

**The Antichrist
In The
Proto-Evangel**



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Gen 3.14-15:

**Cursed are you separately from all the domestic animals,
and from all the animals of the wild.**

**Upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.**

**And enmity I will put
between you and the woman,
and between your seed and her seed.**

**He shall crush¹ you, [i.e., your] head,
and you shall crush him, [i.e., his] heel.**

¹ Or *strike* or *bruise*, also in following line.

We will consider the curse upon the serpent as a pronouncement with five components:

1. The distinction made from the other animals.
2. The sentence of dust-eating.
3. The enmity between the Serpent and the woman Eve.
4. The enmity between Serpent's seed and the woman's Seed.
5. The Proto-Evangel proper: The fatal crushing of the Serpent by the wounded Seed of the woman.

Before examining these pronouncements, let us observe — contrary to millennia of tradition and religious art — that the Serpent of Genesis 3 neither *is* nor *was* a reptilian, animal snake. The Heb text does not speak of *a* snake, but of *the* Serpent. By this name, the Bible first introduces us to that entity that is later “called the devil, or Satan” (Rev 12.9), after he has shown himself to be the *slanderer* of God's people, and the *adversary* of mankind in general. The devil was first called the Serpent (Heb *nachash*, with a guttural *ch*) because of his whispering, hissing speech (the kind of speech that would soon become associated with divination, cf. Isa 8.19),² not because of his appearance. The Gen narrative nowhere describes the Serpent's appearance, but the apostle Paul assured us that Satan can disguise himself “as an angel of light” (2Cor 11.14; appearing as an angel of light would certainly have helped in the deception of Eve).

Beginning, then, with the first component of the pronouncement, the text emphasizes not that the serpent is cursed *more than* the other animals, but *in distinction* from them. All animals and people suffer from the curse upon the ground (Gen 3.17), and indeed the whole creation is subjected to futility and decay (Rom 8.20-21), but the serpent is singled out for special punishment. The animal kingdom will one day be restored to tranquility (Isa 11.6-9), but the Serpent, Satan, who had exalted himself above man and usurped man's dominion, will forever go on his belly and eat dust.

² See Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003, pp. 544-545).

This element of the curse does not imply that the Serpent was (or inhabited) an animal snake that once had legs and now must slither legless. Instead, the words about going on one's belly and eating dust are common expressions conveying the idea of *abject humiliation*. As J. P. Val d'Eremao wrote,

Going, sitting, lying, and grovelling [sic] in dust and ashes, or on the earth; prostrating, placing one's body or putting one's mouth to the earth in dust and ashes; eating or licking dust and ashes;—all these are common scriptural expressions for misery, helplessness, degradation, servitude, humiliation, and defeat. One may easily convince one's self of this, by consulting any full Concordance of the Bible.³

Once we understand that the curse of the Serpent is pronounced upon no other than the evil spirit we know as Satan (not upon some brute animal), we see that the third component of God's pronouncement addresses two *individuals*, Satan and Eve. It is not about snakes and *women*, but about Satan and *the woman*. Furthermore, this third component has to do specifically with Eve as distinct from Adam or any of her offspring (for the matter of offspring comes next). Therefore, we learn from this third component of the pronouncement that Satan would never again be able to represent himself to *the woman*, Eve, as a friend with her best interests at heart. For her part, as James E. Smith says, Eve "would never again be the pushover she had been in the garden. ... This was the beginning of the successful struggle against Satan. ... The woman's enmity toward Satan smashed his dreams of recruiting all mankind for his rebellion against God."⁴

The fourth component in this curse, "**and between your seed and her seed,**" introduces some ambiguity. It clearly extends the perpetual enmity between Satan and Eve to the offspring of both, but we wonder

³ J. P. Val d'Eremao, *The Serpent of Eden: A Philological and Critical Essay on the Text of Genesis III, and Its Various Interpretations*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1888). See for examples, Psa 44.24-25; 72.9; Isa 29.4; 49.23; Eze 28.17; Mic 1.9-10; 7.16-17; Nah 3.18. If it seems hermeneutically jarring to read the curse upon the Serpent as metaphorical, when we have read the narrative of Gen 3 up to this point as literal, let us recognize that this curse is the second *poetic* pronouncement in the Bible after Adam's poem about Eve in Gen 2.23. In the curses, the lines about the bruising of head and heel are also metaphorical (even though Messiah's heel may have been literally bruised), as are the lines, "By the sweat of your face / you will eat bread," and the euphemism, "return to the ground."

