Abstract

This paper examines the role of visual literacy in the construction of biblical narrative, by asking how visual images in the ancient Near East might have been understood by biblical writers and how these understandings (or misunderstandings) may have influenced the development of the biblical text. In particular, the issue of visual illiteracy is examined in light of Mesopotamian seals with images similar to the Garden of Eden story found in Genesis 2-3, and how these visual images might have resulted in the confusion of one or two trees in the center of the Garden.

Keywords: ancient Near East, iconography, visual literacy, Adam and Eve Seal

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Introduction

Pastors and teachers of scripture will undoubtedly encounter the abundance of similarities between Israel and her neighbors, whether from a simple observation that Yahweh brings rain like Baal (Psalm 29), or through many years studying the texts and archaeological discoveries that demonstrate over and over again that Israel is culturally at home with her neighbors. In one of his more recent books, The Bible Among the Myths, Dr. John Oswalt (2009:92) says that when we encounter similarities, we should not therefore conclude, “Hebrew religion is just a variant of the general west Semitic religion of its day.” Oswalt (2009:13-14) challenges evolutionary explanations of Israel’s religious worldview vis-à-vis her neighbors, arguing that while similarities between Israel’s religion and her ancient Near Eastern counterparts abound, many of those similarities are “accidental” (a feature “not essential to that object’s being”), while the underlying differences often not observed on the surface are in fact the “essentials” (if removed the thing will “cease to be itself”). What appears to be superficially the “same” betrays contrasting worldviews about the divine-human relationship when analyzed at a conceptual level.1 Oswalt’s argument principally resides in the comparison of the Hebrew scriptures with non-Israelite texts from the same periods.

Another entry into this discussion is through iconography, the study of ancient Near Eastern visual materials. Like comparative studies of written texts, iconographic research engages visual material produced in multiple ancient Near Eastern contexts and brings such study to bear on both Israelite and non-Israelite written materials.2 When the nexus of biblical text and ancient Near Eastern image is in view, questions relevant to Oswalt’s scholarship emerge: did the producers of Israelite texts share the worldview that produced similar non-Israelite images? When a biblical text employs visual subjects such as water, trees, and divine figures, are those similarities “accidental” or “essential” to the meaning of the biblical text? Or, to put it in the terms explored in this paper, are biblical texts “literate” or “illiterate” in regards to the meaning of non-Israelite iconography?

As it relates to visual and textual borrowing by Israelite authors from their non-Israelite neighbors, a valuable starting point for scholarship is a humble one; one cannot reliably understand the conceptual world of ancient cultures without significant research, an endeavor worth the rigors of an entire career. However, this humility often accompanies a further assumption: that by nature of their chronological and geographic proximity, ancient Near Eastern cultures understood each other. Therefore, when a borrowing is observed, the natural trajectory is to
treat the ancient borrowing as a valid reflection of the conceptual world of the source culture. This is a common starting point for studies on iconographic motifs present in the Hebrew Bible and vice versa. Such studies have made a tremendous contribution to our understanding of biblical texts in their ancient Near Eastern contexts, and clearly there is merit in such a starting point for iconographic study. The question I wish to explore with this essay is whether there is evidence in the Hebrew Bible that, at least occasionally, authors of texts were “iconographically illiterate”? Or, to pose the question in another way, is it possible to detect evidence that a biblical author has reflected a foreign visual motif in such a way that betrays little or no knowledge of its indigenous conceptual context? I will enter this discussion with a frequently cited example of modern iconographic illiteracy – the so-called Adam and Eve seal and its intersections with the biblical text of Genesis 2-3. Further discussion will consider first whether a case can be made from the text of Genesis that a foreign iconographic motif has informed its author. And second, can Genesis 2-3 be described as “literate” of the iconography’s conceptual and/or mythic context? Towards an answer to this question, this essay will consider the text itself, the issue of proximity as it relates to visual and cultural exchange, applicable contributions from the social scientific field of visual literacy, and other biblical scholars who have offered similar arguments from textual evidence.

