

## 104 THE ANCIENT SERPENT

**Introduction:** The purpose of the Genesis 3 story is to show how sin came into the world. There are at least three interpretations: #1. Evil began with a literal talking snake. #2. Evil began with a fallen spiritual being, Satan. #3. Evil began with man. We will seek to show that the Bible supports the third viewpoint and not the other two. We will attempt to demonstrate that Genesis 3 is one of many allegories in the Bible. Allegories, like parables, are stories with a historical or social basis, that are meant to impart deep spiritual truths in a clear accessible manner. We will seek to show that Adam was the serpent in the garden. Upon understanding the serpent as the carnal human nature, we can then infer that the devil, the satan and the dragon are also human references. This will then reveal these words as common nouns with flexible identities and not proper nouns with fixed identities. This study requires a willingness to use logical thought and allow scripture to interpret scripture.

### 1. Genesis 3 establishes the serpent as the prime symbol of deception and that which is contrary to God. The Hebrew word for serpent or snake is nachash, Strong's #5175.

"And the serpent [nachash] was cunning [crafty, shrewd] above every beast of the field that Yahweh God had made." Gen 3:1

### 2. The serpent was condemned to crawl on his belly, eat dust, that is, suffer humiliation (Mic 7:17, Ps 44:25, 72:9), and his descendants would be in continual conflict with the descendants of the woman.

"And Yahweh God said to the serpent: 'Because you have done this [deceived Eve], cursed are you above all the livestock and above every beast of the field. On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat [suffer humiliation] all the days of your life. And enmity [hostility] I will put between you and between the woman, and between your seed [offspring, descendants] and between her seed. He [she] shall bruise [crush, strike] you on the head, and you shall bruise [crush, strike] him [her] on the heel.'" Gen 3:14-15 BLB

**Note:** More correctly, Israel, the woman who gives birth to Jesus in Revelation 12, conquers the serpent.

### 3. Revelation tells us that "serpent" is another name for the devil (slanderer), the satan (adversary) and the dragon.

A. "The great dragon was thrown out, the ancient serpent who is called the devil and the satan..." Rev 12:9

B. "And he seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and the satan..." Rev 20:2

### 4. The word serpent, nachash, is used for a literal snake in the Tanakh.

A. Moses' rod turned into a serpent (nachash) in Exodus 4:3.

B. The serpents [nachash] bit the Israelites in Numbers 21:6.

C. Moses made a bronze serpent [nachash] and put it on a pole in Numbers 21:9.

### 5. The word serpent, nachash, is used metaphorically to refer to people in the Tanakh.

A. The tribe of Dan was a serpent: "Dan shall be a serpent [nachash] by the way, a viper by the path..." Gen 49:17

B. Wicked people are like serpents: "The wicked are estranged from the womb.... Their venom is like the venom of a snake [nachash]." Ps 58:3-4

C. Harmful people are serpents: "...you will trample the young lion and the serpent [nachash]." Ps 91:13.

D. Men of violence are like snakes: "Rescue me, O Yahweh, from the evil man; from the man of violence guard me...They sharpen their tongues like a snake [nachash]; the venom of a viper is under their lips." Ps 140:1-3

E. Two more snake armies will come from the first snake army: "Do not rejoice, Philistia, all of you, that the rod that struck you is broken—for from the root of the snake [nachash] will come forth a viper, and its fruit is a flying fiery serpent!" Isa 14:29

F. Yahweh's armies destroy the godless serpent nations: "In that day Yahweh will visit with His sword... upon Leviathan the fleeing serpent [nachash], and upon Leviathan the coiling serpent [nachash], and He will kill the dragon that is in the sea." Isa 27:1

G. There will be peace in God's Kingdom, but defeat and humiliation for destructive human serpents: "The wolf and the lamb will pasture as one, and the lion like the ox will eat straw—and the serpent [nachash], dust is its food!" Isa 65:25

H. Invading snakes and vipers, are sent to Judah: "Behold, I will send snakes [nachash] among you, vipers that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you," declares Yahweh." Jer 8:17

I. Egypt will flee from the invading army like a hissing serpent. "Egypt will hiss like a fleeing serpent [nachash], for the enemy will advance in force..." Jer 46:22

J. The day of the Lord brings conflict, the punishing serpent bite: "As when a man flees from a lion and a bear meets him, or he comes into the house and leans his hand on the wall, and a snake [nachash] bites him..." Amos 5:19

K. Yahweh directs the sea serpent army (Leviathan) to seek out and destroy His enemies: "If they hide from My eyes at the bottom of the sea, from there I will command the serpent [nachash], and it will bite them!" Amos 9:3

L. The humiliated serpents who opposed Yahweh will tremble: "They will lick the dust like a snake [nachash] like the crawling things of the earth; they will come trembling from their enclosures to Yahweh our God..." Micah 7:17

M. There are many other references to human snakes (cobras, asps, adders, vipers, etc.) in the Tanakh, but we are concerned with the word nachash. These references demonstrate "nachash," the word used in Genesis 3, represents man's lower, carnal nature.

