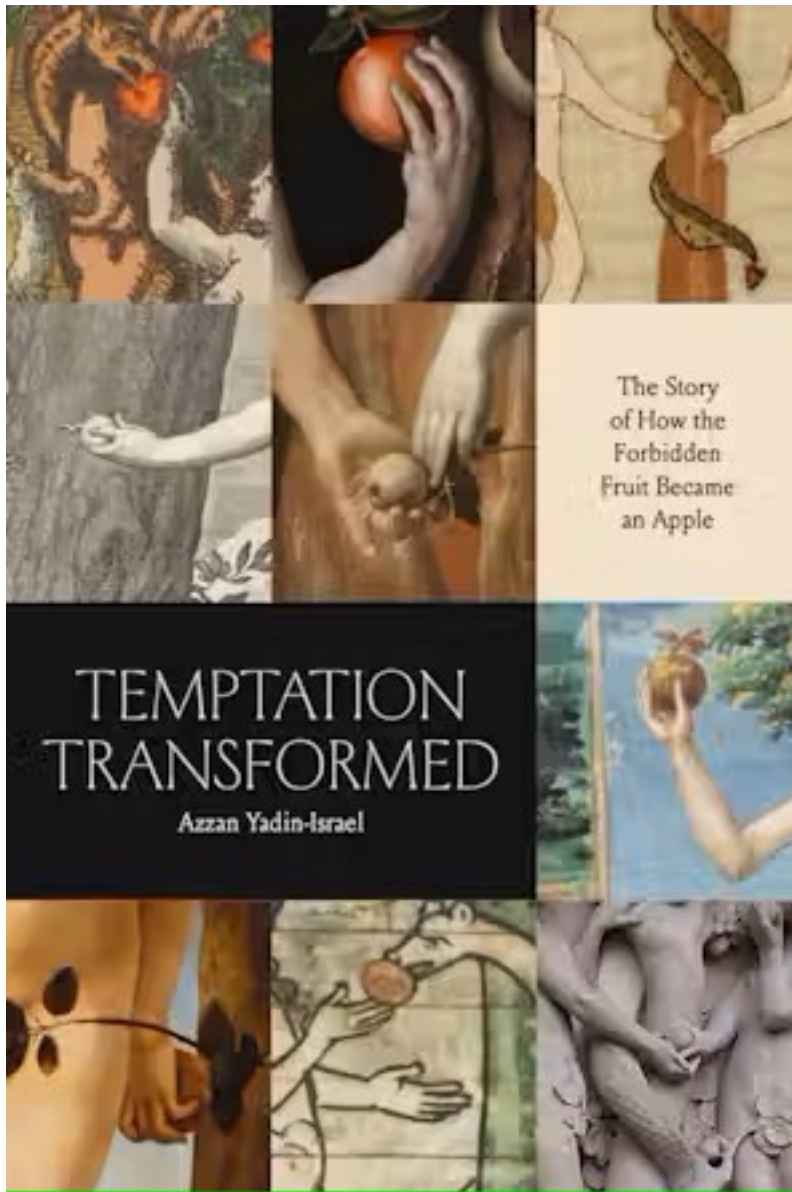


## Temptation Transformed

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**Azzan Yadin-Israel: Temptation Transformed. The Story of How the Forbidden Fruit Became an Apple** University of Chicago Press: 2022 232 Pages; \$27.50



How did the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil come to be known as an apple? Many scholars and non-scholars alike have suggested that the association was borne of a confusion between the Latin word *malum*, “apple,” and *malus*, “evil,” sometimes rendered *malum* depending on grammatical context. However, as Azzan Yadin-Israel points out in the introduction to *Temptation Transformed: The Story of How the Forbidden Fruit Became an Apple*, the evidence for this hypothesis is scant at best. How, then, are we to understand the apple’s rise as the symbol of what is forbidden? The answer lies in art history and medieval shifts in semantics.

