

The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Searching for what the words of our Bibles meant to their ancient authors & following their journeys through the centuries to us.

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The Birth of Evil in Yahweh's Garden

By Jim Myers

It was a beautiful luxurious place where **Yahweh** could be found, along with the **Tree of Life**. A naked man and woman, along with an assortment of animals, were also living there. It had a huge orchard, filled with trees that produced the best fruits ever. *It was heaven on earth until a snake decided to talk.* The garden and its inhabitants would never be the same thereafter.

As pointed out above, this garden was where the **Tree of Life** was located. It, however, wasn't the tree that draws the most attention in this story. There was another tree growing next to it, the **Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**, which is the center of attention. The scene opens with a naked woman standing by these trees; and there is a serpent standing beside her. It does something very unexpected, it speaks to her. Clearly, a snake that stands and talks is unlike any snake we have ever seen. The same was probably true for members of the ancient audience, but animals that speak weren't so unusual in ancient wisdom stories. What it said was more important than the fact it could speak.

Sadly, the lesson the original author planned to teach his audience has been lost because his story was reinterpreted centuries later. The serpent became Satan, a fallen angel that was at war with God. Such a thought would have sounded very strange to members of the ancient Jewish audience, just as it still does today. The Jewish Jesus, as well as generations of Jews, held the doctrine of monotheism as their foundational belief. They believe in one all powerful God, period! He isn't at war with anyone or anything. How could he? **HE HAS ALL OF THE POWER!** *The original story was not about a fallen angel that caused mankind to commit "the original sin."* It was about something much more important to them. It explained what led to the fall of their nation and revealed what they needed to do to prevent it from happening again.

In the last newsletter you read how a Babylonian king was recast as Lucifer by imaginative religious leaders. The fact that the word "Lucifer" did not appear in the text, and that the author, Isaiah, clearly identified the character as the king of Babylon, did not keep them from changing it. Changing the meanings of the words found in the Bible has been going on for a very long time. Once they are changed the original meanings may be forever lost to future readers. This is comparable to destroying an archaeological site. Just as visitors to a damaged site may be unable to understand what actually happened there; readers of the reinterpreted words may never be able to know what the ancient authors wanted to say. Shouldn't we do our best to understand their meanings first?

In this story the serpent is simply a beast of the field that has the ability to stand and talk. We are told that it was created by Yahweh, and therefore it must have been made exactly as Yahweh intended. Its nature and physical body were determined by Yahweh. It is called NACHASH in the Hebrew text, which is the common word for "snake" or "serpent." But, the word also has some additional meanings that the ancient audience would have understood.

(1) to divine, give an omen [Dictionary of the Talmud by M. Jastrow]; magic, curse, luck [The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament].

(2) omen, divination, bewitchment, magic, curse [A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament].

Even though NACHASH was a serpent, the word was linked to magic, omens, spells and divinations in the minds of members of the ancient audience. In their ancient world a name played an important role, because knowing something's name bestowed a special power on the one who knew it. *This adds a very interesting twist to this story, because it was the man that named it NACHASH.* The serpent was a beast of the field created by Yahweh and named by the man. The reason that Yahweh created it was to keep the man from being alone; to be the man's "helpmeet." But the serpent didn't qualify to fulfill that role. Keep this in mind as you read about its interaction with the woman who did.

Readers were not told how Yahweh made the serpent, but Chapter 2 contains the story of how the woman was "built from the rib of the man." Afterwards, Yahweh brought her to the man (Genesis 2:23):

And the man said, "This *is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man."

In the next verse the narrator adds:

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his woman; and they shall be one flesh.

The Hebrew word translated "cleave" literally means "to be glued together." The man and woman began as one body and Yahweh's destiny for them was to be "glued together" again. It is very important for readers to understand that the man is the one responsible for "cleaving to" her, not her to him. Readers would be watching to see if he fulfills that role in the story that follows.

In order to follow the ancient storyline we must ignore chapter and verse markers that were inserted almost two thousand years later. They interrupt the flow of the story and can significantly affect the way it is understood. A chapter break was placed right in middle of the introduction that sets the stage for a very important event that is essential for understanding the author's story.

And the man and his woman were both **ARUMIYM** and were not ashamed. And the serpent was more **ARUM** than any beast of the field which Yahweh ELOHIYM had made. (2:25-3:1a)

ARUM and ARUMIYM are transliterations of the Hebrew words that are found in the ancient text. Notice the underlined letters of the words. They identify the root word. ARUM+IYM is the root word ARUM with the masculine plural suffix – IYM added. An example is BOY and BOY+S. But this isn't what we find when we read most English translations of the Bible. ARUMIYM is translated "naked," but ARUM is translated "crafty." They clearly have very different meanings, instead of words that share the same root meanings: *subtle, shrewd, clever, crafty, and cunning.*

The author used the wordplay -- ARUM & ARUMIYM -- to make a point that has been lost in our translations. The man, woman and serpent share the same traits -- *subtle, shrewd, clever, crafty, and cunning.* The questions that the ancient author presented his audience were: "Who is the most subtle, shrewd, clever, crafty, and cunning?" Would it be the man and woman together or the serpent

that will be the cleverest?" As the story unfolds don't forget that the woman and the serpent were both created to be the "helpmeet" for the man. Both had been brought to him by Yahweh. He had named both of them. But there was also a significant difference. The woman is made from his body, but the serpent is not. The man's role is to be "glued" to the woman and protect her.

