IX. The Serpent in the *Acts of Thomas*

TAMÁS ADAMIK

1. The third act of the *Ath* speaks of a serpent. The Lord commanded Thomas to go out on a road. So he went out, and near the second milestone he saw lying there 'the body of a comely youth.' After having seen the body he began to pray in such a way: 'O Lord, judge of living and dead ... come in this hour in which I call upon thee, and show thy glory toward this man who lies (here)' (30). After that he turned to those who followed him and said: ‘... the enemy has been at work, ...he has made use of no other form and wrought through no other creature than that which is his subject' (30).

When he had said this a great serpent came out of a hole and said to the apostle loudly that he slew the young man because he had seen him making love to a beautiful woman. He, too, fell in love with her, and so he killed the young man. The apostle asked him: 'Tell me of what seed and what race thou art?' (31.) The serpent introduced itself to the apostle in detail. I cite its whole speech because its words are meaningful and special:

'I am a reptile of reptile nature, the baleful son of a baleful father; I am son of him who hurt and smote the four standing brothers; I am son of him who sits upon the throne <and has power over the creation (Syriac)> which is under heaven, who takes his own from those who borrow; I am son of him who girds the sphere about; and I am a kinsman of him who is outside the ocean, whose tail is set in his own mouth; I am he who entered through the fence into Paradise and said to Eve all the things my father charged me to say to her; I am he who kindled and inflamed Cain to slay his own brother; and because of me thorns and thistles sprang up on the earth; I am he who hurled the angels down from above, and bound them in lusts for women, that earth-born children might come from them and I fulfil my will in them; I am he who hardened Pharaoh's heart, that he might slay the children of Israel and enslave them in a yoke of
cruelty; I am he who led the multitude astray in the wilderness, when they made the calf; I am he who inflamed Herod and kindled Caiaphas to the false accusation of the lie before Pilate; for this was fitting for me; I am he who kindled Judas and bribed him to betray Christ to death; I am he who inhabits and possesses the abyss of Tartarus, but the Son of God did me wrong against my will, and chose out his own from me; I am a kinsman of him who is to come from the east, to whom also is given power to do what he will on the earth' (32).

When the serpent had said this, the apostle answered angrily: 'Cease now, most shameless one, and be thou put to shame and entirely done to death! For thine end, destruction, is come. And do not dare to say what thou hast wrought through those who have become subject to thee. I command thee in the name of that Jesus who contends with you until now for the men who are his own, that thou suck out thy poison which thou didst put into this man, and draw out and take it from him' (33).

But the serpent said: 'Not yet is the time of our end come, as thou hast said. Why dost thou compel me to take what I have put into this man and die before the time? For indeed if my father draw forth and suck out what he cast into the creation, then is his end!' (33)

But the apostle said to him: 'Show now the nature of thy father!' (33) And the serpent set his mouth against the young man's wound and sucked the gall out of it. The young man revived, sprang up and fell at the apostle's feet. But the serpent burst and died, and his poison and gall poured out. In the place where his poison poured out there came a great chasm. The apostle said to the king: 'Send workmen and fill up that place, and lay foundations and build houses on top, that it may become a dwelling place for the strangers' (33).

2. This passage caught my attention because it is a perfect drama. R. Merkelbach emphasizes that in primitive times the killing of dragons was performed as a cult drama'. There are four protagonists: Thomas (the twin brother of Christ), the serpent (the son of Evil), the handsome young man and the beautiful woman. And there is also a chorus: the followers of Thomas, among them the king and his brother.

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1 Cp. R. Merkelbach, 'Drache'. in RAC IV (Stuttgart. 1959) 229: 'In ältester Zeit war der D.kampf ein zentraler Kultmythos vieler heidnischer
According to Aristotle: '... tragedy is the representation of a complete i.e. whole action which has some magnitude (for there can be a whole with no magnitude)' (7, 2). That is, the unity of plot, place and time is important in a tragedy, and plots are either simple or complex... By "complex", I mean an action as a result of which the transformation is accompanied by a recognition, a reversal or both' (10, 2). 'A reversal is a change of the actions to their opposite, as we said, and that, as we are arguing, in accordance with probability or necessity' (11, 1). 'A recognition, as the word itself indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, and so to either friendship or enmity, among people defined in relation to good fortune or misfortune' (11, 2).

