

Genesis Three – The Fall of Mankind

The function of Genesis 3 within the Biblical Narrative

In Genesis 1 and 2 we are shown a glimpse of God’s ideal for life before sin and evil entered into human experience. As we read the account of creation, it’s painstakingly obvious there is a wide chasm between the way things were versus the way things are now. The question Genesis 1 and 2 beg is: What happened? Genesis 3 provides us with that answer.

We may also talk about this in terms of our worldview questions: what is wrong with the world? What is wrong with us? Genesis 3 begins to provide God’s answers to these big questions of life.

Genesis 3:1a – “Now the Serpent.”

The narrative of Genesis 3 ominously opens with, “And now the serpent...”

“THE serpent”?

Not “A serpent”?

It seems we never get too far from grammar. The author employs the definite article (i.e. “the”) and not the indefinite article (“a” or “an”).



As one scholar notes, “This is an unusual and somewhat of a mysterious way to introduce a new character.” There may be two reason why an author may use the definite article in introducing a new character onto the scene. One is the anaphoric use of the article, meaning it refers back to someone or something that has already been mentioned or is familiar to the audience.

I'm pretty sure no serpent has been mentioned so far in Genesis 1 and 2. Unless I'm really blind. Could it be that the audience was familiar with this serpent? Were there stories floating around about him? Could have been. We don't know.

But in addition to the anaphoric use of the article, there is also the cataphoric use. This is when the article does not refer back to someone already familiar to the audience. Instead, it is forward-looking and most often utilized to engage and hold the reader's (or hearers') attention with a 'read and find out' message. In other words, it aims to arrest the audience's attention enticing them to keep reading.

THE serpent? What serpent?

It's as if Moses, by employing the definite article is saying to his audience, "You have to know about this serpent! This is too important not to know about. There is one who wants to derail God's good plan for creation. There is one who wants to destroy you and is looking at every turn of your life to throw you off, paralyze you, and rob you of God's blessings. Read on and find out about his schemes and tactics so you too don't fall prey."

To play our parts well in the story we need to know about THE serpent. Let's start with his identity. Genesis never gives us the serpent's identity, but here is what we do know.

First, we know just as well today what Moses and his audience knew in their day: generally speaking, snakes don't talk. At least I've never heard one talk. So, we are left to either conclude that there is some sort of supernatural interference taking place, or the serpent is imagery employed by the author to depict a being or power which stands opposed to God's good creation.

Second, the wording in Genesis 3:4 suggests that this serpent has knowledge of God's command given to Adam in Genesis 2:17. This is obvious from his use of what in Hebrew grammar is called the infinitive absolute. That both God and then the serpent uses this construction is too rare to just be happenstance. It implies the serpent somehow had firsthand knowledge of God's command to Adam. And it will not do to say the serpent was just repeating what the woman told him, since the woman does not directly quote God.

The Serpent

2 And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, **lest you die.**'" 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "**You will not surely die.**"

Infinitive Absolute

From where did the serpent get his verbiage?

Gen. 2:17:

"for in the day that you eat of it **you shall surely die.**"

The serpent, on the other hand, negates exactly what God said. This raises the question: How did this serpent ascertain such knowledge? This too points in the direction of some supernatural ability, as the serpent, in addition to being able to speak, was somehow able to eavesdrop and make itself privy to God's commands to the humans (Or perhaps this dark power was already lurking around the garden as Adam is instructed in Genesis 2:15 to "serve" and "guard" the garden. From what would Adam need to guard the garden?).

Whatever the serpent is, its language and line of questioning betray its motives. The Serpent's response to the woman in Genesis 3:4 stands in direct contradiction to God's command in Genesis 2:17. Further, the serpent is working to incite the couple to disobedience. The serpent approaches the woman and demonstrates its aim to subvert God's authority structure. This may lead us to conclude that the supernatural interference is demonic in nature.

We've also asked the question of why does the woman seem to so nonchalantly enter into a conversation with a talking snake like *no big deal*? Were talking critters just a normal thing back in the garden? Perhaps the Hebrew word for serpent (*nachash*) gives us further information.