The scene clearly sets the two humans at odds with the lone serpent. At first glance the humans seem to have the advantage because of their number. But, they can only maintain their advantage if they "stick" together. In order for the serpent to win this battle it needs to divide the humans to conquer them. It makes the first move by speaking to the woman.

"Ah, because ELOHIYM said, 'Y'all (plural) shall not eat from any tree of the garden . . .'" (3:1b)

I find it very interesting that the very first conflict recorded in the Torah begins with a religious snake! How many times have you heard someone say, "Because God said . . ." or "didn't God say"? The woman is faced with a situation in which she is being challenged, not by the words of a serpent, but words attributed to ELOHIYM. This changes the dynamics of the situation dramatically.

I used "y'all" in the above verse to stress that fact that the Hebrew word in the text is plural in number. This would have quickly caught the ancient audience's attention, but it can't be seen in our English translations. The word "you" can be either singular or plural, so we rely on the context to determine which it is. In Hebrew this isn't the case. The spelling of the word reveals the gender and number. Why did the serpent use a plural if it was only addressing the woman? If it had only been addressing her, the Hebrew spelling would clearly indicate it.

Readers are faced with three distinct possibilities for the plural. First, the serpent meant that ELOHIYM addressed both the man and woman when he originally gave the commandment. Second, the serpent was addressing both the woman and man. The third option is the combination of both of the above. We will have to let the story unfold to find out which is correct.

But, a point my Hebrew professors made about this scene is that the way the text is written it appears that the woman cut the serpent off in mid-sentence with her reply:

"From the fruit of the trees of the garden we (plural) may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, ELOHIYM has said, 'Y'all (plural) shall not eat from it and y'all (plural) shall not touch it, lest y'all (plural) die.'" (3:2-3)

She made it very clear that ELOHIYM had given them permission to eat from every tree in the garden, except for one. She says that not only is its fruit deadly, but the tree itself is so dangerous that if you touch it you will die! Now it was the serpent's turn to jump back into the conversation:

"Y'all (plural) surely shall not die! Because ELOHIYM knows that in the day y'all (plural) eat from it y'all's (plural) eyes will be opened, and y'all (plural) will be like ELOHIYM, knowing good and evil." (3:4-5)

This is a direct challenge to her version of what ELOHIYM said. Who was correctly quoting ELOHIYM? Was she correct or was it the serpent that actually knew what ELOHIYM said? The serpent raised the stakes even higher when it hinted that it knew not only what ELOHIYM said, but also what he was thinking. It claimed that ELOHIYM knew that eating the fruit would make the humans just like him! The lure of becoming a god was clearly a very ancient theme that would have been very familiar to deported Jews living in Babylon.

It was probably at this point in the story that members of the ancient audience began to wonder, *"What's going on here? Why has nothing being said about the Tree of Life? Wouldn't it be more like a god if one was immortality, instead of knowing good and evil?"* They were very familiar with another story in which eating a specific kind of food bestowed eternal life. If the Tree of Life was standing right next to the forbidden tree, why not go straight to it first?

Was the woman wondering if they would really become like ELOHIYM simply by eating the fruit, too? What was the real reason she was told to stay away from the tree? Had she been told a lie? Did ELOHIYM want to keep them from becoming like him? You can almost hear the wheels in her head turning as she thinks about what the serpent's words. All she had to do was reach out, take a piece of fruit, and eat it to find out what was true. She could either become like ELOHIYM, or she could die. Which would it be? The author allows us to hear her inner most thoughts as she stares intently at the forbidden fruit. Notice the details that he provides the audience about this intimate moment.

And the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to understanding . . .
 . (Genesis 3:6a)

Clearly, her original view had been completely changed by the serpent's words. Before, she had viewed the tree as a threat and danger, but now it was a delight to the eyes. Could she really tell whether it was good for food or desirable for understanding, just by looking at it? The only way she could find out would be to eat the fruit. Readers now discover just how close she was to the tree, because all she had to do was reach out to grasp the fruit:

“. . . she took some of its fruit and ate it. . .” (3:6b)

Imagine what the serpent must have been thinking as it watched her extend her hand toward the tree. Her moment of truth came when she touched the tree. She believed she would die if she touched it. What do you think went through her mind the moment she felt it, and then realized she was still alive? Was it possible that everything the serpent had said was correct? Had the one who told her she would die simply been wrong? Or, had he lied to her?

