

ARTICLE V.

THE SERPENT OF EDEN, FROM THE POINT OF VIEW
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TORPHICHEN.

“And the Serpent has been more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God hath made, and he saith unto the woman, ‘Is it true that God hath said, “Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”’ And the woman saith to the serpent, ‘Of the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat, but of the fruit of the tree which in midst of the garden God hath said, “Ye shall not eat of it, nor touch it, lest ye die?”’ And the serpent saith unto the woman, ‘Ye do not surely die, for God doth know that, in the day of your eating thereof, your eyes have been opened, and ye have been as god, knowing good and evil. . . . And the Lord God saith to the woman, ‘What this thou hast done?’ And the woman saith, ‘The serpent hath caused me to forget, and I do eat.’ And the Lord God saith unto the serpent, ‘Because thou hast done this, cursed thou above all the cattle, and above every beast of the field; on thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat, all the days of thy life. And I put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: He shall bruise thee the head, and thou shalt bruise him the heel.’— Gen. iii. 1–4, 13, 14 (Literal Translation).

RECENT interpreters have approached this passage with considerable hesitancy. They are not sure of their ground. Their remarks indicate a strong latent suspicion that, though it would not do to disturb popular impressions, the view of the serpent given here will not stand the test of modern science. We hope to show that they are mistaken. The subject is one of much importance. It has not, however, so far as we are aware, been hitherto set in lights which harmonize with other passages of scripture, or even with the demands of the popular Christianized intelligence. Critics and commentators satisfy themselves by repeating what those who have gone before them have said, and adding a few common-place remarks about alleged changes of structure in this “wisest of the beasts of the field.” The truth

seems to be, that the explanation of this transaction given by Josephus, and the pictures of the poets, have influenced many most learned students of the Bible, when they were little aware of it. "God," says the Jewish historian (Antiq. I. i. 4), "commanded that Adam and his wife should eat of all the rest of the plants, but to abstain from the tree of knowledge; and foretold to them that, if they touched it, it would prove their destruction. But while all the living creatures had one language, at that time the serpent, which then lived together with Adam and his wife, showed an envious disposition at his supposal of their living happily, and in obedience to the command of God; and imagining that, when they disobeyed him they would fall into calamities, he persuaded the woman, out of a malicious intention, to take of the tree of knowledge. . . . He also deprived the serpent of speech, out of indignation at his malicious disposition towards Adam. Besides this, he inserted poison under his tongue, and made him an enemy of men; and suggested to them that they should direct their stroke against his head, that being the place wherein lay his mischievous designs towards man, and it being easiest to take vengeance on him in that way; and when he had deprived him of the use of his feet, he made him to go rolling all along, and dragging himself upon the ground." "Hence it appears," gravely adds Whiston, the learned translator, "that Josephus thought several, at least, of the brute animals, particularly the serpent, could speak before the Fall. And I think few of the more perfect kinds of those animals want the organs of speech at this day. Many inducements there are also to a notion that the present state they are in is not their original state; and that their capacities were once much greater than we now see them, and are capable of being restored to their former condition." The place of the serpent in the temptation has influenced all men's thoughts in regard to it; and, instead of studying it as they would do other animals, many theologians have *imagined* a natural history for it. Thus Cruden, from the heading of whose