In a drama there is always a motive that is the source of the conflict which assures the cohesion of the plot. In this passage this motive is beauty. According to Plato (Phaedrus 250), beauty attracts everything to itself, that is, it is the source and cause of temptation. Not far from the road lay the corpse of a comely youth. The woman, too, was beautiful and both the young man and the serpent fell in love with her. The handsome young man and the beautiful woman were attracted to each other and made love to each other. The serpent fell in love with her at first sight. The serpent, as the son of Evil, is envious and jealous, and kills the young man out of jealousy. The real protagonists of the drama are Thomas and the serpent. The serpent is the Evil, who kills; Thomas is the Good, who revives. The structure of this drama is as follows:

a. Thomas finds the corpse, then begins to pray to God, and asks him: 'show thy glory toward this man who lies here'. After this he states that 'this thing has not happened to no purpose', 'the enemy has been at work', and he used 'no other creature than that which is his subject' (30). By these words the apostle points to the fact that he knows who the murderer was – the serpent.

b. In order to prove that the apostle knows and says the truth, God sends the serpent who confesses that he killed the young man, and explains why. It is not without interest that the serpent was afraid

Religionen u. ist vielfach regelmassig im Kult repräsentiert worden, bei Kosmogonie u. Stadtgründung. Neujahrsfest, Thronbesteigung u. Kriegerinitiation'.

For the text and translation of the Poetics I use R. Janko, Poetics I (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1987).
of Thomas: 'Now it would be easy for me to disclose them before thee, but I dare not do it (Syriac). For I know that thou art the twin brother of Christ, and dost ever abolish our nature.'

c. Then the apostle orders him to say of what race he is. The serpent answered that he is the son of Evil and enumerated the works of Evil.

d. After having heard the works of Evil, the apostle grew angry, and said to the serpent that he would be done to death entirely. Then he bade him to suck out the poison from the young man. But the serpent protested, and said that Thomas could not compel his father, Evil, to draw forth and suck out 'what he cast into the creation'.

e. But Thomas said to him: 'Show now the nature of thy father!' Thereupon the serpent sucked the gall out of the wound of the dead young man who revived, but the serpent, having swelled, burst and died. In the place where his poison poured out a great chasm came into being (33).

Thus the story of the serpent consists of five acts, like a real drama. In its plot there is a Reversal: the killed young man revives, the killer serpent dies. But there is a Recognition, as well: the followers of Thomas recognize that God is more powerful than Evil. Evil's work is death, but life belongs to God.

3. The speech of the serpent, in which it introduces itself and enumerates its deeds, is remarkable in itself because it is a complex treatise on the serpent. Some ingredients of it are well known from the Old and New Testaments. These stories belong to the second part of the speech. For example, when the serpent says that it 'entered through the fence into Paradise and said to Eve all the things' it refers to Genesis 3.1: 'Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, Ye, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden' (King James translation). But in the Bible, Paradise has not yet a fence. The motif of the fence of Paradise is to be found first in the apocryphal *Life of Adam and Eve (Apocalypse of Moses)*: 'And immediately he suspended himself from the walls of Paradise about the time when the angels of God went up to worship' (17). When the

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serpent says, that it is the one who 'inflamed Cain to slay his own brother' (32), it hints at Genesis 4.5. By stressing that 'thorns and thistles sprang up on the earth', he again points to the consequences of Eve's sin (Genesis 3.18). The words 'He hurled the angels down from above, and bound them in lusts for women', hint at Genesis 6.1-4. 'He hardened Pharaoh's heart', alludes to Exodus 1. 'He led the multitude astray, when they made the golden calf', refers to Exodus 32. 'He enflamed Herod and kindled Caiaphas to the false accusation', alludes to Matthew 27 and Luke 23.6-16. 'He bribed Judas to betray Christ to death', points to Matthew 26.14-6. The words 'he possesses the abyss of Tartarus', allude to Revelations 9.11 (32). Now in the Bible it is not said that the Satan accomplished all these deeds, but this enumeration is well known in rabbinic tradition.

The first part of the speech of the serpent has some statements that are not easy to explain. The first sentence of the serpent 'I am a reptile of reptile nature, the baleful son of a baleful father' perhaps hints at Genesis 3.14: 'And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life'. That is, according to Genesis the serpent became a reptile because he misled the first woman, and so he caused the fall of mankind. According to an age-old tradition: 'Il (sc. the serpent) n'est qu'une ligne, mais une ligne vivante; une abstraction, mais, selon le mot d'André Virel, une abstraction incarnée. On ne voit de la ligne que sa partie proche, présente, manifeste.... Rapide comme l'éclair, le serpent visible jaillit toujours d'une bouche d'ombre, faille ou crevasse, pour cracher la mort ou la vie, avant de retourner à l'invisible'. The serpent is baleful because God cursed him in such a way: 'And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise her heel' (Genesis 3.15).

Even more difficult to explain is the following sentence: 'I am son of him who hurt and smote the four standing brothers' (32). Who are these four standing brothers? According to H.J.W. Drijvers there are two possibilities: 'The four standing brothers are the four archangels who stand before God's throne (cf. Job 1.6; Lk 1.19; Jn.

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8. 44; 2 Enoch 29, 4-5 [...]). They could also be identified with the four elements (sroicheia) (2 Enoch 15, 16.7 [...]). Then we must assume in addition to early Jewish and Christian angelology the influence of Bardaisan's cosmology (Drijvers, Bardaisan of Edessa, 1966, 96ff.), according to which darkness through chance destroys the harmony of the other elements, as a result of which the origin of the world comes about. Angelology and Bardaisan's cosmology lead to the idea of the four standing brothers, who are injured by the fifth.5

In order to demonstrate the possibility of the first interpretation Drijvers gives the following passages: Job 1.6; Luke 1.19; John 8.44: 2 Enoch 29.4-5. In Job at the given place we can find the sons of God and Satan. In Luke there is the angel Gabriel, 'who stands in the presence of God'. In John there is a sentence of Jesus: 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do'. In Enoch we read: 'And from the rock I cut off a great fire, and from the fire I created the ranks of the bodiless armies – ten myriad angels – and their weapons are fiery and their clothes are burning flames. And I gave orders that each should stand in his own rank. [Here Satanail was hurled from the height, together with his angels.] But one from the order of the archangels deviated, together with the division that was under his authority. He thought up the impossible idea, that he might place his throne higher than the clouds that are above the earth, and that he might become equal to my power. And I hurled him out from the height, together with his angels. And he was flying around in the air, ceaselessly, above the Bottomless'.6

Now the following motifs occur in these texts: sons of God, the angel Gabriel who stands, the father the devil, the fallen angels, and their leader, but we do not find the number 'four' and 'the four archangels' together. Therefore I would add to these places two other passages of Revelation: a) in which the number four is to be found: 'and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six

6 I quote the English translation of Enoch from Charlesworth, Old Testament Pseudepigrapha I, 148.
wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not
day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which
was, and is, and is to come' (4.6-8). b) 'And after these things I saw
four angels standing on the four comers of the earth, holding the four
winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on
the sea, nor on any tree' (7.1). Even more precisely we can find the
four archangels by name in the Life of Adam and Eve (Apocalypse of
Moses): 'And God said to Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael,
"Cover Adam's body with the cloths and bring oil from the oil of fra-
grance and pour it on him"' (40). These places of Revelation and the
Life of Adam and Eve contributed to Christian tradition according to
which there developed the idea of the four archangels: Michael,
leader of God's armies and conqueror of Satan; Gabriel, who brought
the news of Christ's incarnation to Mary; Raphael, 'God's healer',
mentioned in Tobit, and Uriel who is over the world and Tartarus.

The second interpretation, that the four standing brothers are the
four elements, is also possible, since Thomas, before his martyrdom,
says: 'For behold, how four have laid hold of me, since from the four
elements I came into being! And one leads me, since I belong to one,
to whom I depart <...> But now I learn that my Lord, since he was
of one, to whom I depart and who is ever invisibly with me, was
smitten by one; but I, since I am of four, I am smitten by four' (165).

Here Thomas refers to John 19.34: 'But one of the soldiers with a
spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water',
and to his own death, which will be caused by the four soldiers in
such a way: 'And when he had prayed, he said to the soldiers:
"Come and fulfil <the command> of him who sent you!" And at
once the four smote him and slew him' (168).

The symbolism 'is a fundamental artistic process, which may be
formalized ... or more often arises spontaneously, or is created
within an individual context, at once conveying to the reader its
explicit meaning and affecting him by the range and force of its sug-
gestions'" Therefore a symbolical description has not only this one
explicit meaning but a lot of other meanings, too. So the image of the
'four standing brothers', hurt and smitten by the serpent, can allude

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8 1 Enoch 19-20, in Charlesworth, Old Testament Pseudepigrapha 1, 23.
9 The Penguin Encyclopedia, 577.
to the four rivers of Paradise, as well: ‘And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison.... And the name of the second river is Gihon.... And the name of the third river is Hiddekel.... And the fourth river is Euphrates’ (Genesis 2.10-4). These rivers occur in Ecclesiasticus as the symbols of divine wisdom (24.23-7). The four rivers of Paradise are well known in apocryphal Christian literature, such as, for example, in the Apocalypse of Paul (23). The four rivers of Paradise are represented in the iconography by four men, so they can be named 'four brothers', as well. That is, the serpent's statement can mean, too, that the serpent fights against the wisdom of God.

