

Universality of Serpent-Worship

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Source: *The Old Testament Student*, Jan., 1885, Vol. 4, No. 5 (Jan., 1885), pp. 205-210

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3156392>

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not a little can be said both for and against each of these interpretations, and in view of this fact it ill becomes an exegete to treat any of them with contempt. One writer may have reasons very satisfactory to himself why one of the above views should be adopted rather than any of the others, but another equally learned and acute will fail to be convinced.

Is it not a better way, in all such cases of doubt, to leave the question undecided? Let us have all the light that can be furnished, and let us hear and weigh all the reasons for and against a given exposition, but where absolute certainty cannot be attained, let us hesitate before announcing a positive conclusion.

This may seem to some a kind of agnostic principle of hermeneutics. Be it so. Better far to hesitate, and inquire, and rest awhile on something tentatively accepted as plausible, or probable, or on the whole most satisfactory of several possible interpretations, but not yet certain,—better far this, we say, than that self-complacency and imperious dogmatism, which are forward to pronounce positively on every subject of difficulty or of doubt.

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## UNIVERSALITY OF SERPENT-WORSHIP.

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The Book of Genesis is the book of Origins or Beginnings. It describes the creation of the universe, the origin of man and the commencement of the human race. It depicts the pristine innocence of the first human pair in their Edenic state; recites the story of their fall through the seduction of a powerful adversary; and traces the onward course of the two antagonistic branches of humanity, called respectively "the seed of the woman," and "the seed of the serpent"—a division never lost sight of in subsequent Scripture, (e. g. Jno. VIII., 38-44; Rev. XII., &c.). Parallel with the history of "the sons of God" there runs another, of very great moment, and closely related to it. It is that of a mighty antagonizing power which is evermore engaged in hurling hindrances in the way of all true progress. The "enmity" which God originally put between the two sections of our race (Gen. III., 15), is the only reasonable and satisfactory solution of the tremendous conflict which is ploughed so deep into the history of the world—the conflict between good and evil, between the righteous and the wicked.

It is from Genesis we derive most of our information touching the origin of evil in the earth. In the account of the fall (chap. III.) the temptation is referred more especially to the serpent. We know well from other Scripture that the serpent was only an agent of the devil, who was the real tempter; that from this his fell work in Eden he has received the significant names of the "dragon," and "the old serpent." Nevertheless, while no thoughtful reader can resist the conclusion that Satan was the prime actor, the narrative makes the animal agency most prominent. It is the serpent that talks with the woman, that is "cursed above all cattle," "and above every beast of the field;" that is judicially degraded beyond what any other creature suffers. The import of this language is, that the whole creation over which man was made head participated in the disastrous consequences of the fall, and that the serpent underwent some transformation as to external form. It is quite possible, as many have thought, that before the curse pronounced upon it, the serpent was neither repulsive nor venomous, that it held itself erect, and was the most beautiful as well as the most intelligent of all the animals. It is an interesting fact that in that remarkable sculpture—the oldest surviving representation of the fall—which was found in the temple of Osiris at Philæ, Eve is seen offering the fruit to Adam, the tree is between them, and the serpent stands by in an upright posture (Pember).

The Bible account of the temptation and fall of the first human pair through the subtlety of the serpent has received the most ample attestation and confirmation, if such it needed, in the prevalence of serpent-worship. Ophiolatrea has characterized the universal race of man over the whole globe, to an extent without a rival; unless perhaps, the worship of the sun, which was generally identified with it. Deified as the serpent has been all over the world, it has always been the emblem of the evil principle in nature, and its worship was inspired rather to avert evil than to express reverence or gratitude. A god it might become in the perverted judgment of fallen men, but the feeling of antipathy and aversion with which it was regarded has never abated. It might be feared, but loved it never was nor could be. Thus, we are told that while many Hindus pay religious homage to the serpent at the present day, they regard it, notwithstanding, "as a hideous reptile, whose approach inspires them with a secret awe, and insurmountable horror." Worshipped universally, the serpent was still "cursed above all and above every beast of the field."

In the symbolic language of antiquity the serpent occupies a conspicuous place. Where the polished idolatry of Greece and Rome never penetrated the exaltation of the serpent reigned paramount. It

was worshipped in Egypt, Babylon, Palestine, China, India, America, England, France, Italy, Ireland, Scandinavia, (Sweden and Norway), Greece, Africa in its most savage parts,—in a word, all over the world. It was connected with the principal gods of both East and West, and with the most solemn worship of the countries mentioned above. In Sweden and Norway, and in Macedonia, serpents were kept in the houses as household gods; in Greece and elsewhere, in temples as public ones. They were considered the preservers of Athens, as of Whidah on the coast of Guinea; and the savage of Louisiana carried a serpent and the sun as the symbols of his religion, and tattooed them on his skin.