valuable Concordance so many are willing to take their knowledge of scripture, has, under the word "Serpent," recorded such notes from its nature as the following: "When he is old he has the secret of growing young again, and of stripping off his old skin, by squeezing himself between two rocks. He assaults a man if he has his clothes on, but flees if he finds him naked. When he is assaulted, his chief care is to secure his head, because his heart being under his throat, and very near his head, the readiest way to kill him is to squeeze or cut off his head. And many suppose that his chief subtlety, or wisdom, as the gospel calls it, consists in this, that he chooses to expose his whole body to danger, that he may save his head. When he goes to drink at a fountain, he first vomits up all his poison, for fear of poisoning himself as he is drinking. Though this observation be not assented to by everybody, it has nevertheless a great many defenders." And referring to the words: "They are like the deaf adder that stoppeth his ear," the illustration is at hand: "It is said," continues Cruden, "it applies one of its ears hard to the ground, and stops up the other with the end of its tail." Then as to the words: "Dust shall be the serpent's meat," he says: "It is true, however, that they eat flesh, birds, frogs, fish, fruits, grass, etc.; but as they continually creep upon the earth, it is impossible but that their food must be often defiled with dust and dirt. Some of them may really eat earth out of necessity, or at least earth-worms, which they cannot swallow without a good deal of dirt with them!" Many more like remarks might be quoted from commentaries on the holy scriptures.

Poetry has also helped to convey erroneous impressions as to this passage. An old poet (1580) introduces Satan as assuming many forms ere he took to that of the serpent:

" The fountain of our sorrow,
Thinks, now the beauty of a horse to borrow ;
Anon to creep into a haifer's side ;
Then in a cock, or in a dog to hide,

Then in a nimble hart himself to shroud ;
 Then in the starr'd plumes of a peacock proud ;
 And least he miss a mischief to effect,
 Oft changeth minde, and varies oft aspect.
 At last remembering that of all the broods,
 In mountains, plains, airs, waters, wildes, and woods,
 The knotty serpent's spotty generation
 Are filled with infectious inflammation ;
 And though they want dog's teeth, bore's tusks, bear's paws,
 The vulture's bill, bull's horns, and griphin's claws ;
 Yea, seem so weak, as if they had not might,
 To hurt us once, much less to kill us quite ;
 Yet, many times they treacherously betray vs,
 And with their breath, look, tongue, or train, they slay vs."

Milton, in "Paradise Lost," follows the older poet, as regards the changes of Satan, and with even less regard to natural history. Thus, after describing the prowling wolf's method of getting at the shepherd's folded flock, when he

"Leaps o'er the fence with ease into the fold,"

he continues the description of Satan's entrance :

"So clomb this first grand thief into God's fold.
 Thence up he flew, and on the tree of life, —
 The middle tree, and highest there that grew, —
 Sat like a cormorant." — Book IV.

Afterwards the guardian angels, Ithuriel and Zephon, are represented hastening

"To the bower direct
 In search of whom they sought ; him there they found
 Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve,
 Assaying by his devilish art to reach
 The organs of her fancy, and with them forge
 Illusions as he list, phantasms and dreams ;
 Or if, inspiring venom, he might taint
 The animal spirits." — Book IV.

Taking to himself in the long run the distinctive form, he is described, in lines of unmatched beauty, "addressing his way toward Eve" :

"Not with indented wave,
 Prone on the ground, as since ; but on his rear,
 Circular base of rising folds, that tower'd
 Fold above fold, a surging maze ; his head

Crested aloft, and carbuncle his eyes ;
 With burnished neck of verdant gold, erect
 Amidst the circling spires, that on the grass
 Floated redundant ; pleasing was his shape
 And lovely ; never since of serpent kind
 Lovelier.

“ Of his tortuous train
 Curl'd many a wanton wreath in sight of Eve,
 To lure her eye ;
 He bolder now, uncalled before her stood
 But as in gaze admiring : oft he bow'd
 His turret crest, and sleek enamelled neck,
 Fawning ; and licked the ground whereon she trod.”— Book IX.

This picture has shed its influence into some of the most homely and precious comments on the word of God. “ The devil,” says Matthew Henry, “ chose to act his part in a serpent, because it is a *specious* creature, has a spotted, dappled skin, and *then* went erect.” He piously and very truly adds ; “ Many a dangerous temptation comes to us in gay, fine colors, but they are but skin deep.”