Yadin-Israel’s thesis is that “while scholars have sought to explain the apple’s rise in theological

terms, it was actually an unintended consequence of two distinct historical developments: a series of semantic shifts and the proliferation of Fall of Man narratives in the European vernaculars” (2). Thus, in chapters 1 and 2, Yadin-Israel deconstructs the notion of the apple as the forbidden fruit using a two-fold approach. First, he demonstrates that ancient, late antique, and early medieval Jewish and Christian sources do not associate the fruit with an apple but instead opt for a fig or grape, with citrons, wheat shafts, dates, and other produce also making appearances. Secondly, he deconstructs the *malum* hypothesis, which was first challenged by Sir Thomas Browne in 1658 but remains a common argument today. Yadin-Israel does this by appeal to linguistics, but also by appeal to tradition; there simply is no known Latin textual tradition that addresses the ambiguity of *malum* or calls the forbidden fruit an apple, and prior to the 12th century, there is almost no mention of the forbidden fruit as an apple in either text or iconography in any language or medium. Rather, the fig tradition continued—that is, until the 12th century.

In chapters 3 and 4, Yadin-Israel offers an alternative narrative, one rooted in an analysis of almost 600 works of art and the cultural developments of medieval Europe, including shifts in semantics. In chapter 3, he carefully argues that “the apple . . . played no meaningful role in the Fall of Man iconography until its first sustained appearance, in twelfth-century France” (28), after which the tradition moved into England, Germany, the Low Countries, and Northern Italy (but not Southern Italy or Spain). He supports his claim using representative artworks from his assemblage of almost 600 works, all of which are available on the book’s companion website.

In chapter 4, Yadin-Israel explains why 12th century France was the historical and geographical context for the rise of the apple as the forbidden fruit, and why this association spread the way it did. In brief, *pomum*, “a fruit, specifically an orchard fruit,” was the most common Latin word for the forbidden fruit, and the Old French *pom*, “fruit,” is its etymological descendent. Through the process of semantic narrowing, at some point *pom* came to specify “apple.” Hence, over time, the Latin *pomum*, “fruit,” became the French *pom*, “apple.” As Medieval French exerted massive influence on English and German, these languages also experienced semantic narrowing, with both *appel* (English) and *apfel* (German) shifting from “fruit” to “apple.” At the same time, French illustrated manuscripts and textual traditions influenced biblical interpretation across the region. Once the association of the forbidden fruit with an apple took hold, it expanded greatly, in part due to its proliferation in art, but also because people were engaging the Fall of Man narrative in their common vernaculars.

The association of the fruit with an apple did not take hold in Spain and Southern Italy literally because of semantics. The *pomum* to *pom* shift simply did not happen in their languages, because the Italian and Spanish words for apple—*mela* and *manzana*, respectively—did not originally denote “fruit.” However, the diverse dialects of Northern Italy did undergo a semantic narrowing from the Latin *pomum*, “fruit,” to the Tuscan *pomo*, “apple,” partly under the influence of French, an influence that did not extend far past the Alps. Furthermore, vernacular translations of the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Bible, were not popular in Italy and were met with hostility in Spain, thus reducing the impact of French translation and iconographic traditions on Italian and Spanish biblical interpretation.

Overall, Yadin-Israel’s *Temptation Transformed* is an accessible, well-argued, well-researched book and a testament to the power of interdisciplinary work to clarify age-old conundrums. Though brief (82 pages plus 12 color plates and 99 pages of end-matter), it covers a lot of terrain in terms of timespan (the ancient, late antique, and medieval periods), geography (mainland Europe), and media (texts and images), along with the pertinent languages. This book is a must-read for those interested in the mechanisms by which religious ideas and iconography develop, not only because it is a model case study, but also because it challenges “the assumption that scholars ought to explain religious phenomena by means of other religious phenomena” (79) rather than through the mundane realities of human experience, which includes linguistic change. More specifically, this book is a must-read for those interested in the history of Jewish and Christian biblical

interpretation, especially of Genesis 3. Finally, Yadin-Israel's appendix Inventory of Fall of Man Scenes and its companion website are a gift to art lovers everywhere and ought not be overlooked.

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