

Myths in the Bible and Their Genetic Relationship to Indo-European Parallels: What Do They Mean?



The Script for the Radio Series *Myth Is Truth Which Shall Make You Free*
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The Serpent in Indo-European Religions: Who Is the Serpent in the Garden of Eden?

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Dr. Bolchazy, I'm really looking forward to today's discussion because of the topic you've chosen: Who is the serpent in the Garden of Eden? I'm sure that's a question that's been asked many times. In Genesis 3 we read: "Now the Serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made." And then we read how the serpent succeeded in tempting Eve. But, who does the serpent represent? Is he, in actuality, the devil?

DR. BOLCHAZY: The Book of Genesis does not identify the serpent. All we are told is the serpent is a reptile, and a very crafty one. But it is not identified as the devil.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Well, then, who or what is he?

DR. BOLCHAZY: In order for me to answer your question, I'll have to go outside of the Bible into comparative mythology and show you the way in which the serpent was viewed by other cultures.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: That sounds interesting. Go right ahead.

DR. BOLCHAZY: To our Indo-European ancestors, the serpent was a benevolent divine being who brought mankind such gifts as health, wealth, wisdom, and fertility. Moreover, the serpent, according to several myths, was the cocreator of the universe. In fact, the Semites worshipped the serpent.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So that, in some cultures, the serpent was considered to be divine.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Exactly. In fact, Python was the god of oracles to the people who lived in the land that the Greeks conquered. I'll go into that further in a minute, but Python was a serpent and his seat of oracular wisdom was at Delphi. When the Greeks conquered this people, the Greek god Apollo slew Python and became the god of the Delphic oracle. There was also the serpent Typhous who was the offspring of the mother earth. When the Zeus-worshipping Greeks conquered the natives, Zeus supplanted him. The mythopoetic language for this is Zeus in a cosmic battle subdued him and imprisoned him under Mt. Vesuvius, with the result that he can do no harm.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: With the possible exception of his occasional belching of fire and lava.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Now, interestingly enough, we find a parallel to this story in the Apocalypse. There, as you know, Satan will also be chained and imprisoned by Christ for a millennium, with the result that Christ's reign will be unimpeded.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: If I remember correctly, isn't there a Greek myth which tells of a serpent creating the universe?

DR. BOLCHAZY: That's the myth of Ophion, and there is another Greek myth of Eurynome, the goddess of all, who danced, and with her dancing created a wind. She took this wind into her hands and molded it into a serpent. After copulating with this serpent, a cosmic egg was the issue over which she brooded in the form of a dove. That reminds you of the spirit of the Lord brooding over the abyss in the book of Genesis. In time, the cosmic egg burst and the universe came out of it. The Hebrews knew this myth because they were acquainted with the Hebron icons. The first Hebron icon in the series portrays a huge egg and a serpent entwined around it. The egg has burst and out of it the universe and all that's in it is coming out.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: According to the myth, the Greeks believed the earth to be surrounded by a watery deity, didn't they?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, a god called Oceanus, the Ocean, who is also a serpent. A serpent surrounds the earth also according to Nordic myth. In Mesopotamian culture, we find a female sea deity in the form of a serpent, called Tiamat. When patriarchal society succeeded matriarchal society, a new set of male deities came into prominence. Marduk, their leader, killed Tiamat and from her carcass he created the sky and the earth. All these deities—Typhous, Tiamat, Ophion, Oceanus—were serpents who were in some way instrumental in creating the universe.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Okay—now I want to take you back to one of your opening statements: You said that the serpent was thought to bring mankind gifts, such as health, wealth, wisdom, and fertility. If the serpent brought health, was it then considered a healing god?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, very true. The Greek god Asclepius, for example, who appeared in the form of a serpent, was the god of healing. His symbol was the caduceus with two snakes entwined around a rod.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Which is still a symbol used by the medical profession.

DR. BOLCHAZY: And remember that when the Hebrews were in the desert being killed by snakes, what did Moses do? He erected a brazen serpent, and those who looked upon the brazen serpent were saved from death.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: All right, we've covered health. How about fertility?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Well, in the Temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus in Greece, barren women would lie all night on the floor, hoping that Asclepius, in the form of a snake, would appear to them and impregnate them. In Phrygia, women ritually married the god Sabazius by letting live snakes or their golden replicas slide between their breasts and down to their thighs.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: That's a rather horrifying concept to the modern woman.

DR. BOLCHAZY: But not to the ancient woman. Remember, Caesar Augustus was believed to have been conceived by a snake. According to the story in Suetonius, Atia, on her way to a temple, fell asleep, and a serpent entered her. From then on she had the image of a serpent around her waist, so that she refused to attend public baths. And then Caesar Augustus was born, the son of a divine serpent and a mortal mother. The Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar as well as the Minoan goddess of love and fertility are both represented with serpents entwined around them. In each case, the divine serpent procreates new life.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So, we've covered two of the four gifts you mentioned. Now, how about wealth and wisdom?

