

In the beginning

Part 9 – Revealing the enemy

It is striking just how quickly God reveals the enemy in Genesis. But which one of several enemies in just the first two chapters would you pick as the worst enemy of all? Would you pick the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as our worst enemy, because that's what started the whole thing off, right? But isn't death, the result of eating off the tree, a much worse enemy? But if the serpent had never existed we would never have been tempted into eating off that tree in the first place. But wasn't it our own human weakness for ignoring God's instructions when tempted that sealed our fate?

So, which one of those four enemies would you choose as the worst, or would you choose all four? Either way Genesis also reveals the rather shocking realization that God actually **created** all four of them. It was he who made the tree with its forbidden fruit, he who made death the result of eating the fruit, he who made a very clever serpent, and it was he who made us humans susceptible to temptation and deception. But why put us in harm's way on purpose? It doesn't make sense.

But Genesis also reveals the remarkable fact that God created us humans to rule and guard this planet. It's what he made us in his likeness for. But in making us in his likeness he gave us the freedom to choose, and that raised the question of what choice we would make. Would we charge off on our own path, or would we happily direct our God-given abilities to ruling and guarding the planet as instructed? And would we willingly let God guide us, or would it bug us having to ask him for help? And would we actually **like** the idea of partnering with him, or would we prefer to operate on our own?

Well, there was one easy way to find out: See what we'd do **when offered an alternative**. So God creates a tree for humans to avoid - but - he makes it very attractive too. He also creates a charismatic and probably very beautiful serpent, with hints in the Hebrew that it shone like brass or bronze - making it very hard to resist. And then this highly charming and attractive serpent also provides very persuasive arguments to justify doing what God said not to. So faced with a very real choice what would those two humans do?

Would they naturally turn to God and trust him for help and guidance when faced with a difficult choice?

The answer from Genesis is a simple No. When faced with an attractive alternative it didn't take much for those two humans to ditch God all together. It was horribly embarrassing, but on the other hand **it did reveal our worst enemy**, the one that has tripped us up most of all. It's the simple fact that we find it very difficult trusting God and keeping our eyes fixed on him, and it always ends in disaster. And that really comes into focus when seeing which people the book of Genesis was written to, and the time in which it was written.

Genesis was written to the Israelites during their trek through the desert, because they were about to face their own major test and hard choices when they entered Canaan. It was in Canaan that they too would meet the enemy head-on and they too would experience how little it takes for humans to ditch God when faced with an overwhelming problem or an attractive alternative. But note how God had **already prepared** the Israelites for Canaan by having them live for hundreds of years in Egypt first.

It was in Egypt that the Israelites were introduced to the intriguing world of alternatives to God. Egypt was a sophisticated culture like ours, but the Egyptians were besotted with their legends and tales of how the world was created, and how gods and goddesses and creatures with superhuman powers controlled their lives. But there was also **a ring of truth** to these myths and legends too, because they were very close to the oral traditions about God and the creation of the world that had been passed down through the years to the Israelites. And that posed a very real danger for the Israelites, because the Egyptian myths were similar enough to their own stories - but also different and intriguing enough - to provide a very attractive and very convincing **alternative**.

Genesis, therefore, was written to counteract this fictional but very attractive world of human imagination created by the Egyptians. The Egyptians, for instance, believed the world began as a watery primeval chaos from which their gods spontaneously appeared. But Genesis counteracts that immediately by saying it was **Elohim** who created the world from a watery, empty darkness. And Genesis says it was **Elohim** who created night and day too, and **Elohim** who created the months and seasons, and **Elohim** who created the plants, animals and humans, because the Egyptians believed that **Ra** the sun god created all those things. Genesis was written to take a direct shot at **Ra**, therefore.

And especially since **Ra** the sun god was so attractive too. **Ra** had the head of a falcon and a large red sun disk on his head with a cobra sticking out of it. And **Ra** created day and night, not by just 'speaking' them into existence like **Elohim**, but by sailing across the sky in a boat called '**The boat of millions of years**'.

