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NACHASH, THE SERPENT
By Adam Clarke

Taken From Clarke's Commentary
Comments on Genesis 3
Edited by Duane V. Maxey

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INTRODUCTION

For file hdm0666, I used a portion of Adam Clarke's Commentary dealing with the that number -- a treatise by his nephew, John Edward Clarke, on "The Number of A Man." If you turn 666 upside down, you get 999, the number of this file. I did not plan to create a relationship between these two files, but I did decide to use another portion of Clarke's commentary for hdm0999, and, by coincidence, both the numbers of the files and the subjects are somewhat related: file hdm0666 dealt with the Beast, or Man of Sin, and this file, hdm0999, deals with the Hebrew name of "the serpent" -- "nachash". -- DVM

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NACHASH, THE SERPENT

Genesis 3:1-4 "Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? 2 And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: 3 But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. 4 And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:"

Verse 1. [Now the serpent was more subtle] -- We have here one of the most difficult as well as the most important narratives in the whole book of God. The last chapter ended with a

short but striking account of the perfection and felicity of the first human beings, and this opens with an account of their transgression, degradation, and ruin. That man is in a fallen state, the history of the world, with that of the life and miseries of every human being, establishes beyond successful contradiction. But how, and by what agency, was this brought about? Here is a great mystery, and I may appeal to all persons who have read the various comments that have been written on the Mosaic account, whether they have ever yet been satisfied on this part of the subject, though convinced of the fact itself.

Who was the serpent? of what kind? In what way did he seduce the first happy pair? These are questions which remain yet to be answered. The whole account is either a simple narrative of facts, or it is an allegory. If it be a historical relation, its literal meaning should be sought out; if it be an allegory, no attempt should be made to explain it, as it would require a direct revelation to ascertain the sense in which it should be understood, for fanciful illustrations are endless. Believing it to be a simple relation of facts capable of a satisfactory explanation, I shall take it up on this ground; and, by a careful examination of the original text, endeavor to fix the meaning, and show the propriety and consistency of the Mosaic account of the fall of man. The chief difficulty in the account is found in the question, Who was the agent employed in the seduction of our first parents?

The word in the text which we, following the Septuagint, translate serpent, is "nachash": and, according to Buxtorf and others, has three meanings in Scripture:

1. It signifies to view or observe attentively, to divine or use enchantments, because in them the augurs viewed attentively the flight of birds, the entrails of beasts, the course of the clouds, etc.; and under this head it signifies to acquire knowledge by experience.

2. It signifies brass, brazen, and is translated in our Bible, not only brass, but chains, fetters, fetters of brass, and in several places steel; see 2 Sam. 22:35; Job 20:24; Psa. 8:34; and in one place, at least filthiness or fornication. Ezek. 16:36.

3. It signifies a serpent, but of what kind is not determined. In Job 26:13, it seems to mean the whale or hippopotamus: "By his spirit he hath garnished the heavens, his hand hath formed the crooked serpent," [nachash bariach]: as "barach" signifies to pass on or pass through, and "beriach" is used for a bar of a gate or door that passed through rings, etc., the idea of straightness rather than crookedness should be attached to it here; and it is likely that the hippopotamus or sea-horse is intended by it.

In Eccles. 10:11, the creature called "nachash", of whatever sort, is compared to the babbler: "Surely the serpent (nachash) will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better."

In Isa. 27:1, the crocodile or alligator seems particularly meant by the original: "In that day the Lord shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent," etc., And in Isa. 65:25, [Isaiah 65:25 "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord."] the same creature is meant as in Gen. 3:1, for in the words, "And dust shall be the serpent's meat, there is an evident allusion to the text of Moses.

In Amos 9:3, the crocodile is evidently intended: "Though they be hid in the bottom of the sea, thence will I command the serpent, (hannachash,) and he shall bite them." No person can suppose that any of the snake or serpent kind can be intended here; and we see from the various acceptations of the word, [nachash] and the different senses which it bears in various places in the sacred writings, that it appears to be a sort of general term confined to no one sense. Hence it will be necessary to examine the root accurately, to see if its ideal meaning will enable us to ascertain the animal intended in the text.

