

THE GOD OF ANIMALS, II: THE FIRST THEOLOGIAN
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—GENESIS 3:1-24
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The Bible tells us many of its truths through stories about animals. At least two of those Bible animals can talk, including Eden's infamous reptile, so let's see what the talking snake has to teach us. "The serpent," says the biblical storyteller in one of the oldest and most aboriginal among all the Bible's tales, from about 1000 BC, or three thousand years ago, "the serpent was craftier than any other animal that the Lord God had made."

I'm not sure why the Bible thinks the serpent is the slyest of them all. I might have picked the fox, or the chimpanzee, who looks almost human and can even play practical jokes. But the choice of the serpent as the slyest might have something to do with the sheer genius of the snake's evolutionary history. The snake is nature at its craftiest.

It has two lungs and two kidneys, just like us, but they're not twinned side by side symmetrically as in all other animals, but lined up like box cars on one side of the body to allow for its slender physique and an alimentary canal with room, in the large pythons, for something like a small antelope.

Its jaws, hinged with unearthly flexibility, can accommodate prey many times the diameter of its mouth. The snake smells with its tongue, famously forked so that it can determine which direction its next meal or lover is coming from.

Its fangs are as hollow as hypodermic needles, and serve the same purpose: to deliver potent chemicals beneath the epidermis. Small pits between the nostrils and the eyes are so heat sensitive that a snake knows when the body heat of a nearby rat raises the temperature a tiny fraction of a degree. As if that weren't enough, its eyesight is so acute it can detect movement from a hundred yards away.

It never needs Botox or facelifts or tummy tucks because it sheds its skin periodically, giving even elderly snakes the flawless complexion of America's Next Supermodel, a shrewd evolutionary technology which has unexpectedly turned the snake into a symbol of resurrection and immortality.

The black mamba, fourteen feet long and four feet HIGH when it raises itself on its haunches to strike, can slither around at twelve miles an hour. Keep your track shoes on, because it has enough venom to kill twenty grown men. In the absence of anti-venom, the mortality rate of a black mamba bite is 100%.

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, about the pathetic tribulations of a missionary family from Atlanta trying to preach the gospel to the benighted heathens of darkest Africa, is one of my top ten books of all time. If you've read *The Poisonwood Bible*, you know that the plot hinges on the craftiness of a serpent, the venomous strike of a green mamba, a species of the cobra family. "In this serpent," the snake experts tell us,

“the diabolic genius of nature has attained its highest perfection.”¹

Maybe that’s what the Bible means when it tells us the serpent was the craftiest of all the animals the Lord God had made. The snake is the diabolic genius of nature at its highest. ‘Diabolic,’ from *Diabolos*, the Devil. And that is why even Indiana Jones is afraid of snakes. Will anybody here admit to the guilty pleasure of that recent film *Snakes on a Plane*? I should have called this sermon *Snakes in a Garden*.

The serpent is so crafty he can talk. The Bible has a problem, you see. The Bible has to explain the presence of evil in the good world of a kind and powerful God. A good and competent God would presumably create only a perfect world, so the Bible cannot lay all the world’s problems at God’s sacred feet, and it has to find another explanation for that dark enigma. So the Bible attributes all our present problems and challenges and evils to a malevolent animal and a naive human being.

The serpent’s malice is left unexplained. We don’t know why he wishes the downfall of creation’s first king and queen; he just does. The serpent is the Bible’s Iago, the quintessential Shakespearean villain who engineers Othello’s tragic downfall. Iago’s malice is motiveless, as Coleridge famously put it. So is the serpent’s.

So crafty himself, perhaps the serpent is envious of a being which might prove to be craftier still. When Adam and Eve came along, you see, the serpent had already been here on earth for something like 150 million years,

and after so long and happy a dominance, the human being now threatens his supremacy. His envy is like that of a salutorian for the valedictorian; he doesn’t want to be second-best.

So he happens upon Eve, in all her wide-eyed, dewy innocence, minding her own business, loving God her maker and becoming one flesh all day long with Adam, and tending her perfect garden. You’ve read *Paradise Lost*. Haven’t you? She lives in God’s perfect garden, you see, and has no experience of evil and is completely blind-sided by her crafty interrogator; her artlessness is no match for his guile.

The serpent poses a crafty question: “Did God say you could not eat of ANY of the trees in the Garden?” Eve finds herself in the unhappy position of defending God’s honor. “No, no, no, there’s only ONE tree that’s out-of-bounds in this Garden. Only one tree, the tree in the center, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Just the one tree.”

The serpent presses his deceptive speculations: “You won’t die; that’s a lie. For God knows that if you eat of this tree, you will know good and evil and then you will be like God, and that is what of all things God fears most.” God, says the serpent, wants no peers, no competition, no rivals. God is like the valedictorian who wants to keep the salutorian always in second place. The serpent knows about jealous valedictorians, you see. The serpent imputes his own envy to the Creator of all the stars and worlds.

