important phrases from them but also scenic elements. The first part of the epic (Hist. 2:1-139) is dedicated to setting out the scene in which Gen 3:1-6 took place. A formal description of the Garden of Eden and of the players is given in this part. Adam and Eve are living an angel-like life in the Garden; nothing lacks them and they do not have any needs, either physical or sexual. The snake is regarded as being the devil who, in his turn, is seen as the enemy of humankind. Avitus denotes the devil as a fallen angel who, out of his own free will, denounces his obedience to God; an act which is based on arrogance.

The second part of Avitus’ epic (Hist. 2:140-260) describes the story as it took place according to Avitus. He writes that the devil was sure that he could more easily influence Eve than Adam and thus waited for her to be alone in the garden and then went up a tree so as to be on the same height as Eve. He then engaged Eve into a conversation with his seductive voice, asking her why she refrains herself from eating from the forbidden tree? Who is so cruel that he has forbidden her to eat the fruit? The snake is highly blasphemous, saying that the whole world shakes in awe for mankind instead for God. The narrator then comments on the stupidity of Eve who engaged herself with an animal like the snake, a wild animal who dares using human language and to whom she responds. Eve, however, seems very impressed by the language and

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knowledge of the snake and tells him that God has told them that they are forbidden to eat from the tree because it would bring about their immediate death. She however does not know what death means. The snake answers her that she is afraid of something that will not happen. He explains to her that by eating from the tree she will not die a quick death but instead will become like God and this is what God wants to prevent. That eating from the tree will end in death at a later stadium, he does not mention. Eve hesitates, wanting to eat the fruit yet also not wanting to transgress God's commandment. In the end the snake plucks a fruit and sprays it with a sensuous odor, he then hands it to Eve and she finally eats it. Then Adam returns to the scene, walking happily back to his wife, and she walks up to him holding a fruit. Eve tells him that she has eaten from the tree and wants him to eat as well. She calls his bluff in doing something that as a man he might not have done, but now that she, as a woman, has done, can surely not resist doing as well. Her words hit home and he eats eagerly.

God's judgement on what has taken place can be found in Hist. 3:74-194. God admonishes all three players. Adam tries to put all the blame on Eve but is called shameful for it. All three bear their own guilt. In the Bible Eve was given a voice when she blamed the snake for her transgression; in Avitus' epic she is denied this voice and it is said about her that she blamed the snake.

Avitus' epic is a broad explanation of the short passage in Genesis, which has found a big reception in Christian literature. It is, for instance, one of the sources which John Milton used for his work *Paradise Lost*.

Döpp's book on "Eve and the snake" gives an interesting insight into the historical development of the exegesis of the Gen 3:1-6 passage, and of its translation into biblical epics. The book is easy to read but requires background knowledge of Bible, exegesis, theology and Latin (although most parts are translated). The subtitle states that Avitus' epic of the Original Sin is explained in the light of the biblical exegetical tradition and it takes eight chapters before Döpp actually gets to Avitus' work. In the ninth chapter, however, he gives nearly the full text of Avitus' epic and thoroughly explains it in the light of all that he has written before.

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