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Serpent's first question (OT)

Questions and answers from Bible characters

MY

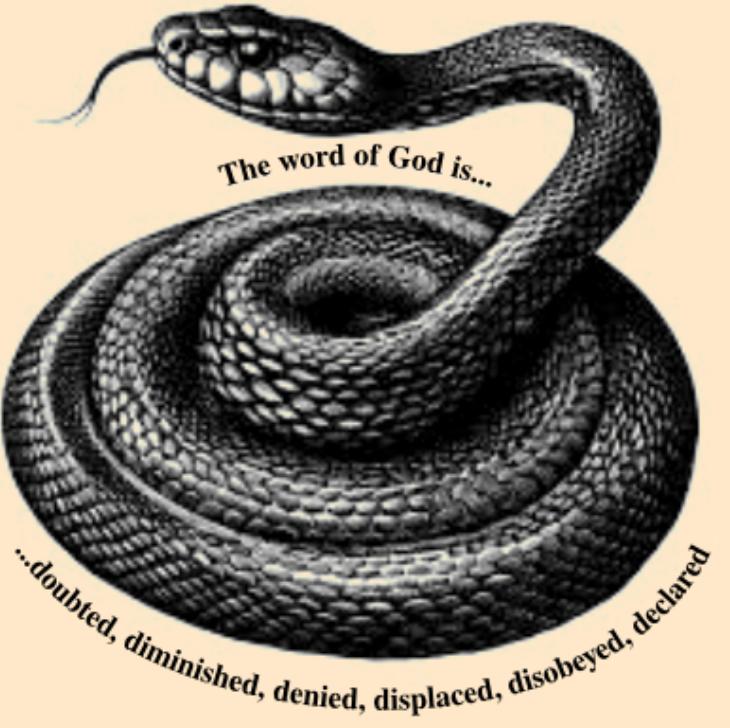
Q



My reflections

Is it really true that God said 'No'?

The word of God is...



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Introduction

This second MyQ&A paper investigates the very first question recorded in the Hebrew Bible. The serpent asked:

"Is it really true that God said, 'You must not eat from any tree of the orchard'?" (Genesis 3:1).

So, a wild beast asked the question of the first woman! That immediately leads us to wonder about the type of world in which this event took place, because in our world, while animals communicate with their own species, they don't converse with humans about God, eating, trees, orchards, or about what God knows. How might we explain such a phenomenon?

One explanation argues that because animals don't speak, we must regard the Genesis account as myth. But this takes the current world as a lens through which to view the ancient world. That assumption may be false. Particularly, viewing a world of some 6000 years ago through the lens of the 21st century prevents us from clearly seeing a world that was unpolluted by sin.

Adam was created perfect, without a single blemish in his body, or his brain. However, our genetic problems since he sinned have accumulated over generations, leading to gene atrophy. In Adam's pre-sin state he had perfect attributes - sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing, memory etc. And, even after he sinned, humans in the antediluvian world lived 12 times longer than we do. To say nothing of geographic and environmental differences that account for discoveries of fossilised plants, animals and shells covered by mud and sediment on top of mountains, or in deserts. The characteristics of our landscape are worlds apart from those in which our ancestors lived. A square peg is not for a round hole.

Serpent deception

Serpent (*nahash*), *nechoshet* (copper), and *nichush* (divination) are Hebrew words derived from the same trilateral root (*nun-chet-tav*). A thread uniting three illuminates on what it is about snakeness or serpentness that motivated the snake to instigate the events in the Garden of Eden ([Bar, Klein](#)).

Further, *nechoshet* or copper, is, in the hierarchy of precious metals, seldom the metal of choice. Copper is a cheap everyday metal. It is always inferior to gold and silver. Copper is often alloyed with other metals to produce bronze. But nobody strives for a bronze medal; they want gold or silver. From a Jewish perspective, this notion of copper's inferiority is mirrored in the construction of the Tabernacle and the Holy Temple. Most of the important ritual items in those holy places were made of gold or silver because they are the most important precious metals; copper plays only a lesser role.

Another example is found when the Jews in the wilderness were attacked by poisonous snakes, God told Moses to "make a snake" (Numbers 21:8), Moses crafted a copper snake (*nachash nechoshet*), which never did possess any inherent power, but served to remind the Jews of the One Above and inspired them to connect to God, Who would heal them the snakebites.

