

Andrew Skinner, Farms Article: *Serpent Symbols and Salvation in the Ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon*

The scriptures help us to see that Satan imitates and perverts every divine truth; every godly concept, principle, or practice; and every good and positive symbol, image, sign, and token in order to deceive and manipulate the souls of men. This even includes appearing as an angel of light (see Alma 30:53; D&C 128:20). By usurping and manipulating the symbol of the serpent, Satan tried to validate his false identity and his lies, insisting that following his ways would elevate our first parents to the status of the very God represented by the true image of the serpent (see Moses 4:10–11). Satan came to Eve clothed, as it were, in the garb of the Messiah, using the signs, symbols, and even the language of the Messiah, promising things that only the Messiah could rightfully promise. “(And [Satan] spake by the mouth of the serpent.) . . . And the serpent said unto the woman: Ye shall not surely die;...ye shall be as the gods” (Moses 4:7, 10–11). In reality only the one who worked out an infinite atonement could legitimately make these kinds of promises. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why Satan is justly called a liar from the beginning (see Moses 4:4; D&C 93:25). Because Satan appeared as a serpent in the Garden of Eden, thereby adopting a symbol of the Messiah it seems plausible that, like the sign of the dove, the sign of the serpent had been instituted in premortality as a symbol of deity, particularly Jehovah (see Exodus 4:1–5; 7:10–13; and Numbers 21:5–9), and later on as a symbol of Jehovah-come-to-earth, or in other words Jesus Christ (see John 3:14–15), the true God of life and salvation. It also seems plausible that the signs of both the dove and the serpent (as specific symbols of true deity) were made known to God’s children in mortality sometime in the distant past. It is interesting to note that at that archaeological site in the Holy Land where most of the cultic objects bearing serpent imagery have been found (Beth-shan), the serpents are usually displayed in association with doves. In addition to the smaller religious objects that display the serpent-dove motif, each of the two Iron Age I temples at Beth-shan display the serpent-dove decoration. A fragment of the relief from the southern temple depicts deities standing and holding doves, while serpents wind upward with their heads almost touching the feet of the deities. In the northern temple, doves sit near the feet of deities as serpents glide toward the doves.

Conclusion

It seems clear that enough evidence exists from a wide range of sources to establish the dual nature of serpent symbols in the ancient Near East— representing both gods and demons, good and bad, life and death. Furthermore, the Bible exhibits the same dualism. But even more important for our present purposes, we may say that the Book of Mormon also presents this same theological understanding of serpent symbolism and is a record perfectly at home in the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East. Evidence from all sources (scriptural, cultural, historical, and prophetic) leads us to believe that the serpent symbol appeared first in the Garden of Eden when Satan adopted the form of a snake, which was intended to point to the true Messiah. Over time, its true meaning became corrupted not only as it became established through natural observation—the snake shedding its skin and so on—but also as the symbol passed through many cultures down through the ages. The result, of course, was the appearance of the dual nature of serpent symbolism in the various civilizations of the Near East and elsewhere.

It was the late Spencer Palmer of Brigham Young University who observed that a theory of corruption and cultural diffusion is the most compelling explanation for the many resemblances to the pure gospel found in various religious traditions around the world.

This certainly seems to be the case regarding the powerful and pervasive symbol of the serpent in the ancient world. Enough glimpses and echoes of the divinely intended meaning of the serpent symbol exist to enable us to make significant connections to Christ. Of this, the Book of Mormon is a premier witness and source.!

Serpent Symbols and Salvation in the Ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon, *Andrew C. Skinner*

Abstract

The serpent is often used to represent one of two things: Christ or Satan. This article synthesizes evidence from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Greece, and Jerusalem to explain the reason for this duality. Many scholars suggest that the symbol of the serpent was used anciently to represent Jesus Christ but that Satan distorted the symbol, thereby creating this paradox. The dual nature of the serpent is incorporated into the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon.