

The Antichrist In The Proto-Evangel

By Roderick Graciano, © 2009

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.**

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

1. The distinction made from the other animals.
2. The symbolic sentence of dust-eating.
3. The enmity between the Serpent Satan and the woman Eve.
4. The enmity between Satan'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.

Let us acknowledge from the outset that the serpent of Genesis 3 is an animal inhabited by "that ancient Serpent called the devil, or Satan" (Rev 12.9). Nowhere does the Bible indicate that any of the animals under Adam's dominion had the faculty of speech, nor that they will have any such ability in the future. It appears, therefore, that the only way the serpent in the garden spoke was as Satan spoke through or from it. It follows that while the devil used the brute snake as an accessory, the real player in the drama was Satan himself.

Beginning, then, with the first component of the pronouncement, Keil and Delitzsch² explain that it emphasizes not that the serpent is cursed *more*

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

² Commentary on The Old Testament.

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. Though Satan himself is the ultimate target, the punishment declared in the first and second components of the curse addresses both the ancient Serpent and the accessory snake. Satan inhabiting the snake had exalted himself above man and usurped his dominion. Therefore, God condemns the accessory animal to forever “eat dust” and thereby symbolize the eventual casting down and utter humiliation of the evil spirit that has inhabited it.³ Keil and Delitzsch summarize:

Although this punishment fell literally upon the serpent, it also affected the tempter in a figurative or symbolical sense. He became the object of the utmost contempt and abhorrence; and the serpent still keeps the revolting image of Satan perpetually before the eye. This degradation was to be perpetual. “While all the rest of creation shall be delivered from the fate into which the fall has plunged it, according to Isa 65.25, the instrument of man’s temptation is to remain sentenced to perpetual degradation in fulfilment of the sentence, ‘all the days of thy life.’ and thus to prefigure the fate of the real tempter, for whom there is no deliverance” (Hengstenberg, *Christology* 1:15).

Understanding that the curse upon the serpent ultimately has Satan rather than the brute animal in view, we can see that the third component of the pronouncement clearly 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 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 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

³ Regarding the punishment of accessory animals, cf. Gen 9.5; Exo 21.28, 29; Lev 20.15, 16.

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

⁵ One plural form of *zera’* appears in our Bible in 1Sa 8.15.

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

⁶ *The New American Standard Bible*, 1995. *The Delitzsch Hebrew New Testament* contrasts the plural רְאֵיִךְ with the singular רְאֵיִךְ 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!

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).

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 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:

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 *spevrma*. 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?

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.

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 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 Satan.

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 positionally 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 the coming Antichrist and the enduring enmity between them.¹⁴

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 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

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 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.

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 their 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 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*.