The Egyptian story got even better too, because in one version of it, as **Ra** sails across the sky in his boat, he's being attacked by the evil Lord of Chaos, an enormous writhing serpent called **Apep** ('a' as in 'cat') or **Apophis**, that tried to stop **Ra** in his tracks by consuming or hypnotizing him. But **Ra** in the form of a cat named **Mau** (Mowoo - 'mow' as in 'cow') fights off the serpent so the sun could still shine and life could continue. At sunset **Ra** then died, but he sailed on anyway into the underworld, leaving the moon in his place to light up the world. Next morning he would then be reborn so the sun would rise and shine for another day, and the cycle of the great sun god **Ra** giving light and life to the world would be repeated.

It was all very fascinating and understandably captivating, but God had got Israel OUT of Egypt and rescued them from all that stuff. And now he was making it clear in Genesis that it was HE, not **Ra**, who was the real source of life and light, and it was he, **Elohim**, who'd made the sun and moon as well.

God had got Israel out of Egypt, in other words, to REEDUCATE them. And central to that reeducation process was the message of Genesis, which is about two things, that first and foremost there is just ONE God at the heart and source of everything we humans see and experience in this world - and secondly, it's about us humans trusting him.

It was the beginning of what one writer called "the monotheistic revolution." Monotheistic meant belief in just one God, and revolution meant it was totally contrary to the prevailing culture, and this is what God began with the Israelites when he rescued them from Egypt.

And it began with the story we now read in Genesis that was mostly written by Moses, an Israelite by ancestry but trained by the best in Egypt, so that Moses had a foot firmly planted in both worlds - the world God had begun with Abraham, and the world of gods and myths in Egypt. Moses knew both worlds by firsthand experience - having lived in Pharaoh's palace from the time he was plucked out of the River Nile as a baby, but also from being confronted personally by the God of Abraham in a burning bush in Exodus chapter 3.

Moses knew there was one very real God, therefore, but he also knew how attractive the gods and myths of Egypt were too. It's no surprise, then, that God chose Moses to lead the monotheistic revolution and begin the process of reeducation with the Israelites.

Or, as we now understand it looking back, God was restoring what was lost in Eden, because for one brief period of time one man and one woman HAD actually known and experienced God as one very real God - AND they had trusted him without question or doubt. But then, tragically, it all fell apart.

It was this terribly sad story of loss that God now has Moses relate to the Israelites in Genesis, and HOW this terrible loss happened. And it involved one of the most influential figures in Egyptian mythology, *the serpent*. So when a serpent appears in Genesis, it may sound odd and totally irrelevant to people in our modern science addicted culture today, but it wasn't odd and irrelevant to the Israelites to whom Genesis was originally written.

In Egypt the serpent was very real, as both a purveyor of good and evil. We've already met *Apophis*, the evil serpent of Chaos trying to shut down *Ra* the sun god. So a serpent in Genesis would immediately conjure up images of gods and monsters, much like serpents still do today, like the enormous *Serpent of Slytherin* in the Harry Potter movie 'Chamber of Secrets', which still gives the view that serpents are fearful creatures of death and evil. But serpents in Egypt were also looked upon as gods of healing, protection and fertility as well, the total opposite to death and evil.

The little cobra or uraeus (UrEEus) on the Pharaoh's headdress, for instance, with its raised head and flared hood, was a good serpent. It was the symbol of the good goddess *Wadjet* (Rajit). In reality, of course, a cobra was just another snake naturally found in Egypt, but at nearly 9 feet long with a venomous bite that could paralyze your diaphragm in 10 minutes, the cobra had understandably taken on god-like status. And with its ability to strike and kill so effectively, it's not surprising that *Wadjet* the cobra goddess became the guardian of the gates of the underworld, protector of the royal family of Pharaohs from all their enemies, and their guide on their journey through the underworld. On Tutankhamun's death mask there was also a vulture beside the cobra, the vulture being the goddess *Nekhbet*, also divine protector of Pharaohs. Cobras and vultures, therefore, were looked upon as good goddesses in Egypt, with divine power that they used to heal and protect.

But Genesis is having none of that. It tears the entire Egyptian world of gods, serpents and monsters to shreds, because God is establishing in the Israelite minds that HE is the one they should look to and trust as creator, protector and healer, not **Ra**, **Wadjet**, or a cat named **Mau**.