The statement of the serpent: 'I am a kinsman of him who is outside the ocean' expresses an ancient conception: the serpent symbolizes the outside ocean that surrounds the earth. The continuation of the sentence: 'whose tail is set in his own mouth' describes the serpent as the symbol of the infinite. According to R. Merkelbach: 'Er symbolisiert das Unendliche, sich ewig Emeuemde, das Jahr (Mart. Cap. 1, 70), den nach vom und hinten blickenden Ianus, der selber ein Bild der sich immer verjüngenden Welt ist (Macr. Sat. 1, 9, 9, 12), die Sonne (Pistis Soph. 136) und vor allem den ausseren Ozean, der sich rund um die Erde schlingt, den grossen Drachen der ausseren Finstemis.... Hier beruht sich die Vorstellung des kreisförmigen Drachen mit der vom Drachen als dem Vertreter des Wassers, des amorphen, chaotischen, lebensfeindlichen Elements".  

Thus, from the speech of the serpent we can conclude that an unknown author took over motifs not only from the Bible but also from rabbinic sources. It is remarkable that the same deeds of the serpent are enumerated in the prayer of Ciliacus according to R. Merkelbach and A. J. Festugièrê 12.

4. R. Merkelbach writes about the battle against the serpent as follows: ‘Über die ganze Welt verbreitet ist der Mythos vom

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11 Merkelbach, *Drache* 227f.
Drachenkampf. Der Drache verkörpert die Mächte des Chaos und des Bosen, welche das Leben der Menschheit zu vernichten drohen. Ein Gott oder gottlicher Held besiegt den Drachen und stellt die Ordnung der Welt wieder her. According to C. H. Gordon, in Sumerian literature Gilgamesh and Enkidu already fight against the evil dragon Humbaba. The dragon is well known from the Old Testament, as well: the crooked serpent is Leviathan (Job 3.8, 40.25); he is actually named as such in Ugaritic texts, too. We know the parallel myth of the Greeks: Python killed by Apollo and the seven-headed Hydra slain by Heracles. Lucian (AD 120-180) tells a story about serpents in his work Philopseudes. A man was stung by a serpent, but a Chaldean cured him by incantation. After that he went out to the fields and by magic formulas and acts he collected all the serpents, and he blew on them, and they were burnt (11-12). Merkelbach mentions that in the myth of the serpent the virgins play a big part: they are either rubbed by serpents or sacrificed to him. In Christian literature the struggle against the serpent is described for the first time in Revelation and is connected to the woman clothed with the sun: 'And there was a war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels. And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him' (12, 7-9). In the AJ, in the love story of Drusiana and Callimachus, a serpent kills Fortunatus (63-86). It was easy for the unknown author to combine these two descriptions with the story of God’s sons who married the daughters of men (Genesis 6.2) and with Hellenistic wonder tales on serpents. Utilizing these stories he constructed his own story of the serpent who fell in love with the beautiful woman, in order to illustrate his encratic ideas. According to Merkelbach, in the AAA the serpent is

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13 Merkelbach, Drache, 229.
15 Merkelbach, Drache, 229.
16 H. Bietenhard, Die himmlische Welt im Urchristentum und Spätjudentum (Tubingen, 1951) 214.
17 Merkelbach, Drache, 247.
the symbol of sexual desire. On the basis of the above I think that his function is more complex.\footnote{Ph. Vielhauer, \textit{Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur} (Berlin and New York, 1978) 712: 'Der Drache in der dritten Praxis stellt sich selbst in einer langen Rede als Sohn Satans und Repräsentanten der bosen kosmischen Macht vor; seine Vernichtung und die Rettung des Jünglings werden so zum Bild der Erlösung.'}

5. From the AAA the image of the serpent passed into Christian hagiography. Jerome, who knew well both Christian and pagan literature, describes the deeds of a big serpent in his \textit{Life of Hilarion}. When Hilarion wanted to hide himself in Dalmatia, he failed because a big dragon (\textit{draco mirae magnitudinis}) appeared in the countryside and began to devastate the animals and the people. He was so big that he swallowed the cattle and the herdsmen. Hilarion prayed to Christ and had the people build a big pyre, then he ordered the dragon to climb on the pyre, and so he \textit{burnt} the beast: \textit{tum itaque cuncta spectante plebe immanem hestiani concremavi}.

R. Reitzenstein thinks that Jerome imitated only Lucian, but in my opinion Jerome emulated both Lucian and the \textit{Acts of Thomas}.

\footnote{Hieronymus, \textit{Vita S. Hilarionis eremita}, 28 Bastiaensen and Smit (PL 23, 50).}