Some have suggested that there is a relationship between the noun *nachash* (meaning "serpent"), the verb *nichash* (verbal form of "serpent" meaning "to give an omen, practice divinization) and the adjective *nechashet* (adjectival form of "serpent" meaning copper, bronze, or brazen). The implication suggested is that there is a triple-entendre in the word "serpent" suggesting what is represented is one who is capable of giving information from the divine realm (thus seeming wise and inviting the woman to listen and entertain the message) and an angelic being (the manifestation of angels – and the divine – is often associated with light or shiny appearance). It is also

suggested that this angelic being, by virtue of utilizing a snake whose movement is restricted to low on the ground, symbolically has already been brought low in judgement (i.e. cast down from heaven cf. Is. 14:12) – in addition to the extra humiliation and defeat pronounced in Gen. 3:14-15. If, as we have already said, the garden is a place where heaven and earth intersected, being engaged by an angelic like being may not have been all that strange of an occurrence. But it is here that we are now in the world of conjecture. Let's return back to the deposit of Jewish literature and the whole counsel of God in Scripture to get at the identity of the serpent.

While Genesis never calls the serpent Satan, both Jewish interpretive tradition and the New Testament author identify the serpent with Satan. Here's a brief survey:

- *Wisdom of Solomon 2:23-24*
 - “For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity. Nevertheless through envy of the devil came death into the world: and they that are of his side do find it.”
- *John 8:44*
 - “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”
- *Revelation 12:9*
 - “And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.”
- *Revelation 20:2*
 - And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years,

In Revelation 20:2 the ancient serpent is identified as the *Devil* and *Satan*. In the Greek language, this means *slanderer* and *deceiver*, respectively. The serpent exhibits

both these attributes in Genesis 3. He slanders God by saying His command of Genesis 2:17 is a lie and that God has ulterior motives. The serpent then uses this slander to deceive the woman and the man. So now let's turn to the Evil One's modus operandi. We'll need to know how he works so we too can "guard" our "gardens".

First, he makes God seem ridiculous by asking, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" Delitzsch calls this phrase a "half-interrogatory, half-exclamatory expression of astonishment." In the words of Collins, the phrase does not express uncertainty as to *whether* God has said it, but implies instead that it is so unreasonable that God must be far too restrictive to be trusted. My interpretation: "You've got to be kidding me. Did God really say that? Is God that ridiculous?" The serpent starts to present God as withholding and someone with less than man's best in view.

Second, the serpent directs the woman's gaze away from the loving faithfulness and care of God. He does this from dropping "the LORD" from "the LORD God." Throughout Genesis 2:4-3:24 the name of the deity is The LORD God (*YHWH Elohim*). Yet the serpent only calls him "God (*Elohim*)," and he and the woman use only that title in their conversation (Genesis 3:1b-5). The name God (*Elohim*) is used in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and brings to mind his role of cosmic Creator and Ruler who transcends His creation. The LORD (YHWH) calls to mind God's activity in personally entering into covenantal relationship with human beings. The one who lovingly went to work to provide a companion just right for the man, placing them in the garden, providing for them. Collins goes on to say, "By dropping the covenant name, then, the serpent is probably advancing his program of temptation by diverting the woman's attention from the relationship the LORD had established. The woman's use of it shows that she is trapped. She is forgetting the relationship that God has entered into with her and the man."

Third, he directly contradicts what God says will happen as a consequence of their decisions. In 3:4 the serpent undermines the spiritual reality of this world and God's economy. He then goes on even further as presenting God as actually withholding something good from the couple. This is the last time we hear from the serpent in Genesis 3. He never tells the woman to eat. He merely lets her mind now run with suggestions and for her to draw her own conclusions about God and the decision at hand. Moberly comments, "It is noteworthy that the serpent never tells the woman to transgress God's prohibition. He simply calls into questions both God's

truthfulness (by denying God's warning) and God's trustworthiness (by impugning his motives), and leaves the woman to draw her own conclusions."

Let's summarize the serpent's strategy:

- The serpent begins to erode trust in God by painting God as ridiculous and withholding.
- Promises things that aren't ultimately his to give – things you already potentially have in God/Christ (They were already created in the likeness of God!)
- Laces truth with error distorting God's truth just enough to make the entire pill easier to swallow. (uses language similar to God's language)
- Removes the relational aspect of God, making God seem aloof and disinterested and invites the couple to forget God's prior faithfulness (uses the name *Elohim* instead of *YHWH Elohim*)

He employs the same tactics today with you and me. Be on guard.

In what areas of your life are you currently questioning God's goodness, love, and provision for you? Be careful, this is where Satan and his minions like to play. Take some time to talk to God about this and remember His faithfulness.