And this is why he'd rescued the Israelites from Egypt at this very time, to begin the process of reeducating them to **look to him** and not to any animal or bird with divine powers, even if their powers were used to do good. And there are several hints in the way Genesis is written to get that point across, like Adam naming the birds and animals, which in the culture of the day meant HE had authority over them, not them over him.

In Genesis, therefore, it is made clear that animals and birds aren't gods to be revered or feared. They are just physical creatures. And whereas **Ra** the sun god was central to the Egyptian belief in gods controlling their lives, the sun is almost an afterthought in Genesis, because it doesn't appear until the fourth day of creation AFTER light and life have been created. The sun and moon weren't the source of light and life, therefore, **Elohim** was. And whereas the Egyptians personalized the sun god with the name **Ra**, Genesis does not give the sun and moon names. In Genesis it is made clear, therefore, that the sun and moon, just like birds and animals, are not gods with personalities and divine power. The sun and moon are just objects in the sky, and nothing more.

And Moses treats the serpent exactly the same way in Genesis. In Egypt the serpent was revered as a god with divine power, but **Genesis 3:1** describes the serpent as merely being "more crafty than **any of the wild animals** the Lord God had made." Genesis doesn't even hint that the serpent was a god with divine power. Instead it compares the serpent to a wild animal, like all the other physical creatures and wild animals that **Elohim** made on the sixth day of creation in Genesis 1:24-25.

And being like one of the creatures God created on the sixth day, the serpent would also have to be called "good," just like all the other creatures God called good in Genesis 1:31. Being "good" simply meant it was fulfilling its God-intended function, just like the sun and moon and all the other things God made in the six days of creation. So the serpent wasn't a god with divine power like the serpents of Egypt, it was a physical creature made by the one God **Elohim** for a specific and good function in his creation. It may even have been one of the animals that Adam had named.

And talking of names, the **Hebrew** word for “serpent” in Genesis 3:1 doesn’t lift the serpent’s status any higher either. The serpent was crafty, yes, which understandably gave rise to the idea that the serpent was Satan the devil, but the Hebrew word for serpent in that verse is **nachash** (nackash), which is based on a word meaning “hissing” like a snake. The serpent is just a snake, therefore, a unique type of snake, yes, but there is no hint in Genesis or the Hebrew that the serpent was the devil. There’s no hint of a devil in Egyptian myth either. The concept of a devil would have been totally foreign to both Egyptian and Israelite.

And take into account that Moses is choosing his words very carefully here, because it’s his God-assigned job to reeducate the Israelites away from all those intriguing and very attractive myths and legends they’d grown up with in Egypt, and to put their total trust in **Elohim** instead. So Moses is writing in terms here that the Israelites can easily understand to help **them** see that the gods of the culture, Egyptian and Canaanite, **weren’t gods with divine power** at all. And Moses does that by using the word **nachash** for serpent, meaning it’s just a physical creature, not a god.

That’s good for us to know too, because making the serpent into the devil can get us Christians thinking the devil is our worst enemy, because he’s the one who made us fail. Genesis takes a different slant, however, as to why those first two humans failed. It wasn’t due to a devilish supernatural serpent that they failed, because Moses explains in clear terms that the serpent was just another wild animal that God made for his purpose. What really made those humans fail was **how easy it was to distract them away from God** - or put another way, how difficult it was for those two humans to trust God when offered an attractive alternative. So whether the serpent was a physical snake or supernatural devil, the result is what matters, that humans failed because they couldn’t trust God.

That was the real enemy, and God brought that into clear focus by making the serpent attractive. Eve didn’t recoil at the sight of it, nor was she surprised when it spoke. Somehow, then, God managed to make a physical creature with speaking ability and intelligence that looked and sounded totally acceptable and reasonable. But what the serpent **offered** was obviously wrong, as Adam well knew, but the offer of hidden wisdom and no fear of consequences for seeking that wisdom were too much for him to resist. But it helped demonstrate, once and for all time, that up against trying circumstances or attractive alternatives **we humans don’t have it in us to trust God**. Trusting God is simply too hard for us, and that’s why we’re in such a mess.