Moreover, while *nechoshet* (copper) is similar to *nachash* (serpent), sounding similar and sharing the same root, they are also similar conceptually. Just as the snake crawls on the ground and does not walk upright like other creatures do, its humble place demonstrate that it is a nobody insignificant in the creation order. So to copper is an insignificant metal that isn't important in its own right. Accordingly, the copper snake did not have any inherent significance or power of its own and served merely as a means to an end. God Himself always remains the ultimate Being (Exodus 15:26, Deuteronomy 32:39).



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Which brings me to the third word in the group, *nichush* (divination). *Nichush* is a forbidden, idolatrous mode of fortunetelling. It is certainly not as effective or accurate as direct messaging from God. For the Jews, the right way to tell the future would be to consult with a genuine prophet, or at least with the *urim v'tumim* in the high priest's breastplate. In this way, *nichush* does not rank number one as light on the future, just like *nechoshet* is not the number one prestigious metal and the *nachash* was not the main player in enticing Adam and Eve.

Additionally, Balaam praised the Jewish people by declaring, that there was “no *nachash* in Jacob” (Numbers 23:23), meaning that the Jews did not turn to secondary, less potent forms of relating to the supernatural such as diviners or other sorts of magical intermedia, but instead relate directly to God.

So, what does all of this have to do Eden's serpent? It was a *wild beast of the field*, how can it then be an any thing else? Well, in the NT, Paul makes an interesting contextual connection between ***the serpent that deceived Eve by his treachery***, and ***Satan who disguises (transfigures or transforms) himself as an angel of light*** (2 Corinthians 11:3, 14).

In this text, Satan is a divine being masquerading as a serpent of the field. Indeed, Satan, self-identified as a snake, and deceived Eve and Adam into violating their relationship with their Creator. The snake was just the means to that end. The snake was a puppet, utterly controlled by Satan, a mere pawn in a larger scheme underscores the vulnerability of humanity to manipulation and temptation, urging us to exercise discernment and moral judgment in the face of seductive influences. Further, later passages in Revelation (12:9 and 20:2), indicate that there was a satanic presence behind the serpent.

An ancient Jewish interpretation explains the reference to the serpent in a literal manner, attributing the capacity to speak to all the animals in the orchard. However, Scripture does not mention all the animals speaking, and there is no evidence of animals with capacity for intelligent speech. It's highly likely, then, that Satan, like God with Balaam's ass (Numbers 22:28), enabled the serpent. He spoke through it.

In sum, the connection between *nachash*, *nechoshet*, and *nichush* is their shared role as secondary elements, eclipsed by something more significant. The *nachash* in the Garden of Eden was simply a tool for Satan, while *nechoshet* is likewise overshadowed by gold and silver, and *nichush* takes a backseat to genuine prophecy. These findings shed light on why the snake was the instrument of temptation.

The Word of God doubted

The serpent's question, “*Is it really true that God said ‘no’ to eating from any tree of the orchard?*” is riddled with doubt (Genesis 3:1). That was his kicking-off point, the first step of a very slippery slope on which humanity gradually minimised and eventually lost the importance of the word of God.

The Word of God diminished

Eve's response was: “*We may eat of the fruit from the trees of the orchard; but concerning the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the orchard God said, ‘You must not eat from it, and you must not touch it, or else you will die’*” (Genesis 3:2-3).

The Word of God distorted continued

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Firstly, Eve distorted the intent of the divine instruction by diminishing the Lord's generosity from "you may freely eat", to simply says 'eat'. Secondly, she does not identify the tree, as God had done. Eve refers nondescriptly to the tree in the middle of the garden. However, there were two trees in the middle, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil (2:9 Net Bible notes). To Eve in her condition there was only ONE tree, that which was forbidden to her. Her concentration on that tree is intended by the writer to demonstrate that the seeds of doubt had been productively sown in her mind by the serpent. On the other hand, the most important tree to the writer and to God was the tree of life ([Pett](#)). The third distortion by Eve occurs when she adds to the word of God by saying that they were forbidden to '**touch it**'. This was never part of God's prohibition. Did Eve want to make up for her diminishing of God's word by adding to it? However, Eve's mathematics don't add up as far as God is concerned (Revelation 22:18).