That the Druids associated the serpent and the sun with their most solemn ceremonies can hardly be doubted. The creation and the universe they represented by a serpent in a circle, sometimes by an egg (the cosmic egg) coming out of the mouth of the serpent, precisely as was done by Phœnicians and Egyptians. The Druid priests wore a crystal ball, egg-shaped, and incased in gold, as the symbol of their mysteries. Some of these crystals are still to be met with in the Highlands of Scotland, nor have they yet lost all their credit (Smith's History of the Druids, p. 62). Their temples were circles of stones with a huge boulder in the center, thus embodying the idea of the Deity, and eternity, as the serpent in a circle, and the egg. The ancient cairns of Scotland, and the stone circles at Abury, Stanton Drew, and Stonehenge in England, as well as many in Brittany in France, are in reality temples of the serpent. Their chief religious ceremony appears to have been to go thrice in procession round the cairn, from east to west and southward, thus following the course of the sun. The Galic term, *Be'al*, or *Be'il*, which still lingers in the Highlands, and in Ireland, it is believed, identifies the principal deity of the Druids both in sound and meaning (*Be'il*, signifies, according to Smith, "Life of everything," "Source of all things"), with Baal of the Phœnicians, the Lord of all, the Sun. And at old Babylon we find Bel and the Dragon associated together, as with the Druids and the Carthaginians. Thus, in the far East and among the most ancient peoples, the serpent and the sun are connected together in the mysteries of their religions, as among the savages of the far West.

The Hindus describe the world as resting upon a mighty serpent which bites its own tail. Among the Chinese the serpent is a symbolic monster, dwelling in spring above the clouds to give rain, and in autumn under the waters. It was held in great veneration formerly among the North American Indians; the Mohicans paying the highest respect to the rattlesnake, which they called their grandfather. The

worship of the serpent was practiced universally by the descendants of Ham; and it has sometimes been alleged to have been prevalent among the antediluvians, (Fergusson). Baron Humboldt describes as follows a remarkable picture illustrative of Mexican mythology, "The group represents the celebrated serpent-woman Chinacohuatl, 'Woman of our flesh.' The Mexicans considered her as the mother of the human race, and after the god of the celestial paradise, Ometenetli, she held the first rank among the divinities of Anahual. We see her always represented with a great serpent. Behind the serpent who appears to be speaking to the goddess, are two naked figures: they are of a different color, and seem to be in an attitude of contending with each other. . . . The serpent-woman was considered at Mexico as the mother of two twin children."

If we turn to the elements which characterized Ophiolatrea, we find it accompanied with a tree, and a woman constantly its priestess. An early Babylonian seal now in the British Museum, has two human figures sitting one on each side of a tree, holding out their hands to the fruit, while at the back of one is stretched a serpent. The late George Smith, from whom this account is taken, adds, "we know well that in these early sculptures none of these figures were chance devices, but all represented events or supposed events, and figures in their legends; thus it is evident that a form of the story of the Fall, similar to that of Genesis, was known in early times in Babylonia." (Chaldæan Acc't of Gen., p. 91). In many cases he was worshipped erect and not prostrate on his belly; and when alive, as in temples and houses, he was fed with sweet cakes of honey.

The notion that wisdom was inherent in the serpent, and was to be gained by homage paid to the reptile, was universal. It is believed that this idea is distinctly traceable to the serpent of Gen. III. The Hebrew word translated *subtle* can hardly be taken in the sense of *πανούργος* as Keil and Macdonald suggest, unless either (1) metaphorically for the devil whose instrument it was; or (2) proleptically, with reference to the results of the temptation; for in itself, as one of God's creatures, it must have been originally good. It seems more correct to regard the epithet as equivalent to *φρόνιμος* (Sept. cf. Matt. x., 16, *γίνεσθε οὖν φρόνιμοι ὡς οἱ ὄφεις*), and to hold that Moses, in referring to the subtlety of this creature, "does not so much point out a fault as attribute praise to nature" (Calvin). It was an ancient belief of all peoples that the serpent was endued with a large share of sagacity. The eating of its flesh, it was supposed, imparted it. In Egypt, as late as the second century, there was a sect of Gnostics who connected it with their Christianity; and under the name of *Ophites* (i. e., serpent-

worshippers), had a living serpent which was let out to glide over the sacramental elements to consecrate them, it being the source of wisdom; exactly as was done with Isis, the great object of serpent-worship; and exactly as was done in the serpent-temple at Abury and other places, as recorded in British bards, writings of that day.