It's a humbling thing for us to have to admit, but at least God didn't leave us flying blind. We now know what our greatest enemy is, and Moses put it in terms the Israelites could easily grasp too, because they were about to enter Canaan where they would also be severely tested. They'd be faced with the highly attractive and seductive gods of Canaan, including the **worship of snakes** as gods too - so - would the Israelites keep their eyes firmly fixed on God, remembering the effect the serpent had on Adam and Eve, or would they too, like Adam and Eve, find an attractive alternative to God too hard to resist?

The answer to that question has huge overtones for us too, of course, because Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 10:6** that what happened to the Israelites "occurred as examples to keep US from setting **our** hearts on evil things as they did." What Moses wrote in Genesis, then - and what happened to Israel **in response** to what he wrote - was meant for our benefit too.

And one example meant for our benefit is in **verse 9** that says, "We should not test the Lord, as some of them did - and were killed by snakes," the full story of which can be found in **Numbers 21:1-3**. The Israelites at the time were facing fierce opposition from the Canaanite king Arad, who had even taken some of them captive. So the Israelites cry out to God and promise they'll hand over all the cities Arad rules to God (by totally destroying them) if God hands over Arad and his subjects to them. In **verse 3** God hears and answers, and it's job done.

It was all so easy. They trusted God and God solved their problem. But in the very next verse, while having to travel the long way round Edom, due to heavy opposition by the Edomites this time, the Israelites got angry. They saw no sense in having to head back south again and spend even more time in this miserable desert eating more miserable manna. So this time, rather than trust God, they blamed God for dragging them out of Egypt to die.

You'd think after 40 years of wandering in the desert they'd finally got the message that - no matter what circumstances they found themselves in - God would provide a way through. He'd always rescued and protected them so far, proving beyond any doubt that HE could be trusted. **But could THEY be trusted to trust him?** That was the real question. The test wasn't on God; the test was on them, just as it had been on those first two humans in the Garden of Eden.

Unfortunately, according to 1 Corinthians 10:6, the Israelites treated God as if HE was the one under fire and being tested, not them.

Well, God reacts just as severely to them as he did to Adam and Eve, because in **Numbers 21:6** he “sent venomous snakes to bite the people and many died.”

In Hebrew the words for “venomous snakes” are *saraphim* and *nachashim*, and where those two words are used together elsewhere in Scripture they are translated in the KJV as “fiery serpents” (Deuteronomy 8:15) or even “fiery flying serpents” (Isaiah 14:29 and 30:6), the “flying” bit tying in with the *saraphim* in Isaiah 6:2 having wings. And having wings could also explain how God “sent” them, and the Israelites couldn’t escape them by running away either.

The word “fiery” also harks back to the *saraphim* meaning “burning ones” in Hebrew. If, then, these serpents God sent were anything like the real *saraphim*, they had a bite that must have felt like a red-hot poker. On the other hand, the words “fiery” and “flying” could also fit the *saw-scale viper* that’s still native to that region, which according to a Roman text from 22 A.D. was “dark red” (fiery) and could “spring up as high as a man’s waist,” looking as though it was flying. It’s the viper’s ability to fly through the air that enables it to catch one of its favourite foods - a bird of all things - the North African sparrow.

So was it thousands of saw-scale vipers leaping out of trees and undergrowth at nearly chest height that God sent, or was it a scaled down version of a *saraph* serpent with its six wings and flaming fiery body? Either way their bite was fatal, and if it was anything like a typical viper’s bite it resulted in a slow death by internal and external bleeding and heart failure, which all sounds extremely severe as a penalty for the Israelites complaining - but even more so when the viper’s bite also created an awful and immediate thirst as well, and here they were in the desert with no water.

But wasn’t it God who created this situation in the first place? Yes, and he did it for exactly the same reason he launched a crafty serpent on Adam and Eve too. It was a test to show them, and us too, how difficult it is for us humans to trust God. It gets worse too, because God also shows through his severe treatment of both Adam and Eve and the Israelites here in Numbers 21 that **he allows no excuses for NOT trusting him as well.**

And that’s a real conundrum for us, because if disaster awaits us when we don’t trust God, but at the same time we can’t trust him, now what? Well, God is not above making things so difficult that we really have no choice but to scream to him for help, which is exactly what happened here in **Numbers 21:7.**

The Israelites, frightened out of their wits and suitably humbled, went to Moses and admitted they shouldn't have got angry and blamed God, so would Moses please ask God on their behalf to take the snakes away?

