

Reflection Paper No. 1: "Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith"

DRAWING MEANING FROM A SCRIPTURAL TEXT: GENESIS CHAPTER THREE

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Re'shiyth (Strong 106), Hebrew for "beginning"¹, the Greek of which is Genesis, is the first book of the Sacred Scriptures and is filled with fascinating aetiologies and eponymous tales² (Gnuse 16-17). These writings are not meant to be factual stories of actual happenings as the modern scientific mind would retell a story. There are facts as we account such, but the point is to tell the story of our beginnings. In this paper, I will explore the ideas in chapter three of serpent (and Satan), prophecy, temptation, the nature of humankind, sin, punishment, the renaming of the woman and the banishment using various commentaries and writings. I intend to sift through this study for a greater understanding of what the text means and what implications it might have for my life, work and ministry.

The account opens describing the serpent. Commentators have interpreted this to be the devil (Henry 2), evil, cleverness and magical power, a god or the dragon of chaos (Marks 5). In the context of the story, however, the serpent is a "mischievous creature made by God," who "recedes into the background when this narrative function is accomplished" (Clifford 12). It was later traditions of Christianity that interpreted this serpent as Satan. The word used for serpent translates: a snake (from its hiss)³ (Strong 78). Because of the millennia of Tradition that has interpreted the serpent as Satan, I will next consider the development of the idea of Satan and the prophecy that follows from a discussion of this concept.

The only word in Hebrew used in the entire Old Testament (Strong 115) for *Satan*, means an opponent, especially (with the article prefixed) Satan, the archenemy of good. This comes from a primary root word meaning to attack, (figuratively) accuse⁴ (Strong 115).

"A satan" is seen "in the parallel passage (2 Sm 24:1⁵)," as "the Lord's anger. The change in term reflects the changed theological outlook of postexilic Israel, when evil could no longer be attributed directly to God. At an earlier period...satan ('adversary,' or especially in a court of law 'accuser'), when not used of men, designated an angel who accused men before God (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7; Zech 3:1f). Here, as in later Judaism (Wis 2:24) and in the New Testament, satan, or the 'devil' (from the Greek translation of the word), designates an evil spirit who tempts men to wrongdoing" (Notes on 1 Chron 21:1).

This last designation of a spirit who tempts is the entire slant of the Matthew Henry Commentary when referring to the serpent, temptation, sin and the fall of the man and woman. "The serpent becomes a symbol of evil, and hostility between man and beast begins" (Marks 6). "Satan may tempt, but he cannot force; may persuade us to cast ourselves down, but he cannot cast us down" (Henry 1). In other words, the only power Satan has is deception.

The prophecy comes from the second part of the punishment of the serpent (v. 15). There is debate on who will strike the serpent's head, he or she. The Hebrew here provides no help. "'He' refers to offspring, which is masc. in Hebrew. Christian tradition has sometimes referred it to Christ, but the literal reference is to the human descendants of Eve, who will regard snakes as enemies" (Clifford 12). I differ with this statement, for most references I have read have interpreted the serpent as Satan.

"Since the antecedent for *he* and *his* is the collective noun *offspring*, i.e., all the descendants of the woman, a more exact rendering of the sacred writer's words would be, 'They will strike...at their heels.' However later theology saw in this passage more than unending hostility between snakes and men. The serpent was regarded as the devil (Wis 2:24; Jn 8:44; Rv 12:9; 20:2), whose eventual defeat seems implied in the contrast between head and heel. Because 'the Son of God appeared that he might destroy the works of the devil' (1 Jn 3:8), the passage can be understood as the first promise of a redeemer for fallen mankind. The woman's offspring then is primarily Jesus Christ" (Notes Gen 3:15).

I would conclude from the various interpretations here that there are many different levels of meaning in a scripture passage and that they can all be true.