A curious fact in mythology is the fable of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, who seized hold of the great serpent that was attacking Jupiter and the gods, and flung it into heaven, where it became the constellation of Draco. So, too, we are told that in the early Latin Church, the pastoral staff of the Bishop was terminated at the top by a serpent's head, to indicate, doubtless, the wisdom and prudence which should distinguish him in the exercise of his office.

It may be added, that a living serpent was kept in the temple of Esculapius, the god of healing. Serpent amulets among the Britons were supposed to secure from all harm. In Brittany, where the remains of dragon-temples are abundant, it is curious to see the mounts ("barrows," as they are called) where the sun was worshipped with the serpent, now all dedicated to St. Michael, whom the Revelation presents to us as the destroyer of Satan's power (Darby).

Interwoven with the ophiolatry which once so generally prevailed are dim and distant notions of a redemption which resembles that revealed in the Bible, and which can be distinctly traced. Thus, in Greek mythology, Apollo (the sun) established his worship at Delphi by slaying Python, an immense serpent, who was also said to have been cast down from heaven by Jupiter. He then gave oracles in his place. Still the serpent was sacred to him, and was otherwise associated with the Delphic worship.

Of the ophiolatry of Mexico Humboldt says, "Other paintings exhibit to us a feather-headed snake cut in pieces by the great spirit Tez catlipoca, or by the sun personified, the god Tonatiuh. These allegories remind us of the ancient traditions of Asia. In the woman and serpent of the Aztecs we think we perceive the Eve of the Semitic nations; in the snake cut in pieces, the famous serpent Raliya, or Kalinaga, conquered by Vishnu, when he took the form of Krishna." Hercules, and other such mystic personages, destroy serpents in all manner of fables.

The most striking illustration of Scripture redemption, as embodied in serpent-worship, is found in Norse mythology. It is a wonderful system, this Norse paganism, vastly superior in purity and sublimity to that of Egypt or Phœnicia or Greece, and well worth earnest study. Among its supernatural beings is one called Loke, a subtle demon, who is always characterized as mischievous, deceitful, treacherous,

malicious, in short, the father of lies. His dreadful brood, begotten with the giantess Angerboda (anguish-boding, sorrow-producing) are the Fenris-wolf, the huge Midgard-serpent and the woman monster Hel (English *Hell*)!

Thor is the antagonist of the Midgard-serpent; they are matched against each other, strength against strength, in a duel to the death. Thor first encounters his mortal enemy in the sea, where he has gone to fish. He hooks the giant Midgard; the line tightens; Thor puts forth his great strength; his feet crash through the bottom of the boat; down, down he sinks, till he stands on the sea-bottom; his mighty form towers above the waters; and, in his fury, he drags the serpent to the surface, smites him with all-rending Hammer. The giant Hymer, terrified at the sight of the monster, cuts the line, and Midgard sinks to the bottom of the sea again.

The two antagonists are to meet again, in a final, world-embracing struggle, at Ragnarok, Twilight of the gods, or Consummation. Odin fights the Fenris-wolf; Thor slays the Midgard-serpent; but, at the same time, retreating nine paces, he falls dead upon the spot, suffocated with the floods of poisonous venom which the dying reptile vomits forth upon him. Smoke wreathes up around the all-nourishing tree Igdrasil; the high flames play against the heavens; and earth, consumed, sinks down beneath the sea.

But it is not final death; there follows the regeneration; there is to be a new heaven and a new earth, a higher supreme God, and justice among men.

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### THE TRANSLATION OF PROPER NAMES.

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In the *STUDENT* for September 1883, there is a review of Rodwell's translation of the Book of Job. One remark made by the reviewer seems to be open to some criticism. He says, "We commend most highly one feature of the translation, viz., the retention of such Hebrew words as *El*, *Elohim*, *Eloah*, *Shaddai*, *Adhonai*, *Goel*, *Sheol*, *Abaddon*, for which the English language has no exact correlatives."

On what ground this commendation of what is now quite a common practice rests, it is quite difficult to see. What is the object of a translation? For what readers is it naturally designed? Manifestly the prime object in translation is to make the production accessible to