



The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Following the journey of the memes of the Bible from their original cultural & historical origins to their influence in our world today.

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The Serpent: Wild Animal or Satan?

By Jim Myers

How one views the serpent in the famous biblical account of the "Garden in Eden," reveals a great deal about one's beliefs about God, as well as how one sees oneself, views women and understands how history is to unfold. Obviously, a change in how the serpent is viewed profoundly changes one's reality too. There are two basic options for how the serpent is viewed in Genesis – as a wild animal or Satan. Our first task is to see exactly what the biblical text states:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (NIV Genesis 3:1)

What does this verse tell us about the serpent?

- (1) It was a wild animal.
- (2) It was made by the LORD God.
- (3) It the most crafty of all the wild animals.
- (4) It can speak a human language.
- (5) It spoke to the woman.
- (6) It claims to what God said.

We will later discover that it walks upright and claims to have secret knowledge that can transform humans into God. A story about "a walking talking scripture quoting snake" reminds me of some televangelists that I have heard in the past. But, the bottom line is, the biblical texts specifically states the serpent was a wild animal.

The Hebrew word used here for serpent is NACHASH, which also has the additional definitions beside serpent:

- (1) *to divine, give an omen.*¹

(2) *magic, curse, luck.*²

(3) *omen, divination, bewitchment, magic, curse.*³

Similar ideas about the serpent are found in other cultures, but there are also significant differences.

The snake is one of humankind's most powerful and ambiguous symbols: it has at various times represented immortality and death, male and female, deity and demon, circle and line, killer and healer, the highest wisdom and the deepest subconscious. By virtue of its mysterious movement, potent poison, fearful grip, unblinking gaze and lightning quick strike, the power and image of the snake has wound its way into every culture. Whether snakes are worshipped as gods, feared as devils, or handled in religious ceremonies to test faith, snakes have played a critical role in the human heritage.⁴

Serpents have been worshipped as gods and feared as devils in Gentile cultures, but Genesis is a product of the Jewish culture. In the Jewish culture the serpent may be understood to have the power to bewitch and even magically speak, but it was still understood to be exactly what the text stated it was – “a wild animal created by God.”

The man in the Garden in Eden had been told by God not to eat the forbidden fruit, but later, the serpent appeared and told the woman that the reason God didn't want them to eat that fruit was because He did not want them to become a god like Him. God, on the other hand, had specifically told the man why He didn't want him to eat the fruit – it would kill him. This is the first appearance of a theme that is well-known in the Jewish Scriptures and culture: The choice of life or death is in our hands – God wants us to choose life!

This was how the account has been understood by Jews for many centuries, including the Jewish Jesus and his Jewish followers. It wouldn't be until Gentiles became the leaders of the movement and new books began to be added to the Jewish Scriptures, that the understanding of who the serpent was began to change. The choices of which books would be included in the New Testament or excluded from it were also made by Gentile leaders with very different cultures from the Jewish culture of Jesus.

As we saw above, in Gentile cultures serpents were viewed as gods and demons. Later, Gentile Christian reinterpretations of the Genesis inserted their cultural concepts into the story. However, it must be remembered that nowhere in the Garden account is there any reference to a fallen angel, demon, Satan, or it being cosmic battle in which the souls of all mankind were at stake. Ultimately, their views would create a new belief system with the doctrine of *original sin*.

By his sin Adam, as the first man, lost the original holiness and justice he had received from God, not only for himself but for all humans. Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called "original sin". As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (this inclination is called "concupiscence").⁵

Obviously, a new born infant could not have broken any commandment or sinned, but according to the new Gentile doctrine, every infant was stained by *original sin*. When the infant's parents engaged in sexual intercourse and it was conceived – *it became a sinner*. The new doctrine created a universal sin, and of course, their church provided the universal solution. It was the sole source for mankind to free itself from the punishment. By the way, the definition of the word "catholic" is "universal."⁶ Only those who were members of the Universal Church, and were in good standing, would be protected from the punishment and damnation that those outside the Church would suffer.

A thousand years after the Roman Catholic Church created the doctrine of *original sin* a new form of Gentile Christianity was created by a German named Martin Luther. It was during the period known as the Protestant Reformation. Luther created a new belief system that kept *original sin*, but denied the exclusive claim of the Roman Church that it was the only way to be free from its punishment. The Roman Church excommunicated Luther and condemned his new doctrines. However, any alternative to the Roman Church would have been welcomed by those who were aware of the inquisitions and other harsh realities of life under the Church's domination. Luther's new belief system became very popular and millions would ultimately adopt it.