There are, no doubt, many difficulties in this narrative, which it would be impossible to get any light on, were we to limit our attention to the words of Genesis. They must, however, be looked at in the light of other portions of the word of God. To this we now turn, and in doing so, would plead for the true historical character of the third chapter of Genesis. It is not a symbolic representation ; it is not a poem ; but a true history of some of the most momentous facts that the world has ever seen. The references to this chapter both by our Lord and his apostles show this. If there be matters in it which suggest relations between mind and matter, between the spiritual world and the material, which we cannot fully explain, let us not hide our ignorance behind fanciful attempts to solve all difficulties, because it is not in the word only but even in connection with some most familiar natural objects, that we find much which forces us to say, “ We do not know.”

The first question is : Was the serpent a true serpent ? The answer to this is given in the narrative. It is men-

tioned as one of the "beasts of the field which the Lord God had made;" and when the curse was uttered against it, it was in the words: "Thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field." It is impossible to explain away the natural meaning of these words by alleging that "this serpent was no common beast, no ordinary serpent." Neither does it strengthen our trust in the narrative to be assured that the whole transaction is designed to bring before us Satan only. There are expressions here which forbid such a construction. It has been urged that the presence of the Hebrew article before the original word points to a difference between this and all other serpents. But a little familiarity with the scripture use of the term would have shown how groundless this allegation is. In Numbers xxi. 9, Ecclesiastes x. 11, and Amos v. 19, the same form is used; and in these passages there can be no doubt a common serpent is referred to. In the last it is associated with the lion and the bear: "If a man did flee from a lion and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his head on the wall, and a serpent bit him." The passage in Genesis introduces us both to the true reptile, and to Satan, the head of sin. This combination has been too much overlooked. Yet it is in it alone we can find the key to two classes of scripture texts. The language of the Bible is peculiarly exact in all references to the creature so intimately associated with the temptation. Others of the same family are referred to, but under different names. This should lead us to look for several species. The word in this passage is *nāhāsh*, and corresponds to the Greek term *ophis*, from which, in natural science, the great order of true serpents is named *Ophidia*. Following the scriptural use of the word, we next find it in Gen. xlix. 17, "Dan shall be a serpent (*nāhāsh*) by the way," he shall be subtle, cunning, crafty; "an adder (*shēphīphōn*) in the path" — the *cerastes*, noted for its venom — he shall be hurtful to others. "And the Lord said unto him, what is that in thy hand? And he said a rod. And he said cast it on the

ground ; and it became a serpent (*nāhāsh*),” an object of terror, for “Moses fled from before it” (Exod. iv. 2, 3). “And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people ; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee : pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole ; and it shall come to pass that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole ; and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived” (Numb. xxi. 6-9). Here the same word is used throughout, except in vs. 8, where we have one introduced to express the bright or fiery appearance (*sārāph*). “Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents and scorpions, and drought ; where there was no water” (Deut. viii. 15). “Their poison is like the poison of a serpent (*nāhāsh*), they are like the deaf adder (*yethon*), that stoppeth her ear” (Ps. lviii. 4). “Look not on the wine when it is red, when it giveth his color in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent (*nāhāsh*), and stingeth like an adder (*tziphōnē*)” (Prov. xxiii. 32). It is suggestive that this same term is used for the constellation to which Job refers, when he says : “By his spirit he hath garnished the heavens ; his hand hath formed Nahash, the crooked serpent” (Job xxvi. 13), an expression to be kept in mind in connection with the worship of the serpent, to which reference will be made. The use of the New Testament equivalents for these words shows the same exactness and discrimination. “Ye serpents (*ophis*) ; ye generation of vipers (*echidna*)” (Matt. xxiii. 33). “As Moses lifted up the serpent (*ophis*) in the wilderness” (John iii. 14). “For their power is in their mouth and in their tails ; for their tails were like unto serpents (*ophis*)” (Rev. ix. 19). “And he

swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly. And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land" (Jonah i. 17; ii. 1, 10). Our Lord himself acknowledged the historical character of this, when he said: "As Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matt. xii. 40). Jesus, as the Lord of nature, once and again showed how all things obeyed him. One example will occur to most, viz. that of the stater in the fish's mouth: "lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea and cast an hook and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money; that take, and give unto them for me and thee" (Matt. xvii. 27). From these passages it is plain that God could and did use the lower animals in as wonderful a way in order to good, as Satan here used the serpent in order to evil. Besides, we have proof that such influence has been permitted him. It has not been appointed to him, but in virtue of his spiritual power he has not been hindered from taking it. The whole miracle of the cure of the Gadarene demoniac testifies to this. The devils truly entered into the swine, and so influenced them, that they hastened over the cliffs into the sea, and were killed. Jesus did not send them into the swine, but he did not hinder them from taking their own way. It is thus clear from scripture, that such a power of that which is spiritual over brute nature as was seen in the temptation, is more than once recognized in the word of God. This of itself strips the narrative of much of its strangeness. It indeed removes its chief difficulty. Even in man's relations with the lower animals we see something of the same kind: we see him leaving the impress of his mind and affections on the beasts put under him so strongly that they show the power of both in their actions. "In our common life, the horse, and the dog no less, are eminently receptive

of the spiritual conditions of their appointed lord and master, man. With what electric swiftness does the courage or fear of the rider pass into the horse; and so too the gladness or depression of its master is almost instantaneously reflected and reproduced in the faithful dog" (Trench). The poet carries these thoughts into these relations, and addressing Satan as "ruthless murderer of immortal souls," he pictures him as bringing down man, "whose spirit goeth upwards," to the level of the beasts, "whose spirit goeth downwards."

"Thou play'st the lion when thou doost ingage
 Blood-thirsty Nero's barbarous heart with rage,
 While flesht in murders (butcher-like) he paints
 The saint-poor world with the deer blood of saints.
 Thou play'st the dog, when by the mouth profane
 Of some false prophet thou doost belch thy bane.
 Thou play'st the swine, when plunged in pleasures vile,
 Some epicure doth sober minds defile.
 Thou play'st the nightingale or else the swan
 When any famous rhetorician
 With captious wit, and curious language, draws
 Seduced hearers; and subverts the laws.
 Thou play'st the fox, when thou doost fain aright
 The face and phrase of some deep hypocrite." (1580.)

Such figures are no doubt fanciful; but may not our Lord have had in view the same aspects of truth when he characterized the crafty king as "that fox Herod," and the bitter-hearted pretenders of his day as "a generation of vipers?"

There are, however, many other difficulties connected with this transaction. Does what we know of the habits of serpents warrant us to speak decidedly as to its cunning being greater than the other "beasts of the field which the Lord God has made?" There may be much in the noiseless way in which it winds its deadly coils around its victim, and much in the fascinating glance of its bright eye, to suggest something like this; but there can be no doubt that it is far less subtle in its mode of taking its prey than many other creatures are. There is no necessity here to make out a disposition of superior subtilty in order to corroborate

the words in Genesis iii. 1. Its craft is directly associated with the evil will which was now acting on it and through it, in the manner indicated above — the will of him who was a “liar from the beginning.” The first words spoken declare by their abruptness, point, and power to arrest the attention of the good, were it for no other purpose than to put the speaker right, that the evil mind now acting on it was full of “all subtlety and all mischief.” As thus used by Satan, the serpent was more subtle than any “beast of the field.” There is literally nothing in this passage to indicate that superior craft and cunning are affirmed of the serpent, apart from its presence as completely under the control of spiritual wickedness. The complete identification of the beast with the bad angel is all that is referred to. Thus there is no break in the narrative, no filling in of an explanatory sentence between the former and latter parts of the verse, such as “when the devil had entered into it he said unto the woman.” The act of possession — of entering in and complete subjugation of the brute to the evil spiritual nature — is not described. In some other cases the link missing here is supplied. Thus, in the account given by Mark (v.) of the demoniac at Gadara it is distinctly said: “The unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine, and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea.” So too, when he took complete control both of the mind and body of Judas, it is said “and after the sop Satan entered into him.” “He then, having received the sop, went immediately out, and it was night” (John xiii). The direct address of the Creator to the serpent has been surrounded with unnecessary mystery. “And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field: upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life. And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (vs. 14, 15). The reptile and its indwelling evil spirit are now regarded as

