

## The Fall of Eve: The Ancient Near Eastern Background to Eden

Interpretations are nested in historical, linguistic, and cultural horizons of meaning.

A story's original composition is, of course, as well.

What clues to understanding Eden in context might be found in ancient Near Eastern myths?

### Ancient Near Eastern Creation Stories

From goddesses who procreate to gods who create – T. Frymer-Kensky's *In the Wake of the Goddesses* Reflections in mythology of social, political, and economic changes in Mesopotamian civilizations.

The Hebrew Bible is the only witness to an ancient religion that does not sanction the veneration of goddess figures in its mythology, poetry, prophecy, liturgy or descriptions of ritual. We have two stories of creation of the world, but neither involve either creation or procreation by a female deity.

Unlike Mesopotamia, we don't possess a variety of creation stories from ancient Israel over a vast time period that attest to changes in heavenly gender roles. We do have a variety of archaeological remains that tell us that before they were monolatrous, the Israelites worshiped many gods, as their neighbors did. The Hebrew Bible itself testifies to the fact that even until the exile, many Israelites continued to worship a variety of gods and goddesses like Baal and Asherah, who we know from Canaanite mythology.

### Myth & Symbol

The conjunction of goddesses with earth, trees, and snakes throughout the ancient world symbolizes fertility and bounty.

How does this help us understand the Eden story? Was there a goddess in the garden?

### Noteworthy elements in Gen 2-3 in ancient context

- *'adam* from *'adamah*
- The serpent's knowledge; why he approaches Eve; why his punishment includes explicit estrangement from humankind
- The etymology of *hawwah* – Eve (Greek *zoe*)
- The tree of life

### Eve – a goddess demoted?

In Mesopotamia, gods take over the procreative roles of goddesses in the creation stories, but goddesses remain prominent in cultic worship and ritual. They continue to be understood as responsible for childbirth, and are invoked as nurturing and sustaining humankind. In the official Israelite religion of the Hebrew Bible, however, the goddesses completely disappear.

### The moral of the story:

The single, masculine God YHWH (“he causes to be”?) is responsible not only for creation of the universe and humanity, but also for sustaining it and nurturing it. As the Eden story shows us, He, not any goddess, is responsible for fertility – of the soil, of the animals, and of humans.