Walter Brueggemann says that the serpent is *The First Theologian*, because instead of talking **TO** God or **WITH** God, he talks

¹Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 362.

ABOUT God.² By **QUESTIONING** God rather than **OBEYING** God, the serpent becomes the world's first theologian, and there are some who would say that theologians have been crawling on their bellies ever since. They love talking **ABOUT** God; they're not so fond of talking **TO** God, and **OBEYING** God, well Pshaw! That's way too hard.

With my friend Saud here, I try to remember a famous Muslim name for God. I remember that in Islam, Allah—THE God, the same God we all adore and obey—is called The One Whom the Boldness of Thought Cannot Contain. So Islam means 'surrender.' It means obedience.

The serpent plants just the faintest shadow of doubt in the woman's artless head, but it is enough. She has to try it out and then coopts the man in her misdeed, and suddenly they notice they haven't a stitch of clothing, and they are ashamed, and hide from God. In this primitive story, God is very near and very real. It is God's habit to take a stroll in the Garden in the cool of the day, and when the first man and the first woman make themselves conspicuous by their absence, God asks, "Adam, where are you? What have you done. Why have you done it?"

A man once asked his pastor, Carlyle Marney, "Where is the Garden of Eden?"

Mr. Marney responded, "215 Elm Street, Knoxville, Tennessee."

"I thought it was someplace in Asia," said the man.

²Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in the *Interpretation Commentary Series* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 48.

"Well, you couldn't prove it by me," Marney said. "For there on Elm Street, when I was just a boy, I stole a quarter out of my Mama's purse and went down to the store and bought some candy and I ate it and then I was so ashamed that I came back and hid in the closet. It was there she found me and asked, 'Where are you? Why are you hiding? What have you done?'"³

The point, of course, is that this primitive story of talking snakes and lethal apples and artless innocents who suddenly notice they're naked and a God who likes to hike is not a story that happens at SOME place at SOME time to SOME one, but one which happens in ALL places and at ALL times, and to ALL people. We all remember the first day we noticed we were naked. We all remember the day we first knew the difference between good and evil, but pressed evil anyway. We all remember hiding from God, perhaps because just yesterday we found ourselves hiding once again.

This story is about failing to respect our limits. It is about grasping after that which does not rightfully belong to us. It is about the finite creature, unhappy in its own finitude, reaching up toward an infinity it can never own and doesn't know what to do with.

Next week, at the Metropolitan Opera, a few of us will have the privilege to see Verdi's version of Shakespeare's *MacBeth*, who never knew when enough was enough. He's won valiant victories and been crowned with honor and named Thane of Cawdor, but it's never enough. He wants to be king and will

³Slightly adapted from Carlyle Marney, quoted in William H. Willimon, *Sighing for Eden: Sin, Evil, and the Christian Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 24.

do anything to usurp the throne. When he worries he won't be able to commit the unspeakable crime of regicide, when he fears he won't be able to "screw his courage to the sticking point," he says, "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent but only vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself." Vaulting ambition, not knowing when enough is enough.

As individuals, as a nation, as a human race, we don't know when to leave the untouchable mysteries undisturbed. In our consumption habits, we don't know when enough is enough. Given all the trees of the Garden but one, we insist on having even that, so that even the ice of Antarctica is smudged with smoke and oil and grease, there is litter on the moon and dead robots on Mars and space junk in the heavens.

We have plundered the forbidden tree by probing the infinitesimal intricacies of the atom and turned those appalling energies to mostly violent purpose until the planet bristles with danger. We've unlocked the secrets of the human genome, but knowledge and technology transcend wisdom and prudence and we don't know how those secrets will be put to use.

I'm not recommending a scientific obstructionism. I'm not pining nostalgically for a simpler day when all the secrets of existence were locked away in a vault with a tricky combination next to our rotary phones and our manual typewriters. I'm just saying that plundering the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is a dicey endeavor. We must guard the sacred mysteries.

As Czech novelist Milan Kundera points out, "Only the animals were not expelled from

Paradise."⁴ Crafty serpents notwithstanding, the animals are happier in their finitude than we, so they got to stay.

Legend has it, of course, that when the first man and the first woman were banished from the Garden to the wilderness east of Eden, one animal followed them to their new home. It was the dog, of course, and that is why the dog has been humanity's best friend ever since. He chose human company over Paradise.

There's another legend about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They say Christ's cross was carved from its wood, so that by God's grace, the Tree that got us banished from Paradise becomes the Gateway by which we return home.

John Donne:

We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place;
Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;
As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.⁵

⁴Quoted by James Taylor in *The Spirituality of Pets* (Kelowna, BC: Northstone, 2006), p. 111.

⁵John Donne, "Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness."