

6. GENESIS ... BACK TO THE BEGINNING: The Talking Snake

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Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat the fruit of the trees of the garden?'" (Genesis 3: 1)

Just who was this "talking snake" who suddenly, even mysteriously appears out of nowhere to put Adam & Eve to the test in the beautiful garden?

Is this insidious character just the author's figment of imagination --- a use of the acceptable literary device we know as metaphor --- to portray the ageless battle for right and wrong which rages in every human breast?

Is this "talking snake" one of the wild animals which becomes possessed by the supernatural person later identified as, **the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and the satan** who **deceives the whole world** (Rev. 12: 9; 20: 2)?

Is this sniping, slithering, sneaky **serpent** who sneers at Eve, "**Indeed, has God said ...?**" the Devil **masquerading as an angel of light** (2 Cor. 11: 15)?

AMBIGUITY OF THE HEBREW GRAMMAR

Our quest to learn about this clandestine character is made more difficult by the ambiguity of the Hebrew text. Without getting in over our heads with the technicalities, the Hebrew preposition which translates the word **than** --- **the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field** --- may be legitimately translated one of two ways.

Either it can have the sense that the serpent was **more cunning as none other of the beasts**, or, that he was **more cunning above all the wild animals of the field**. It's a difference of category --- was **the serpent** (*Nahash*) an animal or something other than an animal? ⁽¹⁾

THE SATAN

Adding to the difficulty of our investigation into **the Serpent's** identity is the confusion in commentary surrounding **the definite article** before the noun. The Hebrew text reads **the serpent was more cunning ...** Some well-credentialed commentators report

¹ The preposition (*min*) can be either **partitive** or **comparative**. An example of the **partitive** sense is "**Cursed are you from all the cattle and from all the beasts of the field**" (Gen. 3: 14). Here the serpent is cursed but not the other animals. Taken this way, Gen. 3:1 indicates the serpent was not included in the classification of the other wild animals. But the **comparative** sense has the meaning that the serpent is in a different class to the wild beasts and so is not in every respect an ordinary animal. The idea would be that the serpent was outside the circle of the others mentioned, because he was **cunning** and the others were not. Was he a supernatural being or a natural animal? We clearly need more information.

that **the definite article** is the equivalent of a personal name. Representative of this school is **Francis Schaeffer** who says **the Serpent** in **Genesis 3:1** is clearly identified. The definite article that is applied to Satan in Revelation 12: 9 and to the Serpent in Revelation 20: 2 and Genesis 3: 1 is important. It has, in fact, been suggested that with the addition of the Hebrew definite article in Genesis 3:1 we have something called in Hebrew grammar an article of eminence. And if this is the case, the serpent actually is, even here, made a proper name --- The Serpent. ^(2)

Representing the opposite side is one of the most authoritative contemporary scholars in the field of the Bible's worldview of the supernatural, **Dr. Michael S. Heiser**. **Heiser** is adamant that, **as a rule**, Hebrew grammar ...

Does not tolerate the definite article to precede a proper personal name. For example, I am not "the Mike". We don't go around calling each other by name with the word "the" preceding our name. By rule of Hebrew grammar, a noun preceded with a definite article is *not* a proper personal name ... Consequently, translations that transform *satan* with a definite article into proper personal names like "Satan" violate Hebrew grammar ... ^(3) ^(4)

The Hebrew word **satan** occurs twenty-seven (27) times in the Hebrew Bible. There are ten (10) times without the definite article and seventeen (17) with the definite article. As much as I appreciate **Francis Schaeffer** he was clearly no Hebrew linguist (nor am I!) so I am inclined to agree with **Dr. Heiser** that we should **not** translate **satan** as a personal name when it is preceded by the definite article. ^(5)

This may mean we have to rethink some of our popular notions. For example, in **the Book of Job**, **the satan** should more accurately be translated as **the accuser**, or as **the adversary**, rather than as a proper personal name. I hasten to add though, that I believe Job's nemesis was the original Edenic rebel, **the serpent**, for other internal textual reasons. ^(6)

How do we make headway through this undergrowth of conflicting ideas when it comes to the first appearance of **the serpent** in the garden? It is very tempting just to jump all the way straight over to the New Testament where **the serpent** is indeed identified as the Devil, the original deceiver and murderer (e.g. **John 8: 44; Rev. 12:9; 20: 2**). But if we adopted this very reasonable strategy we would miss much rich information the Hebrew Bible contains for our instruction.

² *Genesis in Space and Time*, IVP, USA, Third Printing, 1972, p78

³ *Demons: What the Bible Really Says About the Powers of Darkness*, Lexham Press, pp76, 78

⁴ Adding to the challenge is that the Greek usually works differently, because it very often precedes a personal name with the definite article. For instance, in the NT Peter is often "the Peter" and even Jesus himself is "the Jesus".

⁵ The 17 times with the definite article are **Zech. 3: 1,2** (twice); **Job 1: 6,7** (twice), **8,9, 12** (twice); **2: 1,2** (twice), **3,4,6,7**. The 10 times without the definite article are, **Num. 22: 22,32**; **I Sam. 29: 4**; **2 Sam. 19: 23**; **I Kgs. 5: 18; 11: 14, 23, 25**; **1 Chron. 21: 1**; **Ps. 109: 6**.

⁶ I am simply here pointing out the accepted rules of grammar, rather than detailing the exegesis.

JUST A GARDEN?

Ancient readers of the Hebrew Bible knew, of course, that animals did not talk, so when they met this “talking snake” in their narrative they knew it was code for the unseen supernatural realm entering our world. This is where a little knowledge of the original mindset of the **Ancient Near East (ANE)** is very handy. Let me explain.

When we think of the word “garden” we think of a place for quiet retreat surrounded by trees and flowers and probably water features such as ponds, fountains, and bubbling streams. A place with birds, bees and butterflies, and so forth. And it’s so easy to superimpose our idyllic mental image back onto our reading of **the Garden of Eden**.

That’s all very good as far as it goes. Eden *was* a garden. Indeed, Eden was a *perfect* garden. But at the end of the day, it was just a garden, right? *Wrong!*

The original readers of Genesis would have had a far more nuanced ‘picture’ of Eden than just a place where the blossoms bloom and the bees buzz. **Ancient Near East** readers thought of Eden as a temple-garden --- a place where the gods interact with humans and are to be revered. ⁽⁷⁾ ⁽⁸⁾

We read that the LORD God **walked in** the garden **in the cool of the day** (or **in the breeze**) in the midst of Eden. As God’s temple-house the garden of Eden was where Adam & Eve met with their Creator to enjoy His presence. Thus, the garden was **an earthly archetype of the heavenly reality**. ⁽⁹⁾

To ancient Hebrew readers then, the garden of Eden was the earthly reflection of the celestial court where the divine council sat. Eden was the ‘miniature’ temple which reflected that grander divine concourse of the gods. Thus, for instance, in **Ezekiel 28: 13-14** (a passage we’ll shortly examine in a bit more detail) Eden is described as **the holy mount of God** with features of a garden. ⁽¹⁰⁾

Recent Biblical research shows that the notion of the divine council of the gods meeting in a garden atop a mountain with waters flowing down, was a common motif in the ancient world --- for instance in ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, and Assyrian records. So, for the original Genesis reader it would be no surprise to find a member of God’s heavenly court --- **the serpent** --- appearing in God’s temple-garden in Eden. You find the gods in a temple, after all, right? ⁽¹¹⁾

⁷ John H. Walton brought this concept to the fore in his popular books, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* and *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*.

⁸ Michael Heiser develops this theme also, *Op Cit.*, pp62

⁹ Ryken *et al.*, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 849 as cited by Heiser, *Op. Cit.*, p 62

¹⁰ The Bible says in **Hebrews 8: 5** that Moses built the tabernacle according to the heavenly pattern.

¹¹ The word *Paradise* is the Persian word describing a beautiful garden, and it’s interesting that the Greek Septuagint actually uses this word in its description of the Garden of Eden.

THE REBEL SERPENT OUTSIDE GENESIS 3 (¹²)

It is beyond curious to me, that in surrounding cultures and religions in the ANE there is the shared belief in a semi-divine creature with wings and feet very similar to the Hebrew Bible's curious descriptions of the **seraphim** and the **cherubim**.

In Mesopotamian religion there was a divine *kuribu* which was depicted as a "snake dragon". In Egypt also, the divine throne-guardians were cast as "serpentine". Further afield, we could think of the Chinese veneration of "the dragon" or even our own Australian Aboriginal belief in "the rainbow serpent". Indeed, many ancient cultures seem to reflect a common primeval memory of the Biblical serpent in the garden of Eden.

Additionally, the word **seraphim** is the plural form of the Hebrew noun *sarap* meaning **serpent**. So, are the **seraphim** and the **cherubim** descriptions of the same being? It's possible these terms describe slightly different functions for the same creatures in God's heavenly council.

THE GUARDIAN CHERUB IN ISAIAH 14 AND EZEKIEL 28.

There are two Old Testament passages which greatly contribute to our understanding of the serpent in Genesis 3. The divine being in Ezekiel 28: 13-14 is called a **cherub**, and in particular, a **guardian cherub** --- a Semitic / Akkadian term specifically for a *throne guardian*. (¹³)

Many reputable scholars have shown that the accounts of the guardian cherub in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 are rooted in the primeval tale of an original rebel in God's heavenly council. Compare the following verses from Isaiah 14 with Ezekiel 28;

How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth ... You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain ... I will make myself like the Most High ... (Is. 14: 12 - 15).

You were in Eden, the garden of God ... You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God ... You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you ... so I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub ... (Ez. 28: 13-14).

Comparing these passages we discover many "contact points" which prove the same subject is being discussed. Isaiah 14 tells of a divine being described as a **guardian cherub** who is cast out of the heavenly council's meeting place (called **the mount of**

¹² Much of the material in this section I attribute to Michael Heiser, *Op. Cit.*, pp65

¹³ The OT **cherub** had three distinctive roles:- **1.)** To guard the source of life (Gen. 3: 24). **2.)** To "draw the chariot of God" (Ps. 18: 10 = 2 Sam. 22: 11, etc.) which is Hebrew poetry for God's direct activity in this world on behalf of His people. **3.)** To serve representatively as God's throne in the earthly Jewish tabernacle (1 Kings 6: 23-28; 8: 6-8).

assembly). He mysteriously is then located in Eden, the garden of God. Isaiah 14 also speaks of that heavenly rebel's insatiable craving for autonomy --- he boasts how he will be like the Most High ruling over Yahweh's heavenly court (the stars of God).

Although both passages are primarily aimed at being a lament against the human kings of Babylonian and Tyre and, although both passages are mocking taunts of those earthly kings, many reputable scholars have shown how the story is rooted in the primeval tale of an original rebel in the heavenly council of Yahweh God.

In other words, God is going to judge those proud and rebellious kings of Babylon and Tyre the same way he judged the guardian cherub when He ejected that original rebel from the divine council --- and who is subsequently located in Eden. Like that rebel serpent the wicked kings will be cast down beneath the earth to the abode of the dead.

Thus, both passages provide some additional information we need to fill out the gaps in our knowledge of who the serpent in the garden of Eden was and what he was attempting to achieve. He wanted Adam & Eve to join the rebellion! His appeal was that they could become their own demigods! Why couldn't they determine what was good and what was evil, what was right and what was wrong? (14)

WHAT WAS THE SERPENT OFFERING?

Keeping this little bit of background in mind, let's see exactly what it was that the serpent offered. Many folks think he was outright lying. And of course when he said, "You surely will not die" he was bare facedly lying. But like all lies, it was couched in truth.