The commentators I have consulted treat the temptation account, when mentioned, as starting in the first verse, except Clifford. He notes a word play between *naked* (*arum*) and *subtle* (*aruwm*)⁶. Viewed in this way, the commentator observes that the couple's eyes are opened in shame, not wisdom (12). The exchange between the woman and the creature shows a certain subtlety, living up to the word play astutely pointed out above. The snake goes directly to the significant part in questioning the word God had spoken, making the question seem innocent. As one commentator puts it, the snake implied that God had lied (Henry 1). Her answer shows the depth of the subtlety. By entertaining the question and justifying it with an answer, she, in one sense, invited the serpent's bite, which was to substitute false reasons for God's command. The woman can take the blame for the follow-up question because of her answer (Marks 5). Satan is a liar and a scoffer (Henry 1). It seems logical that liars would accuse the innocent of the thing they are guilty of to cover their own tracks. They perpetuate the lie by including others. "Both" the question and answer are "inaccurate interpretations of the originally simple divine command in 2:16-17" (Clifford 12). The woman was probably near the tree, for she saw the tree was "good for food, pleasing to the eyes and desirable for gaining wisdom" (v. 6). "They that would not eat the forbidden fruit, must not come near the forbidden tree" (Henry 1).

"Not that they were blind before, nor yet that their eyes were opened to any more perfect knowledge of good; but only to the unhappy experience of having lost the good of original grace and innocence, and incurred the dreadful evil of sin. From whence followed a shame of their being naked; which they minded not before;

because being now stripped of original grace, they quickly began to be subject to the shameful rebellions of the flesh" (Douay-Rheims, v. 7).

The nature of the human is seen in analysis of the serpent's final half-truth. The serpent finally denies "the death penalty for disobedience" (Mark 5) and substitutes the lie that knowledge will be gained by partaking of it.

"The idea that man here lost immortality, though parallel with the notion in the Babylonian myths of Adapa and Gilgamesh, is not consonant with biblical ideas about man. The OT thinks in terms...of his life as fulfillment rather than mere existence. The serpent speaks of death as the end to mortal existence...in a sense, speaks truly: the man does not die. But the author obviously means to express by 'life' more than existence, and the death threatened by God...can be understood as separation from the possibility of free and perfect enjoyment of life, expulsion from the garden where fulfillment was granted. Death is a separation from God, the life-giver" (Mark 5-6).

This view is elaborated upon more fully by Theophilus. Man was neither mortal nor immortal.

"He was by nature neither mortal nor immortal. For if He had made him immortal from the beginning, He would have made him God...if He had made him mortal, God would seem to be the cause of his death. God made people capable of both; if he should incline to the things of immortality, keeping the commandment of God, he should receive as reward from Him immortality, and should become God; but if...he should turn to the things of death, disobeying God, he should himself be the cause of death to himself. For God made man free, and with power over himself" (Theophilus Chap. 27).

"They heard the sound of the Lord God" (v. 8). "Rather they discerned the approach of the Lord by a certain breeze. As soon, therefore, as they had sinned, God appeared to them, producing consciousness of their sin, and calling them to repentance" (Hippolytus). Their natural punishment, or results of their action, starts, when the man and woman hid themselves because they knew they were naked, a direct result of the disobedience of eating from the forbidden tree. The announced punishment came in the

order of the sin. The serpent will crawl on the ground, eat dirt and fight a losing battle, ending up with a crushed head. I draw on Clifford (12-13) exclusively for the following comments, being the most cogent of the three full commentaries used. The woman will bear children with great pain, "symbolizing the loss of original ease with oneself and one's environment." He also notes the loss of the originally intended equality of the woman and the man, not by design, but sin. This acts as an apology for the subordinate place of the woman in Israelite society⁷, enunciated in, "Your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master" (v. 16b). If the idea of the apologetic is true, it could be used to justify the ideal of equality⁸ in society. He likewise calls the man the "central actor in the story" and observes that man is not cursed, only the earth is cursed because of his disobedience. His punishment is hard labor from which he will obtain sustenance from the ground with its newly acquired thorns and thistles.