And God honours that request, but in a rather odd way, because he tells Moses in **Numbers 21:6** to "make a snake" out of bronze and stick it on a pole, and looking at the snake on the pole would be the antidote for anyone bitten. Some artists portray the snake with wings, which is understandable, because the word **saraphim** is used to describe the snakes in verse 6 and **saraphim** had wings, but it still leaves us with the question as to why would God kill people with ANY sort of serpent, winged or otherwise, and then use a serpent as the **remedy** too?

But the idea of serpents being both good and bad was already familiar to the Israelites, because the Egyptians believed serpents were both the cause of their troubles and the solution. On the physical level snakes were bad because they killed people, but they were good too because they killed rats and other vermin. And the evil snake god **Apophis** was up against the good snake god **Wadjet**, so God was getting a message across in terms the Israelites could easily relate to.

And God using the bite of serpents to kill made sense, because the serpent's "bite" in Genesis 3 brought on the death of Adam and Eve too, and for exactly the same reason that serpents were now killing the Israelites. It was the same old story being played out of serpents and death being used by God to reveal our worst enemy, our inability to trust God and keep our eyes firmly fixed on him.

And that was the message of the serpent on the pole too, because if the Israelites kept their eyes firmly fixed on it, they didn't die. The Hebrew word for "look" in **verse 9** means to "fix one's gaze on," or "behold attentively." Again, God was getting the point across that HE and he alone was their healer, so fix their eyes on him, not on any other god that was supposed to heal.

But why would God use an inanimate object like a snake made out of metal to heal when the Canaanites also made gods of healing out of inanimate objects? But God was simply demonstrating that **he really could** take an inanimate object like a metal snake on a wooden pole and make it heal people - **when HE was the power behind it**. Every which way, then, the Israelites were getting the same message, that they should fix their eyes on God, and no other.

But how is all this meant to benefit us as well?

Well fortunately, Jesus himself answers that question for us in **John 3:14-15** when he says to Nicodemus that “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

In other words, Jesus is now **our** serpent on the pole, and for exactly the same reason God had a serpent on a pole made for the Israelites, that we now fix our eyes on him for our eternal life and healing, and no other. And healing especially is what we need now, just like the Israelites, because we too, as Peter phrases it in **1 Peter 1:6**, “suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”

But why would God do that to us? Why would he allow us to be bitten by what feels like a fiery serpent too? It hurts. It creates grief, that awful mixture of anger, frustration, confusion and depression that make trust in God so difficult, because why is he letting this happen? Well, the reason it happens, according to Peter in **verse 7**, is that “These trials have come to you so that **your faith may be proved genuine.**”

And what a wonderful thing genuine faith is, that no matter what happens we’re able to trust God. Not only does it “result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed” in **verse 7**, it also fills us “with an inexpressible and glorious joy” in this life now, **verse 8**, because, **verse 9**, “you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

The goal of my belief in God is the salvation of my soul, which Genesis shows from the very beginning is trust in God and no other. To get us to that point, God does to us what he did to Adam and Eve and to Israel. He tests us. He chucks us in the ring with the serpent like Adam and Eve, or takes us in directions we don’t like, as he did with the Israelites, but all for the same purpose, to help us realize it doesn’t come to us naturally to trust him.

We will fail like they did, therefore. The serpent’s temptations and attractive alternatives will bite us too, but God reveals the remedy. It’s another serpent, of all things, a serpent on a pole just like he had made for the Israelites. It’s Jesus, who was lifted up on a pole too, to make sure our lack of trust isn’t fatal, but also to heal us of our lack of trust too. And one man recognized that when he said to Jesus, “I believe, but help my unbelief.” The man not only recognized his biggest problem, he also recognized his only solution. Only Jesus could help him with his worst enemy, a lesson that began way back in Genesis.