The Gentile reinterpretation of the serpent as Satan would be the version that over two billion Christian would be taught. The original Jewish version would fade from the Christian understanding of the words found in the Jewish Bible. However, the Gentile Church would also have to change a number of other things to produce its belief systems. One was the concept of sin. In biblical Hebrew there are about 20 different words which denote "sin," but basically **sin signifies a failure of mutual relations**. It corresponds more with the modern idea of "**offense**" rather than the Christian concept of "sin."

Sin is viewed as something that is intrinsic in Church doctrines. The problem is that a person is a "sinner," and the solution requires an internal transformation of the individual into being saved. This is accomplished by the rituals required by the Church. The Jewish understanding of sin is very different and sin is viewed as an external substance that adheres to an individual that is viewed as good. An

example is that of a child playing outside and gets muddy. The mud is sin and the goal is to remove the mud and clean up the child. These are two very different views and they influence how people view themselves and others.

The rabbis rarely speak of sin in the abstract; they usually address a specific violation. There are two types of offenses: offenses of **commission** (transgression of negative precepts) and offenses of **omission** (failure to perform positive precepts). In addition, understanding who the offense was committed against is essential. Was it an offense committed against God or against people.

The Day of Atonement brings forgiveness for sins against God, i.e., for purely religious offenses. However, the Day of Atonement **only brings forgiveness for offenses against other human beings if the wrong done to the victim have first been put right.**⁷ Mans' actions in the forgiveness process involves both conscience and deeds, in order to secure forgiveness. It is not enough for a person to hope and pray for forgiveness. He must humble himself, acknowledge his wrong, and resolve to depart from the sin. **Inner contrition must be followed by outward acts; remorse must be translated into deeds.** Two steps are involved in this process: (1) stop committing the offense; and, (2) start doing what is commanded.

This process is called TESHUVAH in Hebrew, which is translated "repentance." The root word of TESHUVAH is **SHUV**, means "to turn." The idea is that the person who committed the sin was going the wrong way, so the solution is for that person to turn around and go the right way. It is not destroy the person. The goal is to restore the person so he can do what God commands.

God's forgiveness, however extensive, only encompasses those offenses which man commits directly against Him. Those in which **injury is caused to one's fellow man are not forgiven until the injured party has himself forgiven the perpetrator.** Even after compensatory payments have been made, **the offender must still seek forgiveness from the injured party because of the suffering that he caused.**⁸

The Jewish concept of sin and repentance does not free the offender or the one against whom the offense was committed from the consequences of the offense. The man in the Garden lost his home and would ultimately die because of the decision he made to eat the forbidden fruit. His decision also cost the woman her home and life, as well as profoundly affecting the lives of their children.

The transition from the Jewish understanding of sin to the Christian doctrine of *original sin* completely turned the focus away from the original message of the Jewish Jesus. The mission of the Gentile Church became to free people from the consequences of *original sin* – to save people. *Isn't that what the focus of your*

church is? The Gospel became the statement of faith that revealed the way for people to be saved from the consequences of *original sin*. How is one saved? The answer depends on which Church's gospel is used, but usually requires a prayer and sometimes other rituals. Some require membership in their church, while salvation in other churches is an individual matter. However, in either case, the underlying objective is to free people from the consequences of *original sin* so they can order to obtain eternal life and not be damned forever.

The fly in the ointment, however, is that the Gentile doctrine directly contradicts what Jesus taught. This is another case in which, just like that of the serpent being clearly identified as a wild animal, the actual words of the biblical text are ignored. Below is what Jesus said about the subject of eternal punishment.

Then shall he say also unto those on the left hand, "**Depart from me**, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and **you gave me no food**. I was thirsty, and **you gave me no drink**. I was a stranger, and **you did not take me in**; naked, and **you did not clothe me**; sick, and in prison, and **you did not visit me**."

Then shall they also answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto you?"

Then shall he answer them, saying, "Amen! I say unto you, inasmuch as **you did not to one of the least of these**, you did not to me." And these shall go away into everlasting punishment.⁹

What would cause a person to receive everlasting punishment? Was it the failure to submit to a doctrine and participate in specific rituals or how one treated his fellowman? The two choices reveal something else. In the Gentile belief system it is correct beliefs that are the most important. *One may completely ignore the needs of everyone, but as long as he or she has the correct beliefs and does the prescribed rituals, a mansion in heaven awaits their arrival.* It might be good to consider another teaching of the Jewish Jesus that relates to this subject.

A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'"

"All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said.

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.

Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."¹⁰

The ruler believed he had done everything God required, but Jesus pointed out that there was a commandment he failed to keep. Based on what we know about the teachings of the Jewish Jesus, the commandment he failed to keep was – "Love your neighbor as yourself."¹¹ The repentance that Jesus specified involved compensatory payments, which meant that he would have also been required to seek forgiveness from the injured parties, which in this case would have been the poor.

Almsgiving is **not a favor** to the poor. **Those in need have a legal right to receive alms. The donor has a legal obligation to give alms.**¹²

The poor had a legal right to receive alms from the man and he had the legal obligation to give alms. The amount that Jesus determined to be the total amount due the poor was the total value of everything the man owned. The importance of repentance and the restoration of relationships was also the focus of another of the Jewish Jesus' teachings:

Therefore, **if you are** offering your sacrifice **at the altar** (in the Temple) **and there you remember** that your brother or sister **has something against you, leave your sacrifice there in front of the altar.** First **go and be reconciled** to them; then **come and offer** your sacrifice. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Take a moment to consider what was actually involved for a person to make a sacrifice at the Temple. First a sacrifice would have to be purchased from an "authorized" agent. Next, would be the required ritual immersion to enter the Temple. Then there would have been waiting until the time came to approach the priests who did the sacrificial ritual. Then, after all of that, if the person

remembered someone that he hadn't received forgiveness, according to Jesus, he was to leave the sacrifice right there at the altar and go find that person.

He would have to leave the Temple, find the person, make the appropriate restitution, seek and receive forgiveness, and then go through entire process to get back to the altar again, and then present his sacrifice. The Jewish Jesus did not teach that just saying a prayer and asking God for forgiveness for doing harm to another was all that was required. The teachings of the Jewish Jesus reflect his foundational belief: *In order to love God a person must love his fellowman*. Take a moment to think about the man standing in line to present his sacrifice at the Temple. What did God want? Was the sacrificial the most important thing to Him? According to Jesus, God wouldn't have accepted it because the person presenting it had not first done what love of his fellow man would have required. This was the position the rich young ruler found himself after hearing what Jesus said.

When the young man heard this, **he went away sad**, because he had great wealth.¹³

He didn't argue, become angry or question what Jesus said. Instead, he was sad, but it wasn't because of the harm he had done to the poor, it was because of his great wealth. The way one views the serpent in the Garden determines how he or she understands the messages and purpose of the life of Jesus. If the teachings of the Jewish Jesus are followed, the lives people are directly impacted and made better. If the Gentile option is followed, institutional doctrines and rituals are elevated to a position above the relationships of humans to each another. Changing a wild animal into Satan clearly affected much more than just the story. The quality of life for millions of Jesus' followers has been affected. **BHC**

¹ A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerrushalmi, and Midrahic Literature: Volume I; compiled by Marcus Jastrow; Printed in Israel; p. 896b.

² The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Vol. 2 (published by E. J. Brill 1995; p. 690a-691a).

³ A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament by William L. Holladay; p. 235a.

⁴ Amazon product description of Snakes in Myth, Magic, and History: The Story of a Human Obsession by Diane Morgan -<http://www.amazon.com/Snakes-Myth-Magic-History-Obsession/dp/0313352925>

⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 416-418

⁶ http://www.catholic.com/library/What_Catholic_Means.asp

⁷ Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 14, col. 1587-1592.

⁸ Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 6, col. 1433-1434.

⁹ Matthew 25: 31-46

¹⁰ Luke 18:18-25

¹¹ Leviticus 19:8b

¹² Encyclopedia Judaica © Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd., Israel; Volume 5, col. 340-341.

¹³ Matthew 19:22

March Memorials

In Loving Memory

**DOVA
IDA
GREGORY**

March 14, 1907
March 7, 1997

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**MINNIE
KRAUTH**

March 22, 1998

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to
seek those qualities of mind and
heart which they shared when we
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our
loyalty to those things which we
valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will
live; for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The
Prayer Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**ROBERT
DEAN**

March 22, 1996

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**JOHN W.
"JACK"
NELSON**

October 25, 1932
March 21, 2008

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

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**"Belief systems must be large enough to include all of the facts;
they must be open enough to be tested;
and they must be flexible enough to change
when errors or new facts are found."**

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