The Adam and Eve Seal as an Example of Iconographic Illiteracy

The so-called Adam and Eve Seal (see Figure One) as it is titled by the British Museum likely got its nickname from its apparent “illustration” of Genesis 2-3, but also from one of its earliest interpreters, George Smith (1876:90-91), who after viewing the seal concluded that “it is evident that a form of the story of the Fall, similar to that of Genesis, was known in early times in Babylonia.” The Museum describes the scene as follows: “a female figure with her hair in a bun holds out her left hand and sits facing a god (identified by his horned head-dress) who holds out his right hand. Both wear plain robes and sit on either side of a date palm; behind them is a undulating serpent rising vertically.” Readers familiar with the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 - 3 will immediately perceive all the elements of the narrative on this seal – the central tree with fruit hanging from its branches, two anthropomorphic figures reaching for the fruit, and a snake. It comes as no surprise that early scholars from biblically literate cultures read the Adam and Eve narrative into this image. However, as is immediately apparent to contemporary scholars, this scene in its Mesopotamian context has little or no relationship to the
Israelite scene in Genesis. The British Museum dates the image to either the third dynasty of Ur or the Akkadian period, approximately 2200 to 2100 BCE. The motif of a central tree with flanking figures is well attested during this time, is found over a broad geographic area, and the motif continues into the first millennium BCE. Dominique Collon (1987:36), a widely known authority on cylinder seals, loosely relates this seal to the development of the banquet scene that includes two flanking figures with food or drink in the center. Interpreting the motif in light of scholarship on both iconography and ancient Near Eastern literature, Othmar Keel (1998:38) concludes that the scene of a central tree with flanking figures in its many manifestations is related to goddess and fertility cults. Interpreting the visual elements of a central tree, human figures, a serpent, mountains, and a figure suggestive of a cherubim found on a Syrian cylinder seal from the 18th-17th century BCE (see Figure Two), Keel suggests a possible Mesopotamian narrative counterpart to Genesis’ use of the same visual features:

“There the tree of life is simultaneously the tree of the world, supporting the constellations. A female deity, related to Ishtar by the eight-pointed star, holds her hand protectively over the tree. The chaos serpent, who was apparently about to attack the tree, is killed by Baal-Hadad, who strides over the mountains brandishing a mace. It is uncertain whether the griffin...is supposed to be the guardian of the tree of life...” (Keel 1997:51)
There are echoes of Keel’s hypothesized description among other scholars, relating the snake and tree to the goddess Asherah and the Asherah pole, for example. Yet despite the similar constellation of images, the narrative of Genesis 2-3 still reads differently than scholars’ attempts to explain non-Israelite uses of the same subjects. The most confident of associations between Genesis 3 and the goddess Asherah, for example, still must wrestle with the lack of textual referents in Genesis and the multiple hypotheses about what deities are actually present in Genesis’ symbolism. It is common for such studies to note the literary sophistication of Genesis, using “universal symbols to tell a story that can be related across time and translated into the idiom of various cultures,” therefore offering a literary explanation for why the author of Genesis 3 refrains from explicit references to Asherah, for example (Brown 2013:281). While that may be true, that a sophisticated author is undermining the Asherah cult in a very subtle yet powerful way, the present essay takes seriously a parallel or even alternative possibility – that the text betrays an author and/or original audience assumed to be familiar with the visual symbolism and some of its foreign use, but “illiterate” of its foreign indigenous meaning. Many biblical texts betray at least this much, that foreign cults existed in Israel, but the extent to which they were understood as indigenous to Israel’s religious development is debated.