"The man called his wife Eve," (v. 20) seems to be better suited to fit after v. 24 (Notes Gen 3:20). It appears here as if the redactors have misplaced part of the story, since it seems it would more logically follow the settling out of the garden. The Hebrew name for Eve (hawwa) is related to the word for living (hay) (Notes Gen 3:20). The renaming brings out differing approaches in Marks and Clifford. The first holds the man "has indeed become like a god, refusing to think of himself as a creature" (Marks 6). This would imply that the man refused to repent of his sin and continued therein. This is a rather dark, negative approach to the passage. The passage follows the man's naming of all the creatures and the woman (2:19-23). It could be argued from this basis that Marks is off in his interpretation of the meaning here. Clifford envisions this to be "a subtle but significant gesture" of renaming "his wife" and sees that the "couple's sin has not altered

the divine intent to make them fruitful" (Clifford 13). I believe this to be a much more solidly based interpretation, for we cannot forget the biblical principle that God does not take his word away after it is given (Is 31:2; Ps 110:4; Is 40:8). If the writer of the story wanted to show Marks' interpretation, he⁹ should have shown some other punishment for this next offense. Instead, it is written, "God made leather garments for them" (v. 21). Marks tells us the "author thinks¹⁰ of God's gift...as a special grace" (Marks 6). "God's clothing them is another conciliatory sign, an accommodation to human limitations" (Clifford 13). These views of the grace and conciliation God gives to the first people are beautiful, yet they do not address at all how God got the leather to make the garments. *Leather* comes from *owr*, meaning skin (as naked) and by implication hide, leather; *garment* comes from *k^cthoneth* or *kuttoneth* (an unused root) meaning to cover (Strong 58 & 86)¹¹. If God truly made leather garments for the first humans, he would naturally have had to kill animals to do so. This could be a priestly editor hiding in the story a link to the sacrifices of the temple. By doing so, the redactors could have easily read back into the story subtle inferences to temple sacrifice, as can we Christians read into this a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ to redeem all people and the Eucharist which is the extension of this sacrifice.

"The man has become like *one of us*," (v. 22ff, emphasis added) always struck me as such an odd passage. This is related to Gen 1:26, "Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness" (emphasis added). *Us* comes from *hayah* (to exist, be, become), related to *havah* (to breathe, to be). *Hayah* can be broken down into *ha* (even, lo) and *yah* (I am, Ex 3:13ff & the name of God). *One* comes from *echad* (united, i.e. one), related to *achad* (to unify) (Strong 32, 31 & 10)¹². I did a talk in 10th grade using Carl Sagan's idea that the

passages in Genesis proved aliens came to earth. More recently, I have thought about these passages in terms of the Catholic teaching of the Trinity. This does fit with the “*us/our*” passages in this sacred text. There is ample evidence of the truth of the teaching of the Trinity throughout both Scripture and Tradition. I find Anderson's idea of a Heavenly Council fascinating (Anderson 530). The biblical evidence for this view is found in Gen 1:26; 3:22; 6:2-4; Zec 3:1-5; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6, with secondary references in 1 Chron 21:1; Wis 14:6; Bar 3:26-28; Lk 22:31-33; Rev 12.9. A curious term that appears in Job is *sons of God*. Sons comes from ben (a son, as a builder of the family name), which is from banah (to build); God from elohiym (gods in the ordinary sense, but specifically used in the plural thus, especially with the article, of the supreme God; occasionally applied by way of deference to magistrates; and sometimes as a superlative as in angels). This is the plural of elowahh or eloahh (a deity or the Deity), which comes from el (strength, mighty, especially the Almighty, but used of any deity) (Strong 21-2 and 12)¹³. It is unclear from the various passages and original language exactly to what is being referred, yet I get the sense that there seems to be a group of 'gods.' When God banished the man and woman from the garden, Theophilus bespeaks, "And God showed great kindness to man in this, that He did not suffer him to remain in sin for ever; but...by a kind of banishment, cast him out of Paradise, in order that, having by punishment expiated...and having been disciplined, he should afterwards be restored. Wherefore also, when man had been formed in this world, it is mystically written in Genesis, as if he had been twice placed in Paradise; so that the one was fulfilled when he was placed there, and the second will be fulfilled after the resurrection and judgment (Theophilus Chap. 26).