We have already seen that "nachash" signifies to view attentively, to acquire knowledge or experience by attentive observation; so "nichashti," Gen. 30:27: "I have learned by experience;" and this seems to be its most general meaning in the Bible. The original word is by the Septuagint translated "ophis" -- "a serpent" -- not because this was its fixed determinate meaning in the sacred writings, but because it was the best that occurred to the translators: and they do not seem to have given themselves much trouble to understand the meaning of the original, for they have rendered the word as variously as our translators have done, or rather our translators have followed them, as they give nearly the same significations found in the Septuagint. Hence we find that "ophis" is as frequently used by them as "serpent," its supposed literal meaning, is used in our version.

The New Testament writers, who seldom quote the Old Testament but from the Septuagint translation, and often do not change even a ward in their quotations, copy this version in the use of this word. From the Septuagint therefore we can expect no light, nor indeed from any other of the ancient versions, which are all subsequent to the Septuagint, and some of them actually made from it.

In all this uncertainty it is natural for a serious inquirer after truth to look everywhere for information. And in such an inquiry the Arabic may be expected to afford some help, from its great similarity to the Hebrew. A root in this language, very nearly similar to that in the text, seems to cast considerable light on the subject: "chanas" or "khanasa" signifies he "departed, drew off, lay hid, seduced, slunk away." From this root come "akhnas," "khanasa" and "khanos" -- which all signify an ape, or satyrus, or any creature of the simia or ape genus. It is very remarkable also that from the same root comes "khanas," the DEVIL, which appellation he bears from that meaning of "khanasa," "he drew off, seduced," etc., because he draws men off from righteousness, seduces them from their obedience to God, etc., etc. See Golius, sub voce.

Is it not strange that the devil and the ape should have the same name, derived from the same root, and that root so very similar to the word in the text? But let us return and consider what is said of the creature in question. Now the nachash was more subtle, arum, more wise, cunning, or prudent, than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. In this account we find:

1. That whatever this nachash was, he stood at the head of all inferior animals for wisdom and understanding.

2. That he walked erect, for this is necessarily implied in his punishment -- on thy belly (i. e., on all fours) shalt thou go.

3. That he was endued with the gift of speech, for a conversation is here related between him and the woman.

4. That he was also endued with the gift of reason, for we find him reasoning and disputing with Eve.

5. That these things were common to this creature, the woman no doubt having often seen him walk erect, talk, and reason, and therefore she testifies no kind of surprise when he accosts her in the language related in the text; and indeed from the manner in which this is introduced it appears to be only a part of a conversation that had passed between them on the occasion: "Yea, hath God said," etc.

Had this creature never been known to speak before his addressing the woman at this time and on this subject, it could not have failed to excite her surprise, and to have filled her with caution, though from the purity and innocence of her nature she might have been incapable of being affected with fear.

Now I apprehend that none of these things can be spoken of a serpent of any species.

1. None of them ever did or ever can walk erect. The tales we have had of two-footed and four-footed serpents are justly exploded by every judicious naturalist, and are utterly unworthy of credit. The very name serpent comes from serpo, to creep, and therefore to such it could be neither curse nor punishment to go on their bellies, i. e., to creep on, as they had done from their creation, and must do while their race [their kind] endures.

2. They [serpents] have no organs for speech, or any kind of articulate sound; they can only hiss. It is true that an ass by miraculous influence may speak; but it is not to be supposed that there was any miraculous interference here. God did not qualify this creature with speech for the occasion, and it is not intimated that there was any other agent that did it. On the contrary, the text intimates that speech and reason were natural to the nachash: and is it not in reference to this the inspired penman says, "The nachash was more subtle or intelligent than all the beasts of the field that the Lord God had made"? Nor can I find that the serpentine genus are remarkable for intelligence. It is true the wisdom of the serpent has passed into a proverb, but I cannot see on what it is founded, except in reference to the passage in question, where the nachash, which we translate serpent, following the Septuagint, shows so much intelligence and cunning: and it is very probable that our Lord alludes to this very place when he exhorts his disciples to be wise -- prudent or intelligent, as serpents -- and it is worthy of remark that he uses the same term employed by the Septuagint in the text in question: "Ophis"...