⁴ James E. Smith, *Old Testament Survey Series: The Pentateuch* (College Press, Joplin, 1992).

whether we should understand the offspring (Heb *zera'* = seed) as an individual or as a group. While plural forms of *zera'* are possible,⁵ this Hebrew noun only appears in singular form in Genesis, and serves as a collective noun like our English word *sheep*. Does *sheep* mean one or many? We must ask the same question with the Hebrew word for *seed*. The ubiquitous singular form *zera'* is used in Genesis both to refer to a collective and to an individual. In Gen 7.3 and many other passages, *zera'* — though singular in form — is used with a clearly plural, collective meaning. In Gen 4.25, however, Eve refers to Seth as her *zera'*, where the word is singular both in form and meaning.

Paul deals with the grammatical ambiguity of *zera'* in Gal 3.16. Regarding the promise to Abraham and to his “seed” in Gen 22.18, Paul writes that God “does not say ‘and to seeds,’ as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, ‘and to your seed,’ that is Christ.”⁶ In his argument Paul was not chiding the Galatians’ for an oversight in their reading — they knew what Gen 22.18 said —, but rather was giving them the correct exegetical choice for a grammatically ambiguous noun: **One descendant is in view, not many.**

We see then that *zera'*, while a collective noun, can have an important *singular and particular* meaning in some Genesis passages. So, returning to the curse upon the serpent, which is it in the fourth component of the pronouncement? Will the enmity persist between Satan’s many offspring and all Eve’s descendants, or between one spawn of Satan and one Son of the woman?

Commentators generally ignore the possible single-seed interpretation of “your seed and her seed,” and simply interpret *seed* in the fourth component as a collective noun. “Your seed,” i.e., Satan’s seed would then

⁵ One plural form of *zera'* appears in the Bible, in 1Sa 8.15.

⁶ *The New American Standard Bible*, 1995. *The Delitzsch Hebrew New Testament* contrasts the plural זְרַעֲךָ with the singular זְרַעֲךָ in Gal 3.16, thus following the Greek text, but it would be more correct for the Hebrew NT to follow Gen and use the singular form in both places!

refer to evil spirits and wicked men.⁷ “Her seed,” i.e., Eve’s seed would refer to her righteous descendants who resist the devil’s schemes. However, many expositors take the collective approach and speak of “your seed and her seed” as referring to spiritual and biological offspring generally, but then — without giving any grammatical rationale for their interpretive leap — depict the seed of the woman who crushes the serpent’s head as her “representative seed ... i.e., Christ.”⁸ That is, they jump from a plural interpretation of “your seed and her seed” in component 4 to a singular interpretation of “He shall crush your head” in component 5, with little or no explanation for the shift in number. James E. Smith takes this approach:

The battle would continue between the seed of the woman and the seed of the Serpent. That the word “seed” here is figurative is obvious from the fact that women do not literally have seed. The seed of the woman would embrace all those who share the woman’s enmity toward the Devil, i.e., righteous mankind. The seed of the Devil would include all who yield to the Evil One without so much as a skirmish, i.e., wicked mankind. God was assuring Serpent that a righteous remnant of mankind would resist with God-given might the evil designs of the children of the Devil.

The struggle between the two seeds would reach its climax in a confrontation between Serpent himself and a single representative seed of woman. Serpent will strike at the heel of this champion of righteousness. He will thereby inflict great pain upon him. Ultimately, however, the representatives of the seed of woman would crush Serpent’s head, i.e., deal him a mortal blow. That Genesis 3.15 refers to the victory of Messiah over Satan is the teaching of Galatians 4.4-5 and 3.15ff.⁹

Essentially, such interpretations propose that Satan’s seed and the woman’s seed have *both* general *and* particular referents (though no one explains the particular referent of Satan’s seed). I find this both/and

⁷ See for example JFB. The editors of the NNIBC at least note that “the meaning of the phrase **your seed** as it applies to the serpent is uncertain,” but refer to John 8.37-47 where Jesus referred to Jewish hypocrites as children of the devil, thus leaning toward the collective interpretation, as does the BSB.

⁸ The King James Study Bible.

⁹ James E. Smith, *Old Testament Survey Series: The Pentateuch* (College Press, Joplin, 1992).

approach attractive except that it has no grammatical basis. Where is the clue in the text that the nouns in question have double meanings?