Tree of Life

Other references in the Bible to the Tree of Life are: *Happy are those who find wisdom...She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy* (Proverbs 3:13, 18). *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but violence takes lives away* (Proverbs 11:30). *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life* (Proverbs 13:12). *A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit* (Proverbs 15:4). *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations* (Revelation 22:2-3). Life in these references symbolises that which brings joy and healing to people. This tree was freely available to Adam and Eve to eat, but they chose not to do so.

Tree of the knowledge of good and evil

This presumably means that eating the fruit of this tree gives knowledge of good and evil. This may mean that the tree gives the capacity to discern between moral good and evil because it can make one wise (Genesis 3:6). Such wisdom is characteristic of divine beings, as the serpent's promise implies (3:5) and as 3:22 makes clear. However, this capacity does not include the ability to do what is right. God prohibits man from eating of this tree. The prohibition becomes a test to see if man will be satisfied with his role and place, or if he will try to ascend to the divine level.

The Word of God denied

This the serpent did with this categorical assertion:

"No, you will not surely die..." (Genesis 3:4).

God had said 'no' in denying them the right to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and the serpent says 'no' in flatly denying God's prohibition that if they eat they will die.

The Word of God displaced

... for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will open and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5).

Rather, to compensate for his denial of God's word, he offers them parity with God as to knowledge. This is what fallen beings do - they deny the truth of God's word, and replace it with their one truth. No ordinary snake could be seen as speaking like this, for he is forcefully claiming to know better than God, and Eve ([Pett](#)).

The Word of God disobeyed

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*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, **she took** of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate (Genesis 3:6).*

The roles of Adam and Eve were to reproduce and rule the planet (Genesis 1:28), and to care for the garden in Eden and to maintain it (Genesis 2:15). The word garden (gan) comes from the root ganan, which means to surround or to defend, indicating that the Hebrew concept of a garden was an enclosed area, perhaps like a walled garden. Given that the garden contained every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food (Genesis 2:9), it was perhaps more like an orchard. That it was enclosed and could be defended is apparent from the text of Genesis 3:24.

That meant that Adam's duty was to cultivate, preserve and protect the garden (as in Genesis 3:24; 6:19-20; 7:3; 17:9-10; 18:19; 28:15, 20, Psalm 17:8). That idea is the first hint of an enemy of God and man being on the prowl. Adam failed to "keep" the garden from the intruder, so sin entered and Satan became the pseudo-ruler of the earth (Matthew 4:1-11; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 6:10-18).

Moreover, having dominion over the earth meant that he was lord of the creatures and had authority over them. Also, his act of naming the animals shows lordship, and reinforces the fact that he was different in kind from the rest of creation. Adam could have, and should have been on the alert for the satanic visitor.

Further, God formed Adam first, and then at an unspecified time later made Eve. And, it was to Adam alone, before Eve's arrival, that God gave the instruction not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:15-17). Additionally, Adam's naming of Eve was also an act of lordship, of headship, she his helper. However, God's creative order meant that Adam should have led Eve away from Satan and she should have been submissive to that.

On the other hand, Satan subverted that order by approaching Eve thus causing her to usurp Adam's headship. And Adam abdicated his headship, stood by passively, allowing the deception to proceed, and when he saw that nothing happened to Eve for eating the fruit, he willingly ate it as well. Silence in the face of evil was deadly dangerous.

The Word of God declared

To the serpent

*The Lord God said to the **serpent**, “Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:14-15).*

The Hebrew word translated “cursed,” means “punished” or “banished,” depending on how one interprets the following ‘among’. If it is taken as comparative, then the idea is punished above or more than all the wild beasts. If it is taken as separative (as in Genesis 4:11), then the idea is banished from all the wild beasts.” In this case the serpent is condemned to isolation from all the other animals ([Net Bible](#)).

Genesis 3:1 indicates that the “serpent” had once been a quadruped, and now the Lord cursed it. So, it became the creeping creature of the ground destined to thrive on dust (powder, ashes, dirt, garbage, (Leviticus 14:41, 45), even rotting flesh (Job 21:26), and fecal matter (1 Samuel 2:8, Psalm 113:7). This Hebrew word has a direct link with death as Adam would return to dust (Genesis 3:14).

