

The Biblical Heritage Center's
Letting Our Bible Tell Its Own Stories

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A Man, Woman & Talking Snake

By Jim Myers

I know the name of this study sounds like the beginning of a good joke, but it is really a study of the introduction to one of the most important stories in the Bible -- *the man, woman and snake in the Garden in Eden*. The lives of over two billion Christians living today are still affected by how this account is interpreted. Many believe it is the record of a cosmic battle between God and Satan over the eternal destinies of the lives of all mankind. Is that what the ancient author of this famous account had in mind? *Let's allow our Bibles to tell its own story and see what it says.*

The introduction to this account is found in Genesis 2:24-3:1. The goal of the ancient author was to carefully set the stage for the event, but the work of a man who lived centuries later in another nation destroyed the original author's work. His name was Stephen Cardinal Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury (1207-1228) and he inserted chapter breaks in the Bible,¹ and one was inserted in the middle of the original introduction. One half of the introduction ended up in the last verse of chapter two, while the other half became the first verse of chapter three. How many people stop reading at the end of the chapter and miss the point? *In order to reconstruct the original introduction we must not only remove the chapter and verse breaks.*

We must also be aware of the wordplay the author used to make a very important point. I will transliterate the Hebrew words used in the wordplay so you will be aware of it.

And they were both **ARUMIYM**, the man and his woman; and were not shamed. And the serpent was more **ARUM** than any beast of the field which **YAHWEH** the **ELOHIYM** had made.²

Most translators translate **ARUMIYM** as *naked* and **ARUM** as *subtle or crafty*. Therefore, this appears to be a story about "a naked man, a naked woman and a subtle or crafty snake." The word **ARUMIYM** consist of the root word (**ARUM**) combined with the masculine plural suffix (**-IYM**). **ARUM**

has the following meanings: *subtle, shrewd, clever, crafty, and cunning*.³ The suffix simply indicates it is a reference to more than one person. Now, let's update our above translation with this information.

The man and woman were *subtle, shrewd, clever, crafty, or cunning* and had not been shamed. The serpent was the most *subtle, shrewd, clever, crafty, or cunning* of all the wild animals.

It now appears that the question raised by this introduction is: ***Who will be the most subtle, shrewd, clever, crafty, and cunning: the two humans or the lone serpent?*** The ancient author has left two important clues, but most English readers are not aware of them. The first is found in the phrase that is found in most translations – *they were not ashamed*. **Shame** plays a very different role in Eastern cultures and Michelle E. Friedman, M.D. explains how it is viewed in the Jewish culture (highlights added).

Shame must be understood in the context of group culture. Shame implies a failure to live up to internalized parental and larger societal goals . . . From the first chapters of Genesis on, we see humankind struggling to resolve interpersonal and intergroup conflict. These meaning making narratives depict their characters wrestling with powerful and sometimes contradictory impulses. . . Shame is a powerful operative dynamic in Jewish tradition where individual personal and religious destiny can only be truly fulfilled through membership in the larger units of family, tribe, and nation. The concept of individual salvation plays a much less dominant role in Judaism as compared with Christianity. Shame relies on group context.⁴

The second clue is found in the **Hothpael⁵ verb form** of the word translated *shame* that the ancient author used. It indicates that "the action is performed on or for oneself." Below is an example of this verb form in another verse:

Thus will I magnify myself, and sanctify myself; and I will be known in the eyes of many nations, and they shall know that I am YAHWEH.⁶

Now let's update our translation again to include these clues:

And they were both *subtle, shrewd, clever, crafty, or cunning*, the man and his woman; and *they had not shamed themselves*.

Did you notice how the focus has been shifted from the actions of the snake to what actions the humans will do to themselves? Will they each fulfill their personal responsibilities or will they fail and bring shame to the tribe?

A point that should be kept in mind is that **YAHWEH** made all three characters; therefore *they all existed because He wanted them to exist*. Something else that should also be understood is that it was the man that named them, including himself (**ISH**). In the ancient world the power of naming was believed to bestow function give power over the thing named.

