

## ARMENIAN STUDIES HEBREW UNIVERSITY, JERUSALEM

MICHAEL E. STONE looks up a print of an illustration from a medieval Armenian Bible. The picture shows Adam standing on a flat rock signing a document being held out to him by a not-very-demonic-looking Satan. Mr. Stone, nearing retirement age and a well-known figure in the minuscule field of Armenian studies, still has the air of a bashful young graduate student who finds it hard to believe that anyone else could possibly be interested in the obscure discipline he has chosen as his life's pursuit. He seems to be deliberately holding in his enthusiasm.

"The document" he tells a small class of overseas students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is the cheirograph. I'm obsessed by the cheirograph."

It seems unlikely he'll get over his obsession with the cheirograph—Greek for "a hand-writing," and used to designate Adam's contract with Satan in this legend—any time soon. Australian by birth, and Jewish, his passion for Adam and Eve was fired by the Armenians themselves, who have for centuries told, retold, and elaborated apocryphal stories about the protoplasts—that is, the "first beings." Mr. Stone has cataloged more than 50 works in Armenian that contain Adam and Eve tales, beginning in the fifth century, not long after Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion, and into modern times. The cheirograph story is just one of them.

"The cheirograph was the outcome of an encounter between Satan and the protoplasts, after their expulsion from the garden. Eden, the legend says, had been lull of a divine light. When the first night came in the created world, Adam and Eve were terrified.

*"Now, when it became dark and evening arrived, likewise it seemed to them that darkness had come and there would not be light again.... Therefore they wept and lamented till morning," relates one version of The Cycle of Four Works, an Armenian collection of noncanonical Adam and Eve stories.*

"Adam and Eve stories are paradigmatic." Mr. Stone explains. "The way they are told in Judaism and Christianity, and especially the way people retell these stories, tells us how they see the problems of the world. For example, Christians see Adam and Eve's fall as having brought sin into the world, whereas in Jewish readings, the fall brings death into the world."

Mr. Stone is working on a book that will trace Armenian Adam and Eve legends from the fifth to 15th centuries, a companion to the book he published last year, *Adam's Contract With Satan*.

Understanding these texts as they were understood by the medieval Armenians means being immersed in the same legends they knew, and knowing the context in which those legends were created, Stone explains to his class. It's clear over the course of even one class that he knows both the legends and the context better, perhaps, than anyone on earth.

An Italian student presents a seminar paper comparing the Hebrew, Latin Vulgate, and Greek Septuagint texts of Ezekiel 28 and its account of Satan's fall. A reference to Satan sets Mr. Stone off on a string of associations. Satan and the serpent of the Garden of Eden become identified as the same creature in the third or fourth century, he reflects. But for Armenians, the snake resonated with a pre-Christian belief in a primeval dragon. He suddenly recalls another Armenian text in which a serpent figures.

"I must check that out," he remarks, half to himself, half to the class.

*"Now at daybreak Satan came in the form of an angel and he said to Adam, 'Why are you sad?'"*

*'But we do not know that we have done any evil such that God became angry at us and darkness seized us,' Adam replies to Satan."*

As an undergraduate at the Hebrew University, Mr. Stone studied Jewish texts of the Second Temple period—including the Dead Sea Scrolls. He was channeled into



specializing in Armenian when he went to Harvard for his Ph.D., he relates, because a number of Second Temple works survive in medieval Armenian versions.

Most of the Adam and Eve legends he's unearthed in the Armenian tradition are not part of that culture's formal literature and religion, he emphasizes. These stories were not included in Bibles or prayer books, nor were they studied by Armenian theologians. But they were present in the minds of the Armenian laity, a scrim through which they saw the official story as recorded in the book of Genesis.

IN THE GARDEN OF HIS HOME on a Jerusalem hill overlooking the village of Ein Kerem—said to be the birthplace of John the Baptist—Mr. Stone and his wife, Nira, an art historian, show me images they have collected for a book to be called *Secrets of the Family: Unknown Stories of Adam and Eve*. The Armenian art included in the collection stands out in that it almost invariably contains folk iconography that is not part of the biblical story being illustrated. Eve is a guest in the manger in Bethlehem, and when Christ is baptized by John, he's always standing on a flat stone.

*The Cycle of Four Works continues: "Satan said, 'What will you give me if I give you the good news of light?' Adam said, 'If we could see the light again, we would become your servants, we and our offspring.' Then Satan showed him the east and said, 'you will see the light there.'"*

Unlike Western European art, Armenian art does not depict Satan as a monster or demon with animal limbs, Nira Stone points out. While the Byzantines were painting saints and sinners alike with impassive countenances directed outward at the viewer of the picture, the Armenians were painting very normal-looking Satans, she says.

Mr. Stone sums up the Armenians' interest in the human side of their mythological characters this way: the Armenians, he says, want to know what Adam and Eve had for breakfast.

*"Adam and Eve looked to the east and saw that the sign of the sun's light had appeared. They rejoiced completely . . . Then Satan brought a stone and set it before Adam, and he said, 'put your hand upon this stone and say thus, "Until the unbegotten is born and the immortal dies, all my offspring will be yours." . . . This was Adam's promissory note in Satan's hand. Now Satan brought the promissory note and buried it in the river Jordan. Again when the evening came and the sun set in the west, Adam knew that he had been deceived."*

"The negation of the contract is in the baptism of Christ in the Jordan," Mr. Stone explains. That's the flat stone on which Jesus stands in all the pictures of his baptism. Jesus, the unbegotten who has been born and the immortal who will die, undoes the contract that gives Satan mastery over man. Jesus's mission as implied by the cheirograph story is entirely different from his role in official Armenian Christian theology. "According to the Bible story, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command and were punished. But from within the inner circle of this story—and the Armenians lived within this inner circle—Adam and Eve were deceived innocently by Satan. That implies entirely different attitudes on sin and redemption," he suggests.

In class, one of his students asks the obvious question: Why are the Armenians so taken with Adam and Eve? With scholarly caution, Mr. Stone concedes that he really doesn't know, but he does hazard a guess.

"Adam is a type of Christ, Eve a prototype of the Virgin. What they messed up, Jesus and the Virgin set right."

Mr. Stone then looks with a quizzical expression at a reporter who has gone over manuscripts and images with him and sat in on two class sessions. Clearly, he's wondering why a journalist would find this ancient story so interesting.

Then he settles back in his chair.

"It is a lot of fun, isn't it?"

HAIM WATZMAN