The first discussion at hand is the question of exposure: does Genesis 2-3 betray knowledge of the iconographic constellation of a central tree, flanking figures, and snake? Two textual clues suggest the answer is yes. The first and most obvious clue has already been implied: the spatial arrangement of the Garden narrative is the same as on the Adam and Eve Seal. There is at least one tree “in the middle”
of the garden (Gen 2:9) and in the event that Eve eats the fruit, she gives some to her husband who was with her and he ate (Gen 3:6), indicating there are two figures next to the tree. Since the transgression happens immediately after Eve’s discussion with the serpent, it is reasonable to deduce that the serpent is also near the central tree. The second textual clue comes from scholarship’s conversation regarding one of the more awkward textual elements of the Garden of Eden narrative, is there one or two trees? Interpreters of Genesis 2-3 have long been puzzled by the location and roles of the tree of knowledge and tree of life in Genesis 2-3. The tree of life enters the story in Genesis 2:9 as the first of two trees given names, “Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (NRSV). Without the greater context of Genesis 2-3, the most natural reading would be to assume that there are two trees and the tree of life is in the middle, with no explicit indication given about the location of the tree of knowledge. However, the conversation between the serpent and Eve indicates that the tree of knowledge is also in the middle of the garden (Gen 3:1-5). Considering the whole of Genesis 2-3, one must initially conclude that there are two trees in the middle of the garden, but this has not been unanimously accepted by interpreters of the text. Often cited is Eve’s reference to the tree of knowledge as “the tree that is in the middle” (Gen 3:3), and the disappearance of any mention of the tree of life from 2:9-3:22. There is the sense that the sudden reappearance of the tree of life in 3:22, the only tree explicitly planted “in the middle,” is confusing against the priority the tree of knowledge receives elsewhere in the narrative. These observations accentuate the awkward phrasing in 2:9 that makes the tree of knowledge look like an afterthought! Consequently, a number of commentators reading from a source critical perspective concluded that the tree of life has its roots in an older, independent narrative that was later incorporated with the present narrative that is about the tree of knowledge. Accordingly, they conclude, mentions of the tree of life in Genesis 3:22 and 24 are expansions not terribly relevant for the narrative as a whole, which is centered on the tree of knowledge. LaCocque, rejecting source critical readings, has proposed one dual-natured tree at the center of the garden. In keeping with what he calls the “dialectical setting” of Genesis 2-3, he suggests that

“J introduces here again a taut dialectic in his narrative. Departing from the mythical material at his disposal, he splits the tree into a tree of life and a tree of the knowledge of good and evil...just as the Israelites were given through the law the choice between life and death, blessings and curses, Adam and
Eve are presented with one tree with the potential for both life and death.” (LaCocque 2006:47,69)

Regarding this question of one or two trees, the source critic’s solution is to hypothesize two textual source traditions, while non-source critics speculate literary intentions for keeping the ambiguous description of the trees. Neither are satisfactory solutions to the presumed “problem” of one or two trees in the middle of the garden, but they do accentuate the observation being made here: that the Hebrew text as we have it is not clear about the number of trees.11 I am suggesting that the evidence overlooked is visual. What if the narrative of Genesis 2-3 is a textual complement to what was already commonly known to the author or redactor and his audience through a visual medium? Returning to the motif on the Adam and Eve Seal, the central tree flanked by two figures is very prevalent in the catalogues of ancient Near Eastern seals known to us. The additional features of hanging fruit and a serpent are not commonly depicted together with the tree and figures in my own browsing of seal catalogues, but are common enough on cylinder seals in combination with one or more relevant subjects to hypothesize that those involved in producing the final text of Genesis 2-3 would have been exposed to a constellation of multiple subjects corresponding to the narrative. The central tree motif has been observed across a broad time period – from the Early Bronze through the Iron Age – and across all relevant geographic areas. Did the author literally have the Adam and Eve Seal available to him? Of course that is too speculative to defend, but exposure to the motif seems likely, especially when we consider the longevity of seals in both their original and stamped forms, their use in contexts that presume movement and cross-cultural contact, and even the number available to scholars thousands of years later (Gibson and Biggs 1977)!