The most dangerous lies are the ones that are 99% true! The hook is hidden well. Eve was going to learn something! But it was the most dreadful and dangerous kind of knowledge ... experimental evil, existential as well as literal death.

To use my opening illustration from the first article, *Genesis ... Back to the Beginning: Boundaries & Blessings*, we might say Adam & Eve were being lured to sit on Farmer Geddon's tractor to plough in paddocks they had no right to! Crossing God's protective boundaries is not ever a good idea.

According to the King James Version the serpent told Eve, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like [the] gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3: 4). Whereas most English translations read, "... you will be like God ..."

So, did the serpent say, you will be like gods or you will be like God? Is this ambiguity significant? Well, it turns out that the Hebrew word for God or gods (*Elohim*) may

¹⁴ Michael Heiser *Op. Cit.*, has an excellent table for comparisons between Isaiah 14 & Ezekiel 28 with Eden's serpent on p 69. The common overlaps include mention of God's heavenly council and its divine members who have a shining appearance like the stars; a meeting place for the council in a well-watered garden and a mountain; expulsion from the divine Presence to the underworld; luminous gemstones of fire whose list corresponds with the heavenly Jerusalem in Rev. 21: 18f, etc.

reference either a singular deity or a plurality of divine beings, and only the context will determine.

The Greek Septuagint opts for, **you will be like [the] gods**, using the definite article to refer to a particular lot of gods. But who are **the gods**? Was **the serpent** suggesting Eve might enter the realm of the 'hidden wisdom' of the cherubim and seraphim --- the heavenly divine council?

Or, perhaps the serpent's test was deliberately evasive and purposefully ambiguous? Perhaps he was tempting Eve with the possibility of really being like the Almighty in the realm of wisdom and knowledge?

So what would a reader back in the **Ancient Near East** think was being referenced? It is not beyond the realm of probability that, when **the serpent** appears in Eden offering a place for Adam & Eve to be like **the gods**, the original readers knew that, heretofore secret knowledge as already 'enjoyed' in the divine council, was possible for them too.

At the very least, **the serpent** was offering a forbidden wisdom which mankind throughout history has long since craved. Just think about the **Tower of Babel** when mankind organised a concerted rebellion against God by reaching for **the stars!** Wisdom is to be had by entering the heavenly pantheon. This temptation was too alluring for Adam & Eve --- and has so proved for humanity ever since. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Think of **the pyramids of Egypt** which ancient historians agree was an attempt for the dead to arrive at divinity. Many "softer" examples might be given such as man's desire for hidden wisdom from the realm of the dead through the magical arts like spiritualism and necromancy. This is the very temptation humanity has encountered since **the serpent's** nefarious offer in Eden.

THE SERPENT'S METHOD

I am not the first to highlight the fact that **the serpent's** first words in the Bible appear to be an interruption --- he was following on from a previous train of thought. Perhaps his insinuation, "**Yea, hath God said ...?**" (as per **KJV**) or, "**Has God indeed said ...?**" (as per **NASB**) follows on from, or comes in the middle of, a previous conversation? How so?

If **the serpent's** question follows on from a previous train of thought, perhaps he was a mind-reader? Perhaps **Eve** had been sitting under **the tree of the knowledge of good and evil** pondering how alluring its fruit seemed to be? Perhaps she had been wondering about its forbidden properties and why God had singled out this particular tree from all the vast array of others in the garden?

¹⁵ Second Temple Jewish literature abounds with this theme, especially **1 Enoch** which the New Testament writers cite.

If this is what prompted the serpent's question it would indicate that he could read her mind. But could he? (¹⁶)

If, on the other hand, **the serpent's question** came as an interruption in the middle of an audible conversation, then the only two people in the "chat room" were **Adam & Eve**. Perhaps **Adam** was in the process of informing **Eve** about the LORD God's command not to eat the forbidden fruit?