As I reflect on this grand chapter I have attempted to study to clarify the meaning it contains, I can see clearly how involved this kind of research is. I do enjoy it, but am not a scholar and have a much greater appreciation for the scholar now than before I did this work. It is obvious from this attempt that it much easier to use my Strong's Concordance if I knew Hebrew. I have learned how useful it is to have several sources, particularly the commentaries. Especially when I found an idea not to my liking, I was challenged to examine what was said and to separate it from what I thought had been said. This appreciation alone will reap untold benefits as I personally study and learn, will help me to listen to other's views and be more tolerant and will affect the methods and means of my ministry, since I have taught for several years and gravitate toward that kind of work. That word *work* reminds me of the punishment the man received for his disobedience. I, too, am a man and find work burdensome and exhausting, not always to my liking. With the understanding I have gained in this area, I will not complain as much about the difficulties I have to endure as I try to make a living. It will also make me more aware of the pressures that all men undergo. Understanding the source of stress is a first step in dealing with the root of the problem, both for others and me. This affords me a different understanding of the origins of the root that forces me to acknowledge that, "Maybe I don't know everything."

I found the remarks that Clifford had concerning women to be interesting and thought provoking. These thoughts made me analyze my own thoughts about the identity of women are as a general group. I have never really given that much thought at all in the past. It will affect my dealings with women, sensitizing me to the difficulties they face, externally from not only the pressures of a male dominated world, but also how those

pressures affect them internally. The women I know seem to be more affected by emotive experience than men are. This allows me to accept them for who they are and how they process their own life experience.

The concept of myth and the role of story in the life of a people is an idea I never quite grasped. This study is the culmination of much work throughout my life in being able to see and appreciate this concept in terms of scripture. I was raised Catholic, but left the Church on a lie that it was the Whore of Revelation. Neither they nor I knew any better. When I was a Protestant, I accumulated resources such as the Concordance I used for this paper, several Bibles, and a desire to know what God expected of me so that I could live in accord with his holy will. That experience of *protest* gave me the understanding that I had the authority to interpret Scripture inerrantly, that the truth was simple and could be ascertained by any one who was willing to give God their *fiat*. This course has caused me to reach deep within myself to help me to understand some reasons why the Bible is not a science as we think of the concept, this paper being the culmination of this search. The different types of literature in the Scriptures touched me in the deep recesses of the heart. I have learned how my faith does not have to be scandalized because not everything in the Bible might be literally true or even factual. The realization hits me now that I am more in need of this course of studies than I was aware before I entered into it. I perceive that I still have residue hurt and bitterness from that experience of leaving from and returning to my Church. Not that I was not aware of this before, but this course has put it "in my face," and this paper has become, for me, a spiritual watershed. I thank my God for bringing me safe thus far. Surely, he will bring me home.

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¹ Strong's translates this as the first in place, time, order or rank (word no. 7225, Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary [HCD]). See Anderson 4 for a variant spelling. "Books are often titled by opening or key words" (Anderson 5, note c). All Hebrew words are reprinted here without the letter markings.

² An aetiology is a story "to explain the origin of things." "An eponym is a real or legendary person to whom a group or nation gave respect as their ancestor."

³ Nachash (#5175) comes from nachash (#5172), properly to hiss, i.e. whisper a (magic) spell; generally to prognosticate (Strong respectively, HCD). If the letter markings were present, the word difference would be clear.

⁴ The original words are satan (#7854) and satan (#7853), respectively.

⁵ All scripture quotations are taken from the New American Bible.

⁶ See Clifford page 12 for Gen 2:25 and Strong page 91 for Gen 3:1, respectively.

⁷ Clifford quotes here from Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality* 126-128.

⁸ I mean by equality, equal respect, pay, position and expectation. I do not mean by this word the idea of unisex, men can be women and women can be men, physically. The physical make-up of men and women are obviously different, with the corresponding roles generally fixed (i.e. procreation where the man brings one thing, the woman the other).

⁹ Odds are the tellers and redactors of the story were males because of their society.

¹⁰ I am not sure if he means the author of the biblical text or if he is referring to himself. I was just wondering how he could possibly know what the scriptural writer, of which there most likely wasn't just one (Gnuse 15-21), *thinks* concerning the clothing of Adam and Eve with the garments. I have to conclude the commentator is referring to himself.

¹¹ From #5785 and #3801, respectively, HCD.

¹² From #1961, #1933, #1888, #259 and #258, respectively, see note, HCD. Note: Yah is not in Strong's as such. I know of Yah from former studies in an undergraduate Old Testament class with Wayland Baptist University, Hawaii Campus. My professor was Dr. Brangenburg.

¹³ From #1121, #1129, #430, #433, #410, respectively, HCD.