DR. BOLCHAZY: We have two Greek representations of the serpent in the company of Demeter/Ceres and her son Ploutos—the god of wealth. Also there is the suggestion that the serpent is husband of the great Mother Earth. His slithering into her suggests he is her consort and, as consort, controls the riches of the earth which he dispenses to those who approach him with prayers.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: And wisdom?

DR. BOLCHAZY: We've already mentioned Python whose seat of oracular wisdom was at Delphi. In Greek culture, the priestess in charge of the Delphic oracle was called the Pythian priestess. The name is reminiscent of Pythos or Python. Also, the serpent entwined around the tree of knowledge is a frequent sculptural motif dating to the third millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia. That the serpent is the Lord of the Tree of Truth is also alluded to in Genesis. The serpent there promises Eve the knowledge of good and evil which is supposed to make her like the gods.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So, in all of these stories the serpent is a beneficent deity.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes. It isn't until later that the serpent acquires a sinister character. In the epic Gilgamesh, it is the serpent who steals the herb of immortality from the hero Gilgamesh. As a result of possessing this herb, the serpent becomes immortal and poor Gilgamesh loses his chance for immortality. This is also his role, of course, in the book of Genesis. The sinister attributes of the serpent, however, are a later phenomenon, with this one exception in the Gilgamesh account.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: You mean sinister as in the reference to the serpent in the Garden of Eden? The serpent who's the instrument in the expulsion of Adam and Eve.

DR. BOLCHAZY: That's right. The serpent in the Garden of Eden is goodness and divinity inverted. And by the way, this is a good example of how the monotheistic Hebrews used the myths they knew to support their new theology.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: What do you mean?

DR. BOLCHAZY: When the Hebrews took over the "promised land" through conquest, they brought monotheism with them from Egypt. But all of their new neighbors worshipped the serpent as a beneficent deity. The Hebrew reaction to this serpent-worship or ophiolatry was to invert the serpent's divinity and his good attributes. They in other words dethroned the serpent, they denigrated him, and they inverted his traditional good attributes and assigned him evil attributes. Instead of being divine, the serpent was made to be a mere animal—who could, however, still talk and who was clever. Instead of being a beneficent deity, now the serpent becomes the cause of all evils.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Why would the Hebrews invert the qualities of the snake?

DR. BOLCHAZY: To fight the Semitic cult of the serpent—by denigrating him and by making him responsible for the loss of paradise.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: And thereby making him responsible for the woes of the world.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, exactly. It was a way to solve the problem of evil. How can evil exist in a world when their God is supposed to be all-good and all powerful? If he is good, he has the motive to prevent and remove evil. If he is all powerful, then he has the ability to remove evil from the world and human life.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: But, this problem of evil has troubled believers in one God for ages.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Certainly it has. Zoroastrianism tried to explain this problem by positing dualism. According to Zoroastrianism, there were two gods: one a good god and the other an evil god, warring against each other. And all the other gods, according to Zoroaster, became devils, fighting against the good god. Now, the Hebrews solved the problem of evil by making the serpent responsible for the evil in the world. God of the Hebrews thus became exculpated and exonerated. The cause of evil becomes man's free will and the serpent. Not God. It's a rather neat solution.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So the Hebrews devalued the divine serpent. They dethrone him from his divinity by making him the source and the cause of evil in the universe. Was this a common phenomenon in Indo-European cultures?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, it was, Nancy. For example, whenever one people conquer another people, then the native gods of the conquered people are overthrown. The native gods begin to be viewed as evil—the serpent Python that I spoke of earlier, who was the ancient pre-Greek god of oracles at Delphi. When the Apollo-worshipping Greeks came to the land, Apollo slew Python and took over his prerogatives as the god of oracles.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: And the Hebrews did the same thing?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Right. They made the Mesopotamian goddess of fertility, Astarte, a female demon. The serpent whom the Semites worshipped is made to be the enemy of the human race.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So the serpent in the Garden of Eden is not the representation of devil.

DR. BOLCHAZY: No, he's not. Demonology was not as yet developed by the Hebrews at this time. It's only later on, when demonology becomes developed, that the serpent in the Garden of Eden becomes identified with the devil. St. John in particular makes this identification, as we read in the Apocalypse, Chapter 12: 3-9 and also in Chapter 20: 1-3. In Genesis, the serpent is an inverted mythical symbol used to counteract the ophiolatry of the neighboring serpent-worshipping Semites, and to simply solve the problem of evil.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: That's all very interesting. Thank you, Dr. Bolchazy.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Thank you, Nancy.

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