Readers didn't have to wait long to figure out what she was thinking because she moved the fruit directly to her mouth. Think about her expectations as it touched her lips, bit into it, chewed it and then swallowed. It is at that precise moment that the author chose to reveal something completely unexpected –

“. . . and she gave also to her man with her. . .” (3:6b)

He had been standing there the whole time! This may explain why the serpent had been using “y'all.” Why hadn't the man said anything? If he really believed that the fruit was deadly, how could he just stand there and allow her to eat it? Was he willing to risk her life to see if what Yahweh had said was true? Or, was he willing to sacrifice her to see if he really could become like ELOHIYM? If she had died on the spot, wouldn't he be guilty of murder?

The man was the only who really knew what Yahweh had actually said. Neither the woman nor serpent existed when Yahweh had spoken to him. They were created later. Let's flashback to that moment and take another look at exactly what Yahweh said to the man:

And Yahweh ELOHIYM took the man and settled him into the garden towards Eden to serve her and guard her. And Yahweh ELOHIYM commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you (ms) may eat freely; but from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you (ms) shall not eat, for in the day that you (ms) eat from it you (ms) shall surely die." (2:15-17)

Notice that the man was placed in the garden to serve her and guard her. The Hebrew word for garden is masculine, so it wasn't the garden he was supposed to be guarding. I think ancient Hebrew audience would have started looking for the "her" in the story from the moment they first read those words. *Now they were probably wondering why he failed to protect her from the serpent.*

The man knew that Yahweh said that he (singular) would die if he ate the fruit. *He also knew that nothing was said about not touching the tree. The woman either made up the part about not touching it, or he added it to what Yahweh said.* The fact that he didn't say anything when she said "they weren't supposed to touch it," seems indicate that he probably added it. *Of course, his reason for doing it may have simply been to make sure she stayed away from the tree. Obviously, if she never touched it, there would be no chance that she would eat its deadly fruit.* This could also explain why he kept his mouth shut. He may not have wanted to admit that he had lied to her, especially in front of the serpent. But if he had been enticed by the lure of becoming like ELOHIYM, this may also have been reason enough to keep quiet.

He must have suddenly snapped back to reality when he saw the fruit touch her lips. She was "bone of his bones, and flesh of his flesh." He was about to find out if she would become like ELOHIYM or drop dead at his feet? As he silently stood by, she took the bite and didn't die. He had to be wondering if she had become like ELOHIYM right before his eyes. Nothing seemed to have changed. Can you imagine what went through his mind when she turned to him and handed the fruit to him? Now was his moment of truth. Who would he believe – Yahweh or a serpent? He made his choice, and ate it. However, unlike when she ate the forbidden fruit, something very different happened this time:

And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked (AROM); and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. (3:7)

She truly was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, because his act affected both of them simultaneously. The author now uses AROM in the text, which means “naked” instead of ARUM (clever), in his story. Obviously, their bodies looked exactly the same as they had before they ate, and their genitals were just as exposed as before. What had changed? In order to understand why the author uses naked now, we need to take another look at the introduction.

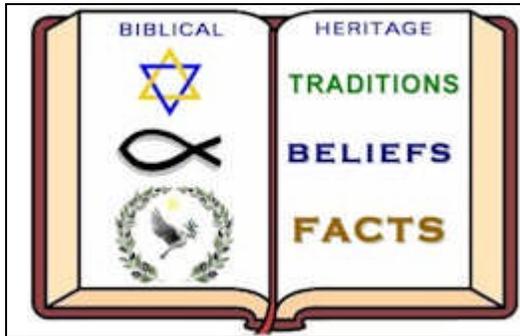
- (1) The man and woman were both ARUMIYM (clever) and not ashamed.
- (2) The serpent was more ARUM (clever) than all of the beasts of the field.

Notice that shame is only linked to the humans; not to the serpent. As long as they were together they were clever and not ashamed. But, when they acted independently without regard to the safety of each other, a weakness was exposed and they experienced shame. Clearly, the serpent proved to be the cleverest one in the garden, at least for now.

The moral of the story: Humans have the ability to act like ELOHIYM by doing things that enhance and preserve the quality of life, and protect life itself. They also have the ability to use their creative powers to get what they desire by doing acts like a wild animal; acts that harm and destroy life and/or lower the quality of life. *The serpent wasn't evil; it was just a wild animal doing what a wild animal does according to its nature.* The use of the creative powers given to the man and woman by ELOHIYM to satisfy their individual appetites and desires by doing harmful and potential deadly animal like acts, is the definition of evil.

The name of the forbidden tree may have also been prophetic. The Hebrew word translated “know” may mean “to intellectually understand” or “describe a physical experience” – i.e., “the man knew his wife and she conceived.” The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil may have marked the spot where good and evil would be experienced; not where their intellect would be increased. The woman and man committed theft and ultimately played a role in causing each other's deaths, as well as lowering the quality of the lives they had been living.

Their choices set in motion a series of events that ultimately lead to the murder of one son by his brother. This was the evil that the author wanted to warn his readers about, not Satan. It is what caused the downfall of Israel. It is the key to understanding the rest of the Hebrew Bible, which is filled with characters that sometimes act like ELOHIYM or a wild animal; but usually both. **BHC**



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