A Biblical Interpretation of the Iconographic Image

The iconographic approach to the garden narrative that I have offered here is conscious of the images potentially informing the author of Genesis 2-3. These images are not secondary to the available “mythical material” (I assume textual), from which the author diverges, as LaCocque suggested in his interpretation of Genesis 2-3. The best explanation for the textual “problem” of one or two trees in the garden may simply be the modern tendency to subordinate visual data. If one prioritizes visual data over textual, it is observed that the central tree motifs depicted on ancient cylinder seals have only one tree,
and if visual data is among the primary material used by the author of Genesis 2-3, it is not surprising, therefore, that the text emphasizes one tree. One could reasonably conclude that the biblical text is consciously associating a uniquely Israelite narrative with a visual medium that was familiar to him and his audience. This begs the question – then why two trees at all? Continuing with a method that prioritizes visual data, perhaps this is not a combination of multiple textual traditions about trees, but multiple visual traditions about trees. The single central tree is not the only scene known outside Israel. Although not as prevalent, some foreign scenes depict two trees in the center (Stager 2000:41). But significantly, iconographic studies of Jerusalem temple imagery suggest that Israel would have been familiar with the distinction of two trees among a garden of trees in sacred space. The two pillars in the temple vestibule were decorated with lilies, pomegranates, and other artistry implying trees (1 Kings 7:13-22). In addition to two tree-like columns towards the center of a temple complex, Psalm 92 describes transplanted trees in the surrounding sacred space, suggesting Eden’s “trees of the garden.” Pillars surrounded by temple or palace gardens are known at multiple ancient Near Eastern sacred sites.

It has already been suggested that the Israelite conception of a central tree flanked by two figures as explained by the Adam and Eve story is unique versus its Mesopotamian visual parallel. One significant detour from Mesopotamian iconography is Genesis’ depiction of human nature. Mesopotamian examples, including the Adam and Eve Seal, depict divine or royal figures at the center; some examples depict the god(dess) or king taking the place of the tree. This reflects a common theme in Near Eastern religious thought, that the king personifies the qualities of the tree, “the king himself represented the realization of [world] order in man, in other words, a true image of God, the Perfect Man” (Parpola 1993:168). Genesis 2-3 is similar in that it places the deity “among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8), but strikingly different in its description of humanity. Unlike Mesopotamian depictions of the universe that place a deity or king next to the tree, the story of all humanity in Genesis 2-3 unfolds next to the central tree(s). This would suggest that an Israelite anthropology grants a kind of “god-like” or “king-like” status to the whole of humanity, which is explicitly stated in Genesis 1.

The Eden narrative shows evidence of being exposed to a visual motif like the Adam and Eve Seal, yet significantly oblivious to the motif’s native conceptual context. One might ask – how oblivious is the Fall narrative to the native conceptual context of the central tree motif? Because the story of the Fall differs noticeably from the cultic or mythic interpretations offered for the Mesopotamian tree with flanking figures, it seems difficult to postulate that the Adam and Eve narrative has much if any of the indigenous Mesopotamian myth, symbol, or cult in mind. Or, if it is understood (i.e. “iconographically literate”), the narrative must fall into the category of polemic, a text that is intentionally challenging a foreign worldview by providing an entirely alternative explanation for a visual constellation of
figures. I find the former plausible – that the Eden narrative is in conversation with only the surface level visual elements of related cylinder seals, but significantly unaware of the details of its indigenous conceptual and mythic context. In Oswalt’s terms, the visual similarities are “accidental,” while the underlying differences are “essential.” The Adam and Eve narrative may be iconographically illiterate, and despite its geographical and chronological proximity to Mesopotamian iconography, perhaps no more literate than its modern interpreter George Smith.