Maybe it was at that precise moment just as her husband was iterating --- for **Eve's** education --- God's command and reasons for abstinence, that **the serpent** chimed in with his challenge, "**Has God indeed said ...?**" (Have you not discovered how 'immaculate' the timing is when temptation comes knocking at your own door?)

It is at least certain that Adam was there with Eve for, once she had tasted the fruit, **she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it** without further ado!

DEVIL POSSESSION?

So, did the Serpent use a serpent in a first instance of "Devil possession"? Did Satan enter and use the body of an actual snake for his nefarious scheme --- a case of 'Devil ventriloquy'? It's a popular notion. It appears, for example, in the footnotes of the popular NIV study Bible. Under "serpent" at **Genesis 3** we read; **The great deceiver clothed himself as a serpent, one of God's good creatures.** (¹⁷)

This is not a far-fetched notion as far as the Bible goes, for we are told about "Devil possession" in two other cases later in the Bible. **Luke 22: 3** tells us that **Satan entered Judas before** he went to the chief priests offering to betray Jesus into their hands, and **John 13: 27** informs us that at **The Last Supper, as soon as Judas took the bread** from Jesus **Satan entered into him**. It would seem that killing Jesus was so critical to the Devil's plan that he was not prepared to leave it in the hands of a lesser agent! (¹⁸)

But let's not rush on too quickly, for the text does **not** say a supernatural being "entered" an animal. That idea is just eisegesis --- a reading into the text, not out of it. As **Heiser** writes, **The text is clear --- it is the serpent that deceives Eve, initiating the cascade of events that leads to the loss of everlasting life for humanity.** (¹⁹)

¹⁶ The question as to whether Satan or demonic powers for that matter are able to read human minds is intriguing, and way too big a subject to deal with in this article. I apologise I will have to leave the reader dangling in suspense in the hope that we might get to it in another article. Sorry!

¹⁷ *The NIV Study Bible: 10th Anniversary Edition*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI USA, 1995

¹⁸ The Devil will yet possess another human agent during the close of this evil age in the days of the Great Tribulation. The Antichrist himself will directly challenge the Name of the Almighty when the vast majority of humanity will revolt in a united economic and religious "Beast" to blaspheme the God of heaven. Boastful humanism will join with the occult at the end of this Evil Age to worship the Devil who is identified as **The Serpent (Rev. 12: 9 and 20:2)**.

¹⁹ *Op. Cit.*, Footnote, p62

THE SERPENT'S PUNISHMENT

But what about when God punished **the serpent** telling him that henceforth he was cursed above all the livestock and all the wild animals, and that he would crawl on his belly and would eat dust all the days of his life ...? Doesn't this language indicate that **the serpent** was a snake, an animal possessed by another divine mind? By what stretch of the imagination is the Devil literally crawling on his belly in the dust today?

Well, if we consider **Genesis 3**, **Isaiah 14**, and **Ezekiel 28** together, we note that all three passages say the supernatural rebel was **cast down to the earth**. The Hebrew term for **earth** is a common term for the ground underneath our feet. But it is also a term for the realm of the dead (e.g. **Ezekiel 32: 21, 24-30**; **Is. 14: 9**; **Jonah 2: 6**);

Having cited **Dr Michael Heiser** often, I am content to let him have the final word;

In biblical cosmology, the underworld (as its name suggests) is *in* or *under* the earth. It is consequently part of the earth. The rebel's sentence makes good sense in that light --- he was plunged both to earth and under the earth. The serpent is associated with the realm of the dead because that is where he was sent ...

All of the motifs of darkness, death, disease, and chaos ... are part of that association, not because they are spelled out in Genesis 3 ... but because all the conceptual roads lead to the realm of the dead. What marks the profile of the first divine rebel? Hubris toward God, antipathy toward humanity, and dominion over the dark realm of the dead. All who die will abide in his realm absent the intervention by an even greater power. (²⁰)

²⁰ *Op. Cit.* pp81