Some might propose that the seeds can have double referents because we can interpret Gen 3.14-15 in both its *sensus literalis* (the literal sense of the text that the author originally intended) and its *sensus plenior* (the fuller sense, deeper than that understood by the author, but intended by God and brought out by subsequent biblical revelation). But if we take this approach, we must still exposit the *sensus literalis* responsibly.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary seems to handle Gen 3.14-15 more faithfully than other commentaries. In the EBC's exposition of Genesis, John H. Sailhamer writes:

... The woman's "seed" is certainly intended to be understood as a group (or individual) that lies **the same temporal distance from the woman as the "seed" of the snake does from the snake itself.** ... (bold emphasis mine)¹⁰

In other words, Sailhamer sees that consistency is called for in our understanding of the two seeds. If we take the seed of the serpent as a collective group, that's how we should understand the seed of the woman. If we take the seed of the woman as indicating a particular individual, that's how we should understand the seed of the serpent. So which is it? Collective or particular?

In the absence of some biblical clue that the seeds in view have collective (or double) referents, the masculine singular pronoun in the final component of the pronouncement must decide the question. From the first mention of the woman's *zera'* the text goes directly to the masculine singular pronoun *he* in the *Proto-Evangel* proper.¹¹ "*He* will crush [Satan's] head." The

¹⁰ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, Ed. (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1990), *Genesis*.

¹¹ The LXX follows the Heb by using the masculine singular pronoun *αὐτός* rather than the neuter *αὐτό* that would normally follow the neuter noun *σπέρμα*. Bizarrely, the Vulgate independently translates the nominative pronoun with *ipsa*, she! Was Jerome expressing veneration for Mary as the one who would crush Satan's head, or did *ipsa* replace the variant reading *ipse* in later mss of the Vulgate?

woman's seed in view is a *he*, and this tells us that her seed is to be understood in the singular number, and as a male descendant.¹²

Keil and Delitzsch disagree. They understand the Hebrew pronoun *hu'* (הוּ) in its genderless meaning as *it*. This allows them to take the word seed, *zera'*, as a collective noun speaking only of descendants generally without reference to a particular individual. With regard to the seed of the woman they say, "As the woman is the mother of all living (v. 20), her seed, to which the victory over the serpent and its seed is promised, must be the human race."

Keil and Delitzsch, while consistent in their interpretation of both seeds as collective, are nevertheless a lone voice in support of this genderless approach to the key pronoun. The majority of commentators understand the pronoun *hu'* (הוּ) as masculine and particular. A parallel in Gen 15.13 supports the majority view. To explain, let us consider the part of the pronouncement about the seeds as consisting of (1) a prediction and (2) an amplification of that prediction:

1. Enmity I will put ... between your seed and her seed.
2. He shall crush your head.

In the amplification, additional information is given about the destiny of the woman's seed, using the pronoun *He* as the subject in place of the preceding "her seed." Compare this structure with a similar pattern in Gen 15.13:

1. A sojourner will be your seed
2. in a land not *theirs* *they* will be enslaved ...

In this verse, the word *seed* (*zera'*) is in its normal, singular form, and in the first statement the descriptive noun *sojourner* and the verb *will be* are also in the singular form (in the Heb text), agreeing with the grammatical

¹² Contemporary Jewish interpreters disagree and have codified the collective meaning in the JPS Tanakh, (1985): "*they* shall strike at your head," thus eliminating all reference to a particular messiah in this verse.

number of *seed*. However, it is not a particular seed that is in view here, but a great many descendants of Abraham. Therefore, the amplification switches immediately to the plural form of the pronominal suffix — *theirs* — and the plural verb *they-will-be-enslaved*. By analogy, it seems that the pronoun *He* in Gen 3.15 is used intentionally in the singular form, in order to point to a particular individual. That individual would be the one male descendant of Eve who would suffer an excruciating wound to his heel, but would himself succeed in delivering the fatal, crushing blow to the Serpent’s head.

In Rom 16.20 Paul amplifies our understanding of this final event in the Proto-Evangel’s drama with the words, “The God of peace shall soon crush Satan under your feet.” How is it that God will do the crushing? God is neither human nor susceptible to wounds on the heel, and yet we have understood Gen 3.15 to predict a single, male, offspring of Eve as the one who will crush Satan’s head and himself be wounded. Can the crushing of Satan be done by a vulnerable man, and at the same time by God Himself? Yes, when it is done by the crucified God-man, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the Seed of the woman and also the one Seed of Abraham whom Paul discusses in Gal 3.16. The Proto-Evangel of Gen 3.15 does not explicitly reveal that the human Seed of the woman will also be *divine*, but may hint at the virgin birth in designating the coming Redeemer as the seed of the *woman* rather than the seed of the man. Regardless, the NT revelation assures us that the suffering God-man, Jesus Christ, was indeed the subject of the prophetic announcements of the one Seed of the woman and the one Seed of Abraham.

