

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



*Buy me a coffee*

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_scripture-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php)

in the book a broad universalism which is much in the same line of thought as the books of Ruth and Job. We should therefore date the work in the middle of the fifth century B.C.—a period when the conflict between universalism and particularism was at its height.

In speaking of the mystical experiences of the Old Testament one's thoughts turn instinctively towards the Cantic of Canticles—but how varied are the opinions and how strange are many of them on this subject ! A. Robert<sup>1</sup> reminds us that a Catholic may not abandon the inspired spiritual sense of this book which has been included in the Canon of Scripture and recognized as profoundly mystical by the whole of Catholic Tradition. To understand it, we must take into account the methods of composition which were in vogue after the exile—this was the era of the scribe, of profound study of the Scriptures and of attempts to work out in ancient terminology the new problems of social and religious life. Hence as a result, there are many subtleties which are quite conformable to the Oriental mind. We have then to find the literary background to the work. In applying this method, the author recognizes certain Deuteronomic texts as being at the base of the description of the Bridegroom (v, 11–15), namely, Deut. xii, 5 etc. And this allows us to identify him with the Temple. In the same way, the description of the Bride based on Osee ii, 5 ; xiv, 6–8, identifies her with the Holy land—a moving aspect of the general theme of the book which is the union of Yahweh with Israel.

R. TAMISIER.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

*Is it possible to take the Hebrew word translated as "serpent" in Genesis ch. iii, as coming from a root meaning "to shine," and translate it as "shining one" ? In this case Satan would have appeared as an "angel of light" (cf. II Cor. xi, 14) and the difficulty about talking snakes would disappear.*

The Hebrew word in question is *nahash*. There is a root *nahash* which may possibly mean to shine, but which Brown, Driver, Briggs give as of unknown meaning. The word in dispute here however is always taken as coming from the root *nahash* to hiss, and meaning serpent. The impossibility of the suggested translation "shining one" may be further seen by simply substituting it in the text, and seeing what havoc is wrought in the sense, e.g. verses 1 and 14.

The symbolism of the serpent is full of meaning and it is to be found in many ancient religions of the East, sometimes in close association with gods, sometimes as itself a god. In Egyptian legends "it usually appears as a rebel, in eternal conflict with gods and men in the nether

<sup>1</sup> *La description de l'Epoux et de l'Epouse dans le Cantique*, in *Melanges Podechard*, Lyons, 1945, pp. 211–23.

world," Yahuda, *The Accuracy of the Bible*, p. 183. In one instance the serpent is depicted with human arms and legs, standing upright before a deity and putting a round-shaped cake in its mouth. It was the role of the serpent to supply the gods with food in the nether world. In Palestine itself before the Israelite conquest, we learn from archaeology, the serpent was the emblem or attribute of gods or goddesses of fertility and hence of sexual life, cf. Cook, *The Religion of Ancient Palestine in the Light of Archæology*, and Coppens, *La Connaissance du Bien et du Mal et le Pêché du Paradis*, 1948, Louvain. There would therefore be nothing surprising in the use of the serpent in the Genesis narrative to indicate a superior being, while attaching a somewhat different meaning to it, namely making it stand for Satan himself.

These early chapters of Genesis are admitted to contain a certain amount of symbolism, as is stated in the recent Letter of the Biblical Commission elsewhere in this issue; and since the purpose of this symbolism was to make these profound truths intelligible to the common folk, the actual symbols used would naturally be those with which they were familiar, always provided that they did not in any way militate against the exalted character of the inspired text. Now the Israelites had spent centuries in Egypt and had contact with the peoples of Canaan even before the actual conquest. Hence they must have been acquainted with the symbolism of the serpent.

Whether the serpent of Genesis ch. iii, is to be taken as a symbol or whether Satan actually appeared to Eve in the form of a serpent cannot be decided with any degree of assurance. It has been said that the reply of the Biblical Commission on the historical character of the first three chapters of Genesis (1909) excludes the former interpretation. But this does not appear to be the case. The Commission, in enumerating the nine points which must be taken as historical, mentions the transgression of the divine command at the instigation of the Devil, under the appearance of a serpent (*diabolo sub serpentis specie suasore*). This wording certainly seems to suggest that the appearance under the form of a serpent is to be taken as historical fact; but another explanation is possible. Since the Devil is not mentioned by name in the narrative, the Commission felt it necessary to specify exactly whom they referred to and this might account for the mention of the serpent in their list of historical points, without necessarily implying that it is to be taken as historical fact, cf. *Enchiridion Biblicum*, no. 334; Ceuppens, *Genèse* i-iii, p. 153.

R. C. FULLER.

*Why should the mention of the bodies of the saints rising from the dead after Christ's resurrection (Matt. xxvii, 52-3) be inserted here just after Christ's death? What exactly happened and what is its significance?*

The reason for its mention here is probably because of its connection with the earthquake which caused the opening of the tombs. It is hardly