A final clue isn't found in the text, but it is very important. The ancient Jewish audience was living in Babylon as captives when Ezra the Scribe first recorded the words of Genesis that are found in the Torah. They would have immediately recognized a theme about another serpent in the Babylonian myth, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Utnapishtim says he will tell Gilgamesh one of the gods' secrets. He tells Gilgamesh about the thorny plant that grows beneath the waves called How-the-Old-Man-Once-Again-Becomes-a-Young-Man. Gilgamesh ties stone weights to his feet and dives into the sea. When he finds the plant he cuts the stones from his feet, and the waters cast him onto shore. He tells the boatman that he will share this plant with the elders of Uruk and then take some himself and be young again too. But one night, when they stop to camp, Gilgamesh takes a swim in a pool of cool water. A snake smells the plant and steals it. As it slithers away, it sheds its skin. Now the serpent is young again.⁷

*This serpent stole the plant that would have made Gilgamesh immortal like a god. The readers of Genesis knew the **Tree of Life** was in the Garden, too. The original introduction would have alerted the ancient author of a different twist. This serpent could not steal immortality and their chance to be like a god. It could only try to make the humans lose it themselves (remember verb form above). **The original account had nothing to do with a cosmic struggle between God and Satan. It was about whether two humans acting together would be more subtle, shrewd, clever, crafty, and cunning than a wild animal!** *If you would like to hear the rest of the story in a future issue, send me an email or a note.* **BHC***

¹ http://www.wicwiki.org.uk/mediawiki/index.php/Why_Is_the_Bible_Divided_Into_Chapters_and_Verses%3F.

² Genesis 2:25-3:1a

³ A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerrushalmi, and Midrahic Literature: Volume I; compiled by Marcus Jastrow; Printed in Israel; p. 1115a.

⁴ ḥShame and Illness: A Jewish Perspectiveö <http://yjhm.yale.edu/archives/spirit2004/shame/mfriedman.htm>

⁵ http://www.becomingjewish.org/pdf/hithpael_stem-hebrew.pdf

⁶ Ezekiel 38:23

⁷ <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/gilgamesh/section9.rhtml>

BIBLICAL HERITAGE CENTER
MEMORIAL GARDENS
April Memorials

<p><i>In Loving Memory</i></p> <p>WILLIAM LESTER STEWART</p> <p>April 26, 2005</p> <p><i>May you dwell under His wings in complete SHALOM forever!</i></p>	<p>As We Remember Them</p> <p><i>May their memories inspire us to seek those qualities of mind and heart which they shared when we walked life's journey together.</i></p> <p><i>May we help to bring closer to fulfillment their highest ideals and noblest strivings.</i></p> <p><i>May their memories deepen our loyalty to those things which we valued and shared -- faith, love, peace and devotion.</i></p> <p><i>As long as we live, they too will live; for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.</i></p> <p>(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor Reflections - <u>The New Mahzor</u> - The Prayer Book Press)</p>	<p><i>In Loving Memory</i></p> <p>GEORGE WASHINGTON HARLESS</p> <p>October 1864 April 6, 1923</p> <p><i>May you dwell under His wings in complete SHALOM forever!</i></p>
<p><i>In Loving Memory</i></p> <p>CHARLES L. "CHUCK" GREGORY</p> <p>January 25, 1925 April 11, 2010</p> <p><i>May you dwell under His wings in complete SHALOM forever!</i></p>		 <p>SHALOM <i>Peace, totality & wholeness!</i></p>

Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them by the BHC Memorial Garden and Memorials which are printed in this newsletter. The Memorial Garden is on the website at <http://www.biblicalheritage.org> Please visit it the next time you are on the Internet and stop back by often. If you would like to add your loved one to this section, send the information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. Remember those who have meant so much to you with a BHC Memorial.

Did you like our new "Letting Our Bible Tell its Own Story" newsletter about the introduction to the Garden of Eden account & the study of the origins of Easter and the Easter Bunny?

*Do you believe **people should consider factual cultural and historical information** when **they read the words of their Bible, state their beliefs or judge others with their Belief Systems?***

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