one. The address proceeds on the recognition of this relation. It consists of two parts, answering to the two natures — the body of the reptile and the mind of the evil spirit. This direct mode of address to the lower animals has its illustration in the narrative of creation. Thus, to the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air God said: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth." The expression of the will of the Creator became thus a law of their being. There is, moreover, the well-known revelation of a yet higher influence of God over his creature in 1 Kings xvii. 34. "Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. And it shall be that thou shalt drink of the brook; and *I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there.*" In 2 Chron. vii. 13, he speaks of himself as one that can "*command the locusts to devour the land.*" And in Amos ix. 3, we have the striking words: "Though they hide themselves in the top of Carmel, I will search and take them out thence; and though they be hid from my sight in the bottom of the sea, *thence will I command the serpent, and he shall bite them.*" Many other passages will readily occur to the reader, and though, as the last quoted, the words may be highly figurative in some cases, they yet illustrate the sovereignty met with in the curse pronounced upon the serpent.

The chief difficulty remains. The general and popular impression of the fourteenth verse has been, that there were no serpents before the time of our first parents, and that at the Fall some change was made in the structure of this creature. Is there anything in this verse which, of necessity, shuts us up to this impression? We think not. There were serpents on the pre-Adamic earth, whose structure was analogous to the true serpents (*Ophidia*) of our day. Geological discoveries have put this as completely beyond doubt as that there were *mollusca* in those primeval times.

The *Ophidia* range from the top of the chalk, up through the tertiary group of rocks, and culminate at the top of the

highest member of that series — the Pleiocene. “The earliest evidence,” says Professor Owen, “of an ophidian reptile has been obtained from the Eocene clay of Sheppey; it consists of the vertebrae indicating a serpent of twelve feet in length, the *Palaeophis toliapicus*. Still larger, more numerous, and better preserved vertebrae have been obtained from the Eocene beds of Bracklesham, on which the species *Palaeophis typhaeus* and the *Palaeophis porcalus* have been founded. These remains indicate a boa-constrictor-like snake, about twenty feet in length. Ophidian vertebrae of much smaller size from the newer Eocene at Hordwell, support the species *Paleryx rhombifer* and *Paleryx depressus*. Fossil vertebrae from a tertiary formation near Salonica have been referred to a serpent, probably poisonous, under the name of *Laophis*. A species of true viper has been discovered in the Miocene deposits at Sansans, South of France.” In Professor Owen’s description, many years ago, of the species first named, one of those inductions in regard to associated forms of life occurred which are so often to be met with in natural science. We are well acquainted with the favorite food of living *Pythons* and *Boas*; and proceeding on this knowledge, he added: “If, therefore, there had not been obtained direct evidence of both birds and mammals, in the London clay, I should have felt persuaded that they must have co-existed with serpents of such dimensions as the species of which the dorsal vertebrae are here described.” There can, then, be no manner of doubt that serpents existed in pre-Adamic times, and that their structure and, by fair inference, their habits corresponded with those which now inhabit various parts of the world. This fact is, of course, fatal to all attempts to make out a case of direct interference with the structure of the serpent because of the transaction in Eden. Neither does it favor any speculations, professedly based upon the inductions of “philosophic naturalists” as to the serpent being the “extreme of animal degradation,” even its very type and exemplar. “How remarkable the fact,” says Hugh Miller, “that the reptile selected as typical

here of the great fallen spirit that kept not his first estate, should be at once the reptile of latest appearance in creation, and the one selected by the philosophic naturalist as representative of a reversed process in the course of being, — of a downward sinking career, from the vertebrate autotype towards greatly lower types in the invertebrate divisions." The remark, however, is more striking than true. It might be shown, that the structural peculiarities of the Ophidians have much about them to indicate a connection between them and the fishes below them, on the one hand, and the birds and mammals above them, rather than, on the other hand, with the invertebrate types of life. For example, in breathing by lungs, in their digestive organs, in the organs which serve in the highest vertebrate animals to give forth sounds, in the bones of the head, in the brain, in the structure of the vertebral column, and in the organs of reproduction.