But now we must return to the long overlooked *first half* of the fourth component of God’s pronouncement. If “her seed” refers to a *single* descendant of Eve, then we can reasonably infer that “your seed” refers to a *particular* spawn of Satan.

Before we explore that thought further, let us summarize what we now understand about the conflicts God decreed. There would be enmity between:

- Satan and the woman.
- Satan’s seed and the woman’s seed.

- The woman's Seed and Satan.

At this point Sailhamer observes:

...in this verse it is the "seed" of the woman who crushes the head of the snake. Though the "enmity" may lie between the two "seeds," the goal of the final crushing blow is not the "seed" of the snake but rather the snake itself; *his* head will be crushed. In other words, it appears that the author seems intent on treating the snake and his "seed" together, as one.

What happens to the snake's "seed" in the distant future can be said to happen to the snake as well. This suggests that the author views the snake in terms that extend beyond this particular snake of the garden. The snake, for the author, is representative of someone or something else. **The snake is represented by his "seed." When that "seed" is crushed, the head of the snake is crushed. Consequently more is at stake in this brief passage than the reader is at first aware of. A program is set forth.** ... (bold emphasis mine)¹³

Gen 3.14-15 sets forth quite a program indeed! As we've already described above, the *first* part of this program insured that Satan would no longer enjoy Eve's willing attention to his propositions. The *third* part of this program, as the Church has expounded it down through the centuries, insured that the coming Redeemer would finally avenge the woman and end Satan's schemes forever. But now in the *second*, and expositionally neglected part of this program, we see that there would also arise an enduring enmity between the two seeds, namely, between Christ and *an individual spawn of Satan*.

The progeny of Satan in view can only be that coming champion of the devil whose career the prophets and apostles describe in detail, and whom John finally calls "the Antichrist" (1Jo 2.18). Thus, the Proto-Evangel not only predicts the coming Christ, but also the coming Antichrist and the enduring enmity between them.¹⁴

¹³ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, Ed. (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1990), *Genesis*.

¹⁴ Origen, in his allegorical comments upon Mat 19.7, sees in Gen 3.15 an eschatological "last husband" of Israel: "For the last husband [of Israel] hated his wife and will write out for her some day at the

We are accustomed to thinking of Christ as only appearing twice, at points in the middle and at the end of history, and imagine the Antichrist only appearing once at the end. However, the pre-incarnate Christ repeatedly appeared to God's people as the Messenger of YHVH and as the Commander of His angel army (Jos 5.13-15). Our Lord acted as a mighty warrior before Bethlehem, and will return as a mighty warrior at the end of the age (Zec 14.1-3; Rev 19.11-16). Likewise, the spirit of Antichrist has been active throughout history (1Jo 4.3). As Paul said, the "secret power of lawlessness" that will energize the Antichrist has already been at work in the world (2Th 2.7). This is why John could say, "even now many antichrists have appeared" (1Jo 2.18). Goliaths, Antiochuses, Pompeys, Hitlers and Stalins have arisen as antichrists in their time, mocking the one true God, suppressing His Scriptures and persecuting His people. They have all been energized by the same spirit and qualify as *seeds* of Satan, if not *the* seed. Against the many antichrists, God has raised up His champions, the Jobs, the Davids, the Pauls who qualify as God's messiahs if not *the Messiah*. And so, through their human agents, the spirit of Antichrist and the Spirit of Christ have maintained through the ages the enmity between "your seed and the seed of the woman."

But hasn't Christ already crushed the serpent's head on Calvary? Yes, Christ, the Seed of the woman, crushed Satan's head *judicially* in the finished work of the atonement. No longer do Satan nor his seed have any legal right to redeemed humanity and humanity's earthly dominion. In Christ we can now tread upon "snakes and scorpions and ... all the power of the enemy" (Luk 10.19). Nevertheless, the evil spirits have refused to quit our property, and so Christ, the seed of the woman and our kinsman-redeemer, must still come and crush Satan's head *practically*. This He will do with the defeat of Antichrist at the apocalypse. As Sailhamer speculates, the defeat of "your seed" and the crushing of Satan's head are somehow concurrent events. Indeed, practically speaking, the Antichrist is Satan's head, and when that

consummation of things a bill of divorcement ... for as the good God will put enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between his seed and her seed, so will He order it that the last husband shall hate her." From The Second Book of the Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, XIV.17.

despicable person is thrown into the lake of fire, the Serpent will be bound, and his usurped rule on the earth effectively ended forever, his head fatally crushed (Rev 19.19-20.3).

The Holy Spirit who inspired our Scriptures has seen fit to make us aware of this cosmic conflict and its end *from the beginning*.