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To the serpent continued

So, the serpent has been brought humiliating low ([Net Bible](#)), for us to see its insignificance. We should likewise look down on all the false ideas that the metaphorical snake tries to peddle on behalf of its master, the evil inclination (Klein). However, the prediction of enmity between the seeds (descendants) of the woman and of the serpent makes no sense if the serpent was merely an animal. The seed of the woman is a future male child. If only serpents and natural human descendants are in view here, then that means that snakes are doomed to go around biting men in the heels and then getting their heads crushed. Given the verses on the serpent in 2 Corinthians 11:3, 14 this obviously is not the intent of the prophecy:

The serpent that deceived Eve by his treachery, and Satan who transforms himself as an angel of light...

and Revelation 12:9, 12:14, 20:2: *And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan..But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness...And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years...*

If we ask, why then would God blame the snake, we must recognise that it is not really the snake that God is blaming, but the shadowy figure behind the snake. Just as Jesus would curse a fig tree to teach a lesson about a nation (Mark 11:14; Mark 11:21), so God ‘curses’ a snake to teach a lesson about this dark being from the spiritual realm. Rather then he is now turning the snake into a symbol of what would happen to the one who had used the snake as a tool. We notice here that of all the culprits it is only the snake which is cursed. If it had only been a misguided creature, lower than man, this would be inconceivable. It can only be that, at this stage, for reasons we cannot fathom, the master is seen for the present as out of reach. So the curse is pronounced on the tool. (Just as it will be the ground from which man was taken that will be cursed and not the man).

So, to the modern readers of this story, we become aware of a sinister power at work that is both subtle and dangerous. Suddenly into this idealistic world something ‘foreign’ has introduced itself. Elsewhere God will speak through an ass (Numbers 22:28). Here some evil presence could well literally speak through the snake. The symbolism is significant.

Man’s future constant battle with snakes, which is a totally new departure in that almost perfect world, is also seen as a picture of man’s constant battle with evil, the evil that will meet him at every turn and constantly snap at his heels. But it is significant that that battle is seen in terms of final, though hard won, victory for man, for that is surely what the bruising of the head must signify. The head is the major part, the heel the tail end. But only God knew Who the Man would be, and what He would have to go through, to achieve that final victory. Note that the battle is between snake and man, and the unseen enemy and man. God is sovereign above it all ([Pett](#)).

To the woman

“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire (tshuwqah) shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16).

The woman, who had broken the divine command for the sake of earthly enjoyment, was punished with the sorrows and pains of childbirth, which would threaten her own life as well as that of the child. The woman had also broken through her divinely appointed subordination to the man, and had led the man into sin. For that, she was punished with a desire bordering upon disease (*tshuwqah* from ‘to have a violent craving for a thing’), and with subjection to the man. Created for the man, the woman was made subordinate to him from the very first.

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To the woman continued

But the supremacy of the man was not intended to become a despotic rule, crushing the woman into a slave, which has been the rule in ancient and modern Heathenism, and even in Mahometanism also. This rule was first softened by the sin-destroying grace of the Gospel, and changed into a form more in harmony with the original relation, namely, that of a rule on the one hand, and subordination on the other, which have their roots in mutual esteem and love ([Keil & Delitzsch](#)).

To the man

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:17-19).

“And unto Adam:” the noun is here used for the first time as a proper name without the article. The sentence upon Adam includes first the cursing of the ground, and secondly death, which affects the woman as well, on account of their common guilt. By listening to his wife, when deceived by the serpent, Adam had repudiated his superiority to the rest of creation.

As a punishment, therefore, nature would henceforth offer resistance to his will. Everything injurious to man in the organic, vegetable and animal creation, is the effect of the curse pronounced upon the earth for Adam's sin. There is a causal link between sin and the evils in the world. For, as soon as the creation had been wrested through man from its vital connection with its Maker, He gave it up to its own ungodly nature, it has turned against man. Consequently, many things in the world and nature, which in themselves and without sin would have been good for him, or at all events harmless, have become poisonous and destructive since his fall.

Then, in the end, the ground that has been cursed will receive him, and he will return to the dust. But the cursing of the ground and not the man is God's indication that in mercy He is delaying punishment. A new phase is beginning in God's purposes. God will show mercy to Adam so that he in his turn, along with his descendants, can reverse the situation and bring down that evil power ([Keil & Delitzsch, Pett](#)).

