

Where did sin come from? – a picture answer

• *History in a parabolic style*

Genesis 3 is one of the great chapters of the Bible. It gives us in picture-style part of an answer to the question: where did sin come from? It is a story which puts to us very simply an account of the historical fall of the human race into sin and into sinfulness. It is a picture-answer to the question: how does the human race come to need salvation? By 'picture-answer' I mean that it relates a historical event but it uses a parabolic style to do so. In Genesis 3 a snake talks, a tree determines the destiny of the human race, God walks in a garden, another tree can keep humankind alive forever. Genesis 1–11 is history written in a child-like parabolic style. I emphasize both parts of the sentence. It is history. **And it is history written in a child-like parabolic style.** Snakes don't talk, and we know from the New Testament that the snake of Genesis 3 is parabolic. In the story it really is a snake. Genesis 3:1 says '*Now the snake was more cunning than any animal of the countryside...*'. It is an '*animal of the countryside*' that is mentioned. Yet the picture as a whole refers to something else. In the book of Revelation the snake is Satan! Satan is not mentioned directly in the book of Genesis. We are being told about a real piece of human history but it is being told parabolically. It refers to historical figures. Adam is referred to as a historical figure in Luke 3:38. Genesis 5:3; 1 Chronicles 1:1; 1 Corinthians 15:22. Paul refers to this incident as a historical event in Romans 5:16, 17. It refers to **one** event, and to the **one** sin of the **one** man. It is comparable to the **one** act of obedience of the **one** man Jesus. 1 Timothy 2:13, 14 and John 8:44 similarly refer to the story of Genesis 3 in a way that implies it is historical.

In some ways Genesis 3 is like 2 Samuel 12:1–4 where a real event was being retold parabolically. Yet there is a difference, for we have no knowledge of the event **behind** Genesis 3 (unlike the case of 2 Samuel), and we can only think of the fall of man in terms of the story God has given us.

1. Sin began from outside the human race

1. Sin began from outside of the human race. There was something evil in God's world **before** Eve sinned and **before** Adam followed her example. This means that sin is not an essential ingredient in human nature. Sin did not originate from men and women. It was there even earlier.

Genesis 3 begins: '*Now the snake was more cunning than any of the animals of the countryside which Yahweh God had made. And it said to the woman, "Did God really say you may not eat from any of the trees of the garden?"*' ¹.

¹ 3:1

The word here should be translated 'snake' not 'serpent'. The English word 'serpent' tends to refer to a mythological creature, but the word here is a quite ordinary word for an animal.

The snake is not just a reference to temptations within us. Nor should the story be taken so literally as to teach that the fall of man came by a demon-possessed animal. (This view seems not

to take the **parabolic** aspect of the snake with the seriousness it deserves. The matter-of-factness of the talking snake is against it; so it is the New Testament which does not take the snake as a literal snake.)

• **Sin is not an essential ingredient of human nature**

The main point is that sin is not an essential ingredient in human nature. We are confronted with a talking snake who hates God and beguiles Eve into sin. He is cursed by God. The snake is an animal, yet the Christian knows it refers parabolically to Satan ¹. The word 'devil' is not used. In Genesis 3:15 the snake's head is to be crushed. This refers parabolically to the work of Jesus. Again the parabolic ingredient is obvious. Salvation is not literally the crushing of an animal. The style of language is highly pictorial. It is like the language used to describe heaven in the book of Revelation, where we have the pearly gates of the new Jerusalem ², and streets which are made of gold ³. It is picture language being used in an imaginative way to speak of what is a real event.

¹ see Romans 16:20

² Revelation 21:21

³ Revelation 21:21

• **The devil is real**



There is an evil power in this world. Man was not made sinful. He was not created as a sinner. From outside of his own personality, there comes a being who drags him down into sin. Later parts of the Bible fill out the details. The snake is identified as the devil ('slanderer'), or is called Satan ('adversary'), a being who is like a lion in his ability to inspire fear, and like a snake in his camouflage and deceit.

It is encouraging to know that sinfulness is no part of man's original nature. If we were sinless before, we shall be sinless again, when God's salvation is complete in final glory.

• **Balance is important**

The devil is real. It is important to be balanced when thinking about Satan. Some people are so 'scientific' they do not recognize the reality of Satan's existence. Others are so preoccupied with Satan they talk about him day and night. The Bible – which is the model of 'balance' – tells us something about Satan but it is not excessively full of talk about Satan. One can read whole books of the Bible and find Satan not mentioned at all. We must be careful not to get morbid and develop an interest only in 'weird' subjects. We must not get too interested in Satan, but there is no doubt that the devil is real.

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