

The Snake in Genesis

The Genesis story of the couple and the snake is inspired by the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh (700 BCE), which is a variation on the earlier Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh (2000 BCE). Gilgamesh, a mythological hero, is afraid of dying and goes in search of Utnapishtim who obeyed the gods when they instructed him to build a boat to preserve himself, family and animals at the time of a great flood. For his obedience Utnapishtim and his wife were granted immortality. Gilgamesh finds Utnapishtim and asks him for the secret of immortality. He is told that he cannot have immortality but he may be able to restore his youth. He receives this answer, 'Acquire the plant whose root is like camel-thorn, whose thorn, like a rose's, will spike your hands. If you acquire it, you will find rejuvenation.' Camel-thorn is a low spiny Middle Eastern shrub.

To get the plant Gilgamesh has to weigh himself down with heavy stones tied to his feet and descend into Apsu, the divinity that is the vast aquifer of fresh water beneath the earth. With the plant in hand Gilgamesh sets out for home proposing to try out the plant by giving it to an elder to see if he could eat part of the plant and turn into a young man.

On his journey home Gilgamesh came to a pool of cool water and dived in. He did not notice the snake who smelt the fragrance of the plant and came up silently and carried it off. As it slithered away the snake shed its skin and emerged with a new life, becoming the only animal capable of possessing immortality by means of rejuvenation. Gilgamesh returned home in disappointment to Uruk and eventually died.

We can hear this story and think that if only Gilgamesh had not had the swim in the pool he would have lived forever. But that is not the point. Rather, the story's message is that immortality is beyond human beings. Humans belong to the cycle of nature that begins, lives for a time and then dies. Only the serpent and the mythical flood heroes had immortality. As part of the natural world humans need to accept their mortality and get over it.

The plant in the Babylonian myth gives life as restored youth. In the Genesis story it is the tree in the garden that can give life as restored youth. In both stories the snake steals the chance of this restored youth from the humans



Christians have imposed their own meaning on this story

The snake in Gen 3 is a third party coming into the scene to suggest to the couple a course of action that had never occurred to them, that is, going against God's instructions. The snake convinces the woman that the fruit of the tree is desirable to make one wise. A human will be better for having eaten of this fruit. So, vain self-improvement outweighs fidelity to God. But what is so wrong with seeking wisdom and human advancement? Wrong question. The point is, this perceived good does not cancel God-given instructions to avoid having anything to do with what was forbidden.

This is also not an 'if-only' story. Both stories are parables proclaiming that death is our common human destiny – there is no escaping it. Neither story is meant to imply that eternal life was once obtained but then swiftly lost by human beings. Not keeping immortality for long meant never having had it in the first place. It is a mistaken Christian reading to imagine that life for humans would be paradise if Adam and Eve had not listened to the snake. Jews have never read the story in the same way Christians have, and there is no concept of original sin in Judaism. After all, the Adam and Eve story is a Jewish story. Christians come-lately have taken it over and imposed their own interpretation on it.

Sin is never mentioned in the Adam and Eve tale of Genesis 3, because that is not the point. Damaging human relationship with God by not living up to expectations with integrity is more to the point. Not reaching unrealistically for the impossible is also part of the message. Realise who you are and accept it. Come to grips with your relationship with God and live according to it with loyalty and love.

The snake is never anything more than a reptile in this narrative

Notice the snake is never anything more than a snake. It is cursed as a snake in Genesis 3:14-15 and the text never implies it is equal to the humans or that it is an unearthly Satan figure. When this narrative was written there was no Satan in Jewish tradition. Satan (Hebrew: *ha-śāṭān* = the accuser/tempter) appears as a benign member of God's heavenly court in the book of Job (written 400-500 years BC). He first appears as an antagonistic being in Zechariah 3:1-2 and after that in 1 Chronicles 21:1 (written in the 300s BC). This last occurrence of *śāṭān* is without the article *ha* for 'the' in Hebrew, suggesting it is now the proper name of a diabolical being.

The key issue to bear in mind here is that Israelite biblical tradition could not conceive of a power in the universe that was opposed to God and that operated as a kind of antigod who stood as the source of all evil trying to tempt humans to defy God. Other contemporary religions had good gods and bad gods. That was the only way they could account for the existence of evil in the universe. The Jews, with their firm belief in one God, put the existence of evil down to human behaviour that selfishly went against the divine order and sinned

Satan then emerges in later writings (the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha) as a supernatural diabolical figure spreading evil and tempting human beings to rebel against God. It is only in some Jewish documents of the early Christian era (e.g., *The Life of Adam and Eve* – 1st century AD) that the snake in the Adam and Eve story is interpreted as a form of Satan. So, this is an idea that was developed over time and was certainly not there in the beginning when the Adam and Eve story in Genesis 3 was written.

Satan has become a handy cop-out for many Christians over the centuries who have argued:

I am at heart a good person and any wrong I may have done...well...the devil made me do it.

© 2020 Laurie Woods