

A Note on the Serpent

by William Masopust

"Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?"¹
(Genesis 3:1)²

This is the first reference to the serpent in the Bible. Genesis 3 is the pivotal chapter of the Bible that gives us the story of the fall of man. The spearhead of this fall is none other than the serpent. Who is this serpent? What exactly is this serpent? Let's examine other scriptures to get an idea about this serpent.

"Rejoice not thou, whole Palestina, because the rod of him that smote thee is broken: for out of the serpent's root shall come forth a cockatrice, and his fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent."
(Isaiah 14:29)

"In that day the LORD with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea."
(Isaiah 27:1)

"And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."
(Revelation 12:9)

It is easily confirmed that the serpent in Genesis 3 is Satan. If you read Revelation 12:9, you can see that the author is talking of the "old serpent" (Genesis 3) and calling him, "the Devil, and Satan." Now, with that established, we know who the serpent is. When thinking of *what* the serpent is, a snake may come to mind. After all, many translations use the word snake instead of serpent. However, examine the previous three scriptures. In them, you will see other creatures used to refer to the serpent. Isaiah 14:29 speaks of the "cockatrice" and "a fiery flying serpent." Isaiah 27:1 talks about a "leviathan" and mentions "the dragon that is in the sea." Then,

1 Subtil is synonymous with subtle.

2 All scriptures reference the 1769 King James Version (also known as the Authorized Version) of the Holy Bible.

in Revelation 12:9, the author writes about "the great dragon." None of these creatures are a mere snake you may see at the local zoo or in a nearby field. What is a serpent?

*Serpent: snake; a subtil or malicious person (figuratively);*³

By that definition, there is another connection between the words serpent and snake. However, the Greeks often interchanged serpent with dragon. This is the case throughout the book of Revelation--more specifically the twelfth chapter, verse nine. The author⁴ of this book specifically calls the serpent a dragon. A dragon can be defined as a fabulous kind of serpent (perhaps as supposed to fascinate) or a sea-monster.⁵ Recall from Isaiah 27:1 the creature known as leviathan. A leviathan is a serpent (especially the crocodile or some other large sea monster). Finally, examine Isaiah 14:29 and notice the serpent being referred to as a cockatrice, which is also a dragon and is said to be the equivalent to the Greek basilisk. The basilisk is the "king of serpents."⁶ These references (dragon, leviathan, and cockatrice) are synonymous to, and different forms of, the serpent and portray it as an elaborate creature--far from a common snake.

Matthew Henry⁷ mentioned that the serpent in Genesis 3 could have been either a likeness or a physical serpent. He wrote in his commentary⁸, "Whether it was only the visible shape and appearance of a serpent (as some think those were of which we read, Exodus 7:12), or whether it was a real living serpent, actuated and possessed by the devil, is not certain: by God's permission it might be either."⁹ He also speculated on the form of this serpent by saying, "Perhaps it was a flying serpent, which seemed to come from on high as a messenger from the upper world, one of the seraphim; for the fiery serpents were flying, Isaiah 14:29." This makes sense because Satan is a master of deception and can come in many different forms. It says in 2 Corinthians 11:14 that, "...for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light." So, Matthew Henry's questioning of Satan's form as the serpent is reasonable. Throughout the Bible, serpent is used to be a metaphor for a deadly, subtle, malicious enemy. Therefore, it isn't necessary

3 Webster's 1828 Dictionary

4 The author of the book of Revelation was said to be an exile on the Island of Patmos, which is a Greek island.

5 Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries

6 Wikipedia entry for "Basilisk"

7 Matthew Henry (1662 - 1714), was an English minister and Bible commentator.

8 Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible

9 Exodus 7:12 - "For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents: but Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods."

to say Satan was any more of a garden snake than a more elaborate creature, such as a dragon. Keep in mind that a dragon is not necessarily a towering, fire-breathing, beast of a reptile.

Recall Strong's definition of a dragon: a fabulous kind of serpent (perhaps as supposed to fascinate). The adjective, fabulous, can mean to be barely credible, extremely pleasing, or lacking factual basis or historical validity. Fascinate means to intrigue, capture, or attract.¹⁰ Therefore, we can amplify the definition of dragon to be something like: a barely credible--lacking factual basis--or extremely pleasing kind of deadly, subtle, malicious enemy (perhaps as supposed to intrigue, capture, or attract). Does that definition--being figurative in nature--not describe Satan?

This note is not striving to prove whether or not Genesis 3 was referring to a common snake possessed by Satan or a more elaborate creature (i.e. dragon, leviathan, or cockatrice). The Bible is not one-hundred percent clear on the matter. Matthew Henry put it best in his commentary by saying, "...by God's permission it might be either." However, this note is written to get you to think outside the words on the page and see the meaning or the implication the serpent has in the context of the Holy Scriptures.

¹⁰ WordNet definitions for fabulous and fascinate; Princeton University