Understanding Visual Literacy

Because there is a plethora of studies that demonstrate significant cross cultural exposure of ancient Near Eastern texts and even iconography, it is reasonable to resist the suggestion being made here, that a text with geographic and chronological proximity to the culture that produced the central tree motif may be “illiterate” of its significance. Much like the conversations around iconographic method and biblical studies, there are many ways thinkers have approached the question of how visual data is produced and interpreted. Maria Avgerinou (2011:6-7), researching in the social scientific field of visual literacy, has incorporated the contributions of many scholars to arrive at a basic definition: Visual literacy is 1) “the learned ability to interpret visual messages accurately and to create such messages,” and 2) “a group of largely acquired abilities, i.e., the abilities to understand (that is, read), and use (that is, write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images.” Avgerinou continues by summarizing some of the foundational assertions that theorists in this field have in common. First, visual language ability develops prior to verbal ability. Second, visual language is learned. The meaning of a visual medium may be apparent on a basic level, but visual language is a complex code that must be learned for true comprehension. This predicts the third point, that visual literacy is culture specific. Fourth, research has shown that memory for pictures is superior to memory for words. This is called the “pictorial superiority effect.” And lastly, texts and pictures are different languages that complement each other when they are used at the same time. This is called the “Dual coding memory model” - information presented in pictures is encoded twice, once as a picture, and once as a verbal label that names the picture. This creates a redundancy in the memory from which information can be retrieved either from the visual form or from the verbal memory (Augerinou 2011:7-13).

Can these observations of the human mind and human culture formation be applied to an ancient context? First, since the roots of biblical literature are either oral (textually illiterate), or produced in an ancient context that has a high illiterate population, one should expect visual communication to be very prevalent, if indeed visual language and visual memory are precursors to text production and textual memory. This resonates with
current studies of biblical texts in light of iconographic evidence that emphasize that visual data is too often overlooked when reading biblical texts. I might add that not only is it too often overlooked, we likely underestimate how substantially primary visual data is for reconstructing ancient literary composition.

Second, visual literacy is a learned skill and culture specific. Images will acquire unique meanings in each culture that produces them. To be considered visually literate requires much more than a common use of the same subjects, or even a basic capacity to name subjects and their use in a scene. This suggests that neighboring cultures that demonstrate iconographic exchange at the surface can be dissimilar at a deeper conceptual level. Two contemporary observations would suggest that cultural proximity can be a misleading indicator of visual literacy. Consider first the Native American dream catcher that is often found hanging on non-native front porches, bedroom windows, and rearview mirrors. The dream catcher’s most indigenous meaning is thought to have originated with the Ojibwe Nation, yet both non-native Americans and native non-Ojibwe nations use the symbol for reasons only superficially related to its indigenous mythic and ritual meaning (Oberholzer 1995:147). A second example is the debate around the usefulness of “cultural literacy” exercises offered in American public schools. In the area encompassing just one school district, students can be significantly uninformed about traditions they have been living alongside of for two hundred years or more. But returning to iconographic exchange between ancient cultures – this issue of geographic or chronological proximity as a predictor of cultural proximity has been discussed by Isaak de Hulster in his piece “Illuminating Images.” Geographic and chronological proximity are often the primary considerations of iconographic borrowing. He advocates that iconographic studies should expand and consider cultural proximity, since two societies with geographic proximity may be significantly different in their culture and therefore the meaning they attach to images (de Hulster 2009:150-151).

On a related point, it seems important to distinguish proximity within the literature trade and exchanges between the discrete trades of literature and image production. One should consider the possibility that a text may be literate in the traditional literary sense because of shared scribal cultures, and at the same time visually illiterate if the scribe is not familiar with the production of cylinder seals, or the cultic culture that produces their motifs. Or to look at it from another perspective; whereas a Palestinian cylinder seal artist may be more literate with Mesopotamian motifs, a literary artist from the same geographic area interacting with visual material (like our author of Genesis 2-3 perhaps?) may not interpret it the same way or with the same underlying assumptions about its meaning. These points suggest that we should not be surprised if we encounter iconographically illiterate biblical texts. I have suggested the garden narrative of Genesis 2-3 as a possible candidate.
Conclusion

