

## Ask Away – January 2

### 1) Who or what was the serpent mentioned in Genesis 3? (Gen 3:1–6, 14–15).

The word for serpent is *nāḥāš*, a common Hebrew word for a snake (e.g., Num 21:7–9; Deut 8:15; Prov 30:19).<sup>1</sup> Its comparison to the “beasts of the field” indicates that it was an animal which God had made and was therefore good (Gen 3:1, 14; cf. Gen 1:24–25). The fact that it was a land animal suggests that it was originally legged, for if its means of movement was slithering, the curse to go “on your belly” makes little sense (Gen 3:14). Although it is surprising that the serpent spoke, it must be remembered that certain parrots have the ability to mimic human speech. The statement that the serpent was “more crafty than any other beasts of the field” suggests that it was able to understand and communicate with Eve using human sounding words. Thus the serpent was a real animal which could communicate using speech.

That being said, it’s also clear that something else was the true force behind the serpent (cf. Gen 3:1b, 4–5, 15). Leupold comments: “When we go farther into the Scriptures, we find the very definite fact, especially in the New Testament, that the devil is regarded as the actual tempter. When Christ says (John 8:44) that the devil is ‘a murderer from the beginning’ and that he is ‘a liar and the father thereof,’ this word is a manifest allusion to the event of Genesis 3. 2 Corinthians 11:3 compared with 2 Corinthians 11:14 suggests the same thought. Romans 16:20: ‘The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly,’ cannot be anything other than an interpretative allusion to Genesis 3:15. The words of Revelation 12:9, ‘the old serpent, he that is called the Devil and Satan,’ harmonize only with our interpretation of the passage (cf. Rev 20:2).”<sup>2</sup>

Thus I conclude that the serpent was a real animal which cooperated with Satan (it may also have been deceived) and became the instrument through which Satan deceived Eve (Satan may have possessed the serpent as he did Judas; cf. Luke 22:3; John 13:27). That the serpent was responsible for its actions is made clear by God’s curse (Gen 3:14). The punishment for Satan was reserved until such time as the seed of the women would crush his head (Gen 3:15).

### 2) In what sense did Adam and Eve “surely die” when they ate the fruit? (Gen 3:6; 2:17).

They immediately died *spiritually*, that is, they were cut off from the spiritual life that comes from union with God (cf. John 15:1–4; 17:3). They also began to die *physically*, that is, a process of physical death began from which they could not escape (only the tree of life could counter this and God prevented Adam and Eve from eating it—Gen 3:22).

<sup>1</sup> Some have noted that the word for the angelic creatures (*šārāp*) described in Isaiah 6:1–7 can also mean “fiery serpent” (Num 21:6, 8). They have then tried to make a connection between the “seraphim” of Isaiah 6 and the *nāḥāš* (serpent) of Genesis 3, pointing out that the two words are used interchangeably in Numbers 21:8–9. However, the verb *šārāp* means “to burn” (cf. Lev 4:12; Josh 6:24; 2 Kings 17:31), and its use in reference to snakes is in the burning pain of the venom they inject into their victims. Further, *šārāp* is used as an adjective in Deuteronomy 8:15 to describe the kind of *nāḥāš* (serpents) that live in the desert: they are *nāḥāš šārāp* (“fiery serpents”). Thus the word itself does not necessarily invoke a serpent or serpent-like form; it depends on the context. As Harris comments: “They [the angelic creatures in Isaiah 6] are not ‘originally mythically conceived with serpents’ bodies’ as BDB suggests. There is nothing in the context to suggest serpents’ bodies. Indeed they are said to have feet (Isa 6:2). Rather than the noun being interpreted from the word *šārāp* (fiery serpent) it should be related to the parent root of both words ‘fire.’ These angelic beings were brilliant as flaming fire, symbolic of the purity and power of the heavenly court” (R. Laird Harris, “שָׂרָפִים,” TWOT 2:884).

<sup>2</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942), 1:141–142.

**3) What did Lamech mean when he said, “If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-seven fold”? (Gen 4:24).**

It seems as though Lamech interpreted God’s promise to avenge Cain’s life “sevenfold” (Gen 4:15) as a badge of honor for Cain rather than as a merciful provision for a shameful criminal. Lamech believed that if Cain’s ‘value’ for killing Abel was sevenfold vengeance, then his killing merited much more prestige and honor. Lamech seemed to be reveling in his violence, and his speech serves as a fitting conclusion to the line of Cain, the murderer.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, “Genesis 1-11:26,” *New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996) 288-290.