All these things considered, we are obliged to seek for some other word to designate the nachash in the text, than the word "serpent," which on every view of the subject appears to me inefficient and inapplicable. We have seen above that khanas, akhnas, and kanoos, signify a creature of the ape or satyrus kind. We have seen that the meaning of the root is, "he lay hid, seduced, slunk away," etc.; and that khanas means the devil, as the inspirer of evil, and seducer from God and truth. See Golius and Wilmet.

It therefore appears to me that a creature of the ape or ouran outang kind is here intended; and that Satan made use of this creature as the most proper instrument for the accomplishment of his murderous purposes against the life and soul of man. Under this creature he lay hid, and by this creature he seduced our first parents, and drew off or slunk away from every eye but the eye of God. Such a creature answers to every part of the description in the text: it is evident from the structure of its limbs and their muscles that it might have been originally designed to walk erect, and that nothing less than a sovereign controlling power could induce them to put down hands in every respect formed like those of man, and walk like those creatures whose claw-armed paws prove them to have been designed to walk on all fours.

Dr. Tyson argues in his anatomy of an ouran outang that this creature was designed to walk erect, as it is otherwise in all quadrupeds. Philos. Trans., vol. xxi., p. 340. The subtlety, cunning, endlessly varied pranks and tricks of these creatures, show them, even now, to be more subtle and more intelligent than any other creature, man alone excepted. Being obliged now to walk on all fours, and gather their food from the ground, they are literally obliged to eat the dust; and though exceedingly cunning, and careful in a variety of instances to separate that part which is wholesome and proper for food from that which is not so, in the article of cleanliness they are lost to all sense of propriety; and though they have every means in their power of cleansing the aliments they gather off the ground, and from among the dust, yet they never in their savage state make use of any, except a slight rub against their side, or with one of their hands, more to see what the article is than to cleanse it. Add to this, their utter aversion to walk upright; it requires the utmost discipline to bring them to it, and scarcely anything irritates them more than to be obliged to do it. Long observation on some of these animals enables me to state these facts.

Should any person who may read this note object against my conclusions, -- [because apparently derived from an Arabic word which is not exactly similar to the Hebrew, though to those who understand both languages the similarity will be striking; yet, as I do not insist on the identity of the terms, though important consequences have been derived from less likely etymologies], -- he is welcome to throw the whole of this out of the account. He may then take up the Hebrew root only, which signifies "to gaze, to view attentively, pry into, inquire narrowly," etc., and consider the passage that appears to compare the nachash to the babbler, Eccles. 10:11, and he will soon find, if he have any acquaintance with creatures of this genus, that for earnest, attentive watching, looking, etc., and for chattering or babbling, they have no fellows in the animal world. Indeed, the ability and propensity to chatter is all they have left, according to the above hypothesis, of their original gift of speech, of which I suppose them to have been deprived at the fall as a part of their punishment.

I have spent the longer time on this subject:--

1. Because it is exceedingly obscure--
2. Because no interpretation hitherto given of it has afforded me the smallest satisfaction--
3. Because I think the above mode of accounting for every part of the whole transaction is consistent and satisfactory, and in my opinion removes many embarrassments, and solves the chief difficulties.

I think it can be no solid objection to the above mode of solution that Satan, in different parts of the New Testament, is called the serpent, the serpent that deceived Eve by his subtlety, the old serpent, etc., for we have already seen that the New Testament writers have borrowed the word from the Septuagint, and the Septuagint themselves use it in a vast variety and latitude of meaning; and surely the ouran outang is as likely to be the animal in question as nachash and ophis are likely to mean at once a snake, a crocodile, a hippopotamus, fornication, a chain, a pair of fetters, a piece of brass, a piece of steel, and a conjurer; for we have seen above that all these are acceptations of the original word. Besides, the New Testament writers seem to lose sight of the animal or instrument used on the occasion, and speak only of Satan himself as the cause of the transgression, and the instrument of all evil.

If, however, any person should choose to differ from the opinion stated above, he is at perfect liberty so to do; I make it no article of faith, nor of Christian communion. I crave the same liberty to judge for myself that I give to others, to which every man has an indisputable right; and I hope no man will call me a heretic for departing in this respect from the common opinion, which appears to me to be so embarrassed as to be altogether unintelligible.

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THE END