To the couple

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. 21 And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:21-24).

God also displayed His mercy to the fallen, and through divine grace Adam believed the promise to the woman's seed, and manifested his faith in the name which he gave to his wife, Eve, “the mother of all living,” because the continuance and life of his race were guaranteed to the man through the woman. God also displayed His mercy by clothing the two with coats of skin, the skins of beasts. By this clothing, God imparted to the feeling of shame the visible sign of an awakened conscience, and to the consequent necessity for a covering to the bodily nakedness. By causing the death of beasts, He showed them how they might use the sovereignty they possessed over the animals for their own good, and even sacrifice animal life for the preservation of human, and laid the foundation for future sacrifices ([Keil & Delitzsch](#)).

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To the couple continued

Adam and Eve had “become as one of Us, to know good and evil,” resembling God only with regard to the knowledge of good and evil. But after he had fallen through sin into the power of death, the fruit which produced immortality (the tree of life) could only do him harm. For immortality in a state of sin is not the eternal life which God designed for man, but endless misery, which the Scriptures call “the second death” (Revelation 2:11; Revelation 20:6, Revelation 20:14; Revelation 21:8). The expulsion from paradise, therefore, was a punishment inflicted for man's good, intended, while exposing him to temporal death, to preserve him from eternal death ([Keil & Delitzsch](#)).

The Cherubim are creatures of a higher world, which are represented as surrounding the throne of God, (Ezekiel 1:22., Genesis 10:1, Revelation 4:6), standing by the side of God as the heavenly King when He comes to judgment, and proclaiming the majesty of the Judge of the world. In this character God stationed them on the eastern side of paradise, to render it impossible for man to return to paradise, and eat of the tree of life. Hence there appeared by their side the flame of a sword, apparently in constant motion, cutting hither and thither, representing the devouring fire of the divine wrath, and showing the cherubim to be ministers of judgment.

With the expulsion of man from the garden of Eden, paradise itself vanished from the earth. God did not withdraw from the tree of life its supernatural power, nor did He destroy the garden before their eyes, but simply prevented their return, to show that it should be preserved until the time of the end, when sin should be rooted out by the judgment, and death abolished by the Conqueror of the serpent (1 Corinthians 15:26), and when upon the new earth the tree of life should flourish again in the heavenly Jerusalem, and bear fruit for the redeemed (Revelation 20:1-15, 21) ([Keil & Delitzsch](#)).

God kicks them out of the Garden of Eden — not as punishment, but as a blessing: If they think they will never die then how will they truly live? If you have eternity then there is no urgency for anything; with unlimited tomorrows, everything can wait. The German existentialist Martin Heidegger, in his masterwork *Being and Time*, taught this: ‘he said that in order to truly live authentically we have to confront death head-on. In other words, knowing that I am going to die is what allows me to truly live’.

Heidegger wrote:

“If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life — and only then will I be free to become myself” (Heidegger)

The seducer only urges man to taste what is forbidden; Satan never urges you to do what is perfectly permissible. Knowing everything wasn't the key to life... trusting in the Creator and living in the goodness of His garden was all that was needed for Adam and Eve to live a fulfilling life.

Eve didn't trust that this was the case... and neither did Adam. You cannot live in the presence of God and try to be a god yourself. God loved life and order; the Deceiver loved death and chaos... and when the serpent deceived Eve and got her to taste sin, it opened the floodgates for death to enter the garden and infect humanity. Death cannot exist in the presence of God and so Eve and Adam had to leave the garden ([Moskovitz](#)).

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Conclusion

This, first My Q&A paper investigated the first question recorded in the Bible. It was asked by the serpent: ***"Is it really true that God said, 'You must not eat from any tree of the orchard'?"***

This venom of deceptive doubt about God's word from the mouth of the serpent was imbibed by Adam and Eve. What followed included God's word being distorted, denied, and disobeyed. In response, God's word decreed death on mankind, pain and suffering, a less-than-cooperative earth, and exclusion from the Tree of Life.

Mercifully, there is hope for humanity, for through the advent of the Seed of the woman death and the serpent are conquered and abolished, and access to the Tree of Life is restored.

Nevertheless, the simple take-out from the first question ever asked of mankind is don't ever think of doubting God's word, for the consequences are devastating and long lasting.

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