The sentence pronounced on the serpent assumes two aspects. Its body was cursed, and permanent antagonism between "its seed and the seed of the woman was declared. But here again it is impossible to separate between the beast and the personal evil — the bad angel — who had thus used it in order to his own purpose. The first expressions plainly refer to something in regard to the body of the reptile which in all times was to characterize it as accursed. It has, however, been remarked already, that now, as ever, it follows its own nature. Where then is the curse? Let us bear in mind what is said of the man, whose whole nature yielded without resistance to the same evil powers. "Thou art cursed from the earth," was the sentence uttered against Cain; though as to mental and physical constitution all his faculties retained their identity. So here: the instrument and the agent both are set apart as cursed. The former carries the curse about with it, as it trails on its belly among the dust of the world, loathed, hated, turned away from by man, Cain's curse was not only realized in his own consciousness, but it came home to him as pecu-

liarily poignant when he thought, that not only was he avoided, but that, as the race increased, he might count on something more. "My punishment," he said, "is greater than I can bear." "It shall come to pass that every one that findeth me shall slay me." And thus is the serpent cursed in the very attitude of man to it. The strong expressions as to creeping on "its belly, and eating the dust all the days of its life," have much light shed on them indirectly in other portions of scripture. That the original structure of the serpent was good after its kind cannot be doubted; but here that form replete, as all others, with evidences of creative skill, and containing much in it prophetic, as it were, of some of the most important parts of the human skeleton, has a far different thought now suggested with it. But the truly good may come to be associated with a curse. "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings." Even vegetation may be made to bear direct testimony to the same truth: "Master, behold the fig-tree which thou cursedst is withered away" (Mark xi. 21). In Leviticus xi. 42 "whatsoever goeth upon its belly" is characterized as "an abomination," and in Psalm xlv. 25, those cast down, and feeling as if under a curse speak of themselves as those whose "belly cleaveth unto the earth." Again, such references as the following are suggestive, in connection with this curse: "I will send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of serpents of the dust" (Deut. xxxii. 24). Man is abased, and he joins the mention of himself with the dust: "My flesh is clothed with worms and with clods of dust" (Job vii. 5); "Thou hast brought me into the dust of death" (Ps. xxii. 15). The extreme degradation of all opposed to the truth is thus stated: "His enemies shall lick the dust" (Ps. lxxii. 9); "They shall lick the dust like a serpent" (Mi. vii. 17).

In the other part of the curse the agent of evil is especially addressed: he was to have a seed, a people, in the world, who should serve him, and over whom he should

reign as the "prince of this world." The woman who was in the transgression, was to have a seed likewise, specially distinguished by this, that it should ultimately destroy, cast down, overcome, the seed of the serpent, now to be known as "that old serpent called the devil." The history which traces and which unfolds the fruits of this antagonism, has very many points in it suggestive of the relation between man and the beasts formed in Eden.

To conclude: how remarkable the influence which this association of man with the serpent has had upon the world! Traditionally it seems to have gone with the human race wherever they wandered, and into what circumstances soever their lot was cast. All the great branches of the human family appear to have come more or less under its influence. In China and India, in Egypt and Persia, in Greece and in Rome, it has been the object of the worship of fear. By a natural law, that which is dreaded comes to be propitiated, and, according to well-known principles, objects long propitiated come to be regarded with something like esteem. Thus the twofold worship of the serpent. Thus, too, the explanation of its place as a type of blessing, of healing, of health.