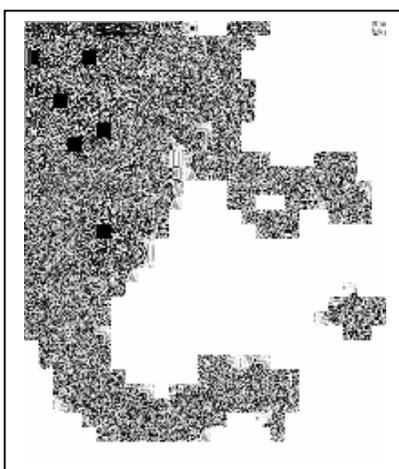# Before the Serpent Became Satan

By Jim Myers

It is absolutely amazing how dramatic the results can be when you simply change the role of one character in a story – especially when that story affects the beliefs of over 2,000,000,000 people. The story took place in the Garden of Eden. The characters were God, Adam, Eve and the serpent.

Most of us were taught that the story of the Garden of Eden was an account of a cosmic struggle between God and Satan. The outcome of that battle directly affected the lives of every person who has ever lived since the beginning of time. Without this event there would have been no original sin and no need for a universal savior.

The focus of this article is the character called "the serpent." Christian doctrine teaches that the serpent is really the Devil -- Satan himself. The way we understand this character will make a very big difference in how we understand the story. We will use our linguistic approach to Bible study and do our best to let our Bible tell its own story.

The story begins in Genesis chapter 2 verse 19 where we discover information about the origin of the serpent:

So out of the ground the LORD God formed **every beast of the field** and every bird of the air, and **brought them to the man** to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

God made the beasts of the field, (which included the serpent) from the ground. The serpent wasn't an angel, he belonged to a specific group of animals. His name came from the man, not God. In the ancient world the power of knowing the name was significant.

Now let's jump back one verse and find out why God decided to make these creatures:

> Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

In this creation account the man was created alone, without a mate. God declares that it was **NOT GOOD** for man to be alone. This is unlike the creation account in chapter 1, in which every act of creation was said to be "good." The creation of man and woman was the crowning achievement and we were told that this was "**very good**." In this account we have a man without a mate, God busily creating animals to fill the void and the man naming each new animal. *Why would he be considered alone – he was with God?*

The man named one of those animals NACHASH

נָחָשׁ

which was translated as "serpent." You will find this word in the Holladay Lexicon on page 235a:

(1) snake
(2) crocodile
(3) dragon

Now let's turn to the verb form for more insight into the etymology and meaning of the root form of this word:

(1) seek & give omen
(2) practice divination
(3) bewitchment
(4) magic curse

In order to understand the next comment I want to remind you that the chapter and verse numbers were not in the ancient manuscripts, they were added over a thousand years later. Let's insert the chapter break at the end of chapter 2 verse 24 and combine verse 2:25 with 3:1a –

> And the man and his wife were both **naked**, and were not **ashamed**. Now the serpent was more **subtle** than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

This is one of those cases that makes it very clear why it is much better to use an interlinear Bible for your studies. Look at the two Hebrew words below –

עֲרוּמִים   עָרוֹם
(2)   (1)

The Hebrew word on the right (#1) is the one that was translated as "naked." The second word was the one translated as "subtle." You will notice that the first four letters (right to left) of both words are the same. Word #1 has a masculine plural suffix added, which accounts for the additional letters. The point I want to make is that these words are from the same root and therefore should be translated the same. Below are our choices:

And the man and his wife were both **naked**, and were not ashamed. Now the serpent was more **naked** than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made.

or

And the man and his wife were both **subtle**, and were not ashamed. Now the serpent was more **subtle** than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made.

The key to determining the correct translation may be the last word in verse 25, which may also reveal the beliefs of the translators.

יִתְבּשָׁשׁוּ

The definitions for the root word (Brown-Driver-Briggs) are as follows:

(1) ashamed
(2) delayed
(3) confused

There are examples in which it is used in parallel to others words – ashamed / confused and ashamed / confounded. Therefore let's check out the other options for the Hebrew word translated as "naked" (word #2 - Holladay 283a) and then retranslate:

(1) subtle
(2) shrewd
(3) clever

> And the man and his wife were both **clever**, and were not **confused**. Now the serpent was more **clever** than any other **beast of the field** that the LORD God had made.

The author is clearly making us aware of the fact that the man, woman and serpent were all clever – ***but which would prove to be the most clever – the man, the woman or the serpent?*** The stage was set in the minds of the ancient audience for the next scene. We will find out what happens in the next part of this article – **coming soon in part 2**. *Don't miss it!!!*

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February 2005