### 6. Snakes are symbolic of wicked people in the Greek New Testament, as well.

A. John said, "You [Pharisees and Sadducees] offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Mt 3:7

B. Jesus said, "You offspring of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak good things?" Mt 12:34

C. Jesus said, "Serpents! Offspring of vipers! How shall you escape from the judgment of Gehenna?" Mt 23:33

D. "Behold, I have given you the authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and on all the power of the enemy..." Lk 10:19

E. "With their tongues they have used deceit." 'The poison of vipers is under their lips.'" Rom 3:13

**7. The Bible tells us that the heart/mind of man is the problem, not a spiritual entity named Satan.**

- A. "The heart [not Satan] is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked—who can know it?" Jer 17:9
- B. "The inclination of the heart of man [not Satan] is evil from his youth." Gen 8:21
- C. Jesus said, "From within, out of the heart of men [not Satan], proceed evil reasonings, sexual immorality, thefts, murders, adulteries, covetous desires, wickednesses, deceit, sensuality, an evil eye, slander, pride,..... and they defile the man." Mk 7:21-23
- D. "Each one is tempted, being dragged away and being enticed by his own [not Satan's] desire." James 1:14
- E. "The mind of the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able." Rom 8:7

**8. Man is at war with himself.**

A. In Romans 7, Paul explains two warring natures within the individual: the carnal mind (the serpent nature) and the spiritual mind (the made-in-the-image-of-God nature).

**Scripture:** "I delight in the law of God according to the inner man, but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin being in my members." Rom 7:22-23

B. The war of which Paul speaks, appears to be the very same hostility found in Genesis 3:15. It is the conflict within each human being—the conflict between our carnal serpent self and our God-given conscience.

**Scripture:** "Enmity I will put between you [serpent self] and between the woman [God-given conscience], and between your seed and between her seed. He [the coming Savior] shall bruise you on the head, and you [serpent] shall bruise him on the heel. Gen 3:15

C. Jesus delivered us from our sinful serpent nature but was also bruised by it on the cross.

**Scripture:** "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God..." 2 Cor 5:21

**9. Test the three interpretations:**

A. **Problem with the talking serpent theory:** Some believe that animals could think and speak like human beings in ancient times. Setting aside the very brief apparent ability of Balaam's donkey to speak, the Bible does not give evidence animals could talk.

B. **Problem with the fallen angel interpretation:** The problem with the fallen angel story is that the word nachash does not refer to spiritual beings in the Bible. Nachash means serpent—literally and metaphorically, and is consistently applied to people metaphorically, not to spiritual entities. Genesis 3:15 requires that the offspring of the serpent be in continual conflict with the descendants of the woman, but we do not see reports of Satan having descendants in the Bible. In addition, describing a spiritual entity as a "beast of the field" makes no sense.

C. **Adam, speaking from his lower nature, fits the serpent role:** As we have seen in the many references above, it is man who is shown to have the serpent nature in the Bible. It is from the heart of man that wickedness springs. The garden story plainly states that Adam was there with Eve when she was tempted to eat the fruit (Gen 3:6). Paul holds Adam solely responsible for the fall saying "sin came into the world with one man" (Rom 5:12) and doesn't mention a Satan character. Items G and L in #5 explicitly comments on men "eating dust." But was Adam a "beast of the field"? Another way to translate this phrase is "a living creature of the ground/land." The land/garden was Adam's home (Gen 2:7-9). Adam was definitely superior in intelligence to all the other creatures. In addition, the lower nature of man is frequently called a "beast" in the Bible. The entire Bible is illustrative of man's serpent nature in conflict with God's Way.

**10. The mistranslation of the word satan as a proper noun instead of a common noun, adversary, has had a heavy cost in Christian understanding.**

A. The belief in a cosmic enemy demeans the power of God with a competing power. God is the only power: Isa 45:5-7, Dt. 32:39, etc.

B. We do not need Satan to sin. By blaming Satan, we are naive to our own wickedness projecting evil outside ourselves.

C. Belief in Satan injects an inimical separating power between God and the individual.

D. Belief in an invisible spiritual enemy promotes helplessness, fear and possible ecclesiastical manipulation.

E. We cannot fully know the love of God and our love for Him until we see the depth of our sin. See Lk 7:44-48

F. Belief in Satan steeps us in a pagan, dualistic belief system.

G. Believing in falsities like "Satan" diminishes our understanding of the Bible and its truths. Revelation's ancient serpent, the devil (slanderer), satan (adversary) and dragon are references to people opposing the Lordship of Christ in the first century. We need only read the New Testament to see who they were. (See "Ruler of this world is not Satan" P.P. #66, "The Dragon of Revelation" P.P. #93)

**Closing thoughts:** The serpent, the satan (adversary), the devil (slanderer) and the dragon of Revelation, were the first century human enemies of Christ. The human responsibility for sin is one of the basic understandings for the Christian life. Not only that, but this understanding enriches our lives. When we know how deeply flawed and sinful we are, we love our Savior more and allow Him to lead and live in us more deeply. Our serpent nature is then used in the service of the Kingdom of God. Jesus said, "Be shrewd as the serpents and innocent as the doves." Mt 10:16.

**We have treated the concept of Satan in many other papers besides the following:**

"The Dragon of Revelation" P.P. #93

"The Serpent in the Garden was not Satan" P.P. #59.

"Problems with the Idea of Satan in the Old Testament" P.P. #60

"Problems with the Word Satan in the New Testament" P.P. #61

"Satan in Job" P.P. #62

"Did the Devil Tempt Jesus?" P.P. #63

**Recommend:** "The Real Devil" by Duncan Heaster. This book is available on line (but not in print).

**Note:** We are fully aware that Satanism is prevalent today, but this does not mean that Satan is real.