

**Some Supplementary Thoughts—Twenty Years On—RE:  
“The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent”**

• According to the NRSV, Gen 1:26 speaks of human dominion “over all the wild animals of the earth.” But the “wild animals” part of the phrase is not in the Hebrew of the Masoretic text. This apparent *lacuna* (filled in by the Syriac text and followed by the NRSV, NJB, NLT, REB, RSV but not by ASV, KJV, NET, NIV, JPS, ESV), if intentional, may put the wild animals in a special category. Support for the idea that the “wild animals” are deliberately omitted from human “dominion” may be found by looking at the repetition of (and within) other lists in Gen 1 before and after the dominion theme is introduced.

Gen 1:24	Let the earth bring forth:		cattle creeping things (on ground) <b>wild animals<sup>1</sup></b>
Gen 1:25	God made:		<b>wild animals</b> cattle creeping things (on ground)
Gen 1:26	human dominion over:	fish birds	cattle
	[Hebrew MT <i>contra</i> NRSV]	<u>all the earth</u>	creeping things (on earth)
Gen 1:28	call to fill/subdue:  and rule over:	  fish birds	  <u>the earth</u>
Gen 1:30	food provided for:	birds	creeping things (on earth)  <b>wild animals<sup>2</sup></b>  creatures that creep (on earth)
		“everything that has the breath of life”	

• This implies that the human relationship/covenant with the wild animals calls for a special form of wisdom (cf. God playing with Leviathan in Ps 104:26, NJB, JPS?) that belongs in a different category from our relationship with domestic animals (understood to include cattle).

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<sup>1</sup> With respect to “wildness” (of animals and of creation itself), we should note that the “garden of Eden” is actually a “garden *in* Eden” (Gen 2:8), this garden being a cultivated space within a wider, wilder primordial space (as assumed here in Gen 1).

<sup>2</sup> This is the same phrase used in vv. 24, 25 though NRSV here has “beasts of the earth.” The wild/domestic animal contrast, using the main word from this phrase—as found here and in vv. 24 and 25—for the former together with the same word—as found in vv. 24, 25, and 26—for the latter (though this is no longer translated “cattle” in NRSV), continues in 7:14, 21; 8:1.

- This also adds intrigue to the initial description—prior to the Fall—of the serpent as the wisest of the wild animals as it is clearly wild, yet (presumably, cf. Gen 3:14) creeps along the ground/earth. The narrative is deliberately provoking/evoking our wise interpretation here: “Wisdom calls for/th wisdom.”
- The same goes for the first biblical reference to “Sin,” which occurs in Gen 4:7, some time after the place in the narrative where the Fall is usually located. This may suggest that a different term—I suggest un-wisdom—may be more apt for the initial stages of a Fall the different layers of which are narrated in Gen 3–4. God’s words in Gen 4:6–7, in which the theme and question of wildness and dominion is present once more, are wisdom-evocative and wisdom-provocative not only for Cain, but also for the reader/hearer (that’s us): “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? <sup>6</sup>If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, *sin is lurking at the door*; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” Not only do the Hebrew terms in the final phrase echo the (fallen, good, or ambiguous?) “desire” and (fallen!) “mastery” of Gen 3:16 (which is descriptive of, not prescriptive for, the gender relations of a fallen world), but the “lurking at the door” (NIV, NET, NJB, NLT<sup>2</sup>, REB: “crouching at” the door; JPS: “Sin crouches at the door”) is, according to many commentaries, an image of a wild animal. (NET notes *ad loc.*: “Sin is portrayed with animal imagery here as a beast crouching and ready to pounce (a figure of speech known as zoomorphism).”)
- The thoroughly sapiential character of the narrative is easy to miss. But when we are sensitive to it, a number of anomalies may be resolved. For example: the search for a “helper” and “partner” for *ha adam*, the earth creature, or first man (2:18, 20) cannot be understood, first and foremost, in terms of reproduction (or even companionship) as the role of the animals in 2:19–20 as potential candidates would be strange indeed. Furthermore, in the final form of Gen 1–2, the male-female distinction *per se* is already part of the background to whatever revelation and innovation the “This at last . . .” of 2:23 represents. One way the animals could fit as helping Adam in the face of the “not good” of 2:18, which immediately follows the second reference to the “Tree of the knowledge of good and evil [or good and bad]” in 2:17, involves their *wisdom* (cf. the “exceedingly wise” animals of Prov 30:24–28 and the assumption that animals are wise in Job 28:1–28, even though they do not know the way to wisdom).
- The interpretation of the serpent of Gen 3:1 as genuinely “wise,” and as “more wise” and not “more crafty” (NRSV and NIV) than the other wild animals (all of whom are seen as wise in varying degrees) coheres with the role of the serpent in Prov 30:19 as representing wisdom on earth, pictured as the rock (see Exod 20:11; cf my “For the Love of Wisdom: Scripture, Philosophy, and the Relativisation of Order”) between the skies above and the waters below. The wildness of the serpent, which indicates a creature that humans do not have dominion over (it cannot be “domesticated” [see above]), calls for a certain kind of wisdom from Adam and Eve (and, *mutatis mutandis*, from us).
- The claim (in “The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent: A Canonical Approach to the Tree of Knowledge”) that the serpent only becomes deceptive when its words are pulled into the vortex of human covenant breaking and un-wisdom seems to be undermined by Paul’s (unqualified) reference to the serpent as “cunning” in 2 Cor 11:3. However Paul’s term, *panourgia*, is used for a positive kind of wisdom in Prov 1:4 LXX (cf. NRSV’s “shrewdness” for the MT) and Prov 8:5 LXX (where NRSV uses “prudence” for the MT).
- This “vortex” understanding of the serpent’s “deception” (Gen 3:13–14) finds an interesting parallel in Paul’s discussion of the Law in Rom 7:5–13:

<sup>5</sup>While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. <sup>6</sup>But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

<sup>7</sup>What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” <sup>8</sup>But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. <sup>9</sup>I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived <sup>10</sup>and I died, and *the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.* <sup>11</sup>*For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.* <sup>12</sup>So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

<sup>13</sup>Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

- One thing I would rephrase now if I were to work on a revised version of the essay are the references to dis/obedience throughout. Numerous references to covenantal obedience in our translations are best understood as God’s call to truly hear and heed the Word of Life. Exod 19:5a is instructive. Although the NRSV reads: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant . . .,” the REB is (arguably) far more sensitive to the Hebrew when it translates the key phrase as: “Now if only you will now listen [*’im-šāmôa’ tišme’û*] to me [*beqôlî*; literally, ‘to my voice’]. . . .” The Hebrew (as cited) is actually even more emphatic as it places two different forms of to ‘hear’ (using the verb that gives its name to The Shema of Deut 6:4) back-to-back and barely one letter away from YHWH’s very personal reference to “my voice.” To “keep” covenant here is less about obeying what God is commanding/demanding than really hearing-and-thus-heeding what God is actually, truly saying. This points to the *sapiential* (“Wisdom calls for/th wisdom”) character of the biblical witness.

- A central thesis of “The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent” may find confirmation in the relation between 6:5–7 and 6:11–13:

<sup>6:5-7</sup>“[YHWH] saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And [YHWH] was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him in his heart. So [YHWH] said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry I have made them.”

[6:8–10]

<sup>6:11-13</sup>“Now the earth was corrupt in [*’elohim*’s] sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And [*’elohim*] saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And [*’elohim*] said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth”?

Is this just a case of repetition—due perhaps to two versions of what is (at this point) essentially the same narrative being combined? Ironically, the NIV, whose translators resist such source analysis/conjecture, might be taken as support for this approach given its use of “people” for “flesh” in 6:12–13! But if there is a shift from “human kind” to “all flesh” (NRSV), then what is human violence in origin (an anthropocentric reading of the fall) is now being acted out throughout creation. A priest-mediator understanding of the *imago Dei/imago mundi* in Gen 1:26 fits well with this reading. The apparent *non-sequitur* of the “people together with . . .” of 6:7 following the human-only focus of 6:5–6, receives elaboration and indirect explanation in 6:11–13. The switch in divine names to *’elohim*, whatever the pre-history of the text that source criticism can or cannot reconstruct, deliberately brings to mind the creation-wide vision of Gen 1:1–2:4. Gen 6:5–7 and 11–13, taken together, suggest that evil is anthropocentric in origin but cosmic in its impact!