A related argument about Israelite religion was made in 1951 by Yehezkel Kaufmann, and proves relevant to the iconographic question at hand. He begins by noting that in the scholarly conversation regarding Israel's tolerance of foreign gods and foreign mythology, all perspectives agree, “throughout the Biblical period heathen mythology exercised a profound influence on Israelite culture” (Kaufmann 1951:179). This is argued primarily by comparing biblical data with non-Israelite religion as it is known from non-Israelite sources, paralleling one common method used in iconographic treatments of biblical texts. Kaufmann argues that “they have failed, however, to ask the primary question: what acquaintance do the Biblical writers themselves show with the nature of real non-Israelite religion, that is with mythological religion”? (Kaufmann 1951:179). I think this is similar to the question this essay seeks to answer– what level of visual literacy do the biblical writers themselves demonstrate regarding non-Israelite visual motifs, whether that be Egyptian, Syrian, or Mesopotamian? Is it possible that our contemporary access to the indigenous conceptual context of non-Israelite iconography may actually surpass that of the biblical writers? Kaufmann proceeds to make an argument that this may indeed be the case – that in his examination of biblical texts regarding idolatry, “the Bible shows absolutely no apprehension of the real character of mythological religion” (Kaufmann 1951:180). He compares a modern understanding of ancient polytheism, the underpinning of non-Israelite religion, with what the biblical text itself believes about the existence of “other gods.” His conclusion is that for the biblical writers the realms of idolatry and myth are two separate spheres. Whereas in polytheism, the deification of nature gives birth to myth, which in turn deifies material objects – that is, the spheres of myth and idol worship are inextricably connected. Kaufmann argues that 1) the Bible never condemns belief in its own Yahwistic mythology even when it shares motifs with condemned non-Israelite religions, and 2) the Bible repeatedly condemns the practice of idolatry. Through a survey of biblical texts referencing idolatry, Kaufmann suggests that the biblical definition of idolatry is not the worship of living gods through lifeless idols, but simply what he calls a “fetishistic” worship of wood and stone (Kaufmann 1951:193). To put it in terms of the present essay, Kaufmann suggests that the biblical texts regarding idolatry demonstrate illiteracy of foreign myth.

John Oswalt (2009:12-13) reminds us that the evidence available to Kaufmann in his time is not substantially different than what is available to twenty-first century scholars. Consequently, both Kaufmann's and Oswalt's ideas are timely contributions to contemporary inquiries about the origins of Israelite religion. The present interpretation of Genesis 2-3 in its iconographic context is, in the spirit of John Oswalt's Bible Among the Myths, offered as a contribution to the ongoing discussion of Israel's religious origins and unique worldview.
End Notes

1 For an in depth treatment see Oswalt, The Bible Among the Myths, 47-84 where he explains the Israelite worldview as “transcendence,” versus the ancient Near Eastern worldview as “continuity.” He applies this argument to the prophetic corpus in John Oswalt, “Is There Anything Unique in the Israelite Prophets?” BSac 172 (2015): 67-84.


3 Joel LeMon references several such studies in his discussion of three “typologies” of iconographic study in LeMon, “Iconographic Approaches,” 146-52.


For an extended review of the scholarship around Asherah and Genesis 3, see Joel Brown, “The Goddess and the Garden: The Israelite Understanding of the Genesis 3 Narrative” (Ph.D. diss; The Graduate Theological Union, 2013).

A variant of Genesis 3:3 reads “But from the fruit of this tree which is in the middle of the garden” lending support to the proposed scene that puts all the characters – man, woman, and serpent – next to the tree.


Among other creative solutions is Paul Humbert, Études sur le récit du paradis et de la chute dans la Genèse (Neuchâtel: Secrétariat de l’Université, 1940), 22-3 where he hypothesizes that the tree of life is hidden to Adam and Eve, so in 2:9, the tree of life is not pertinent information. Comparing the life-giving plant, food, and water in the Gilgamesh Epic and Adapa myth with the tree of life in Genesis, he concludes that like these substances the tree of life was hidden.

A plant that magically bestows immortality is known from the Epic of Gilgamesh, and it may be argued that the absence of multiple magic plants or trees in Mesopotamian texts would be evidence for the same conclusion, that Genesis is merely accommodating its narrative to a context that speaks of a single magic plant. However, the visual medium in this case is far more compelling as a “source” for Genesis’ tree of life than the Epic of Gilgamesh that lacks other features of the visual motif, such as the central location of the tree and its association with dual figures (and/or a serpent, mountain, rivers, and cherubim!).


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