

The Serpent Motif in the Ancient World

An Introduction to Symbolism

Symbolism is prevalent in Biblical text and in the earliest known records of all civilizations and societies. In fact, symbolism is the very language of scripture and constituted much of the information exchange of the ancient world.

The reaction of many, when learning the importance of symbolism to the ancients, is essentially disbelief. Those unfamiliar with the concepts of symbolism and typology frequently say, (or at least think), something to the effect of: "Why didn't they just say what they meant?" At first blush, it seems that the inference of one thing through the presentation of another is counter-intuitive to modern Western thought. Or, is it?

When Disney studios used the "Circle of Life" motif in *The Lion King*, they were plugging into a fundamental image that an audience would recognize, and with which it might identify. The circular image of birth, youth, maturity, and death is a pattern that all of humanity comes to understand. Closely connected to it is the ancient theme known as the "Innocence to Experience" motif. This is the story of the life-path from innocence, or a lack of knowledge, to a position of insight and wisdom. The archetype of this repeated thesis is the chronicle of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It is interesting to note that the presentation of these two themes, Innocence to Experience, and the Circle of Life, are invariably linked in the most important of mankind's history, legend, and mythologies. For most of us, these two concepts were first introduced in the Biblical story, found in the Book of Genesis.

It is noteworthy that the scholarly world is united in the belief that early Christians approached the Old Testament from a typological point of view. Early Saints invariably saw in the scriptures of earlier periods, the prophetic illustration of what was to come. Typology (a type) viewed in this way, is predictive foreshadowing of future events.

Maurice Farbridge noted "in the ancient East...symbolism permeated the whole life of the people." One text on the history of biblical interpretation states: "Without the typological method it would have been almost impossible for the early church to retain its grasp on the Old Testament... The early church was intensely interested in the ways in which the life of Jesus was prefigured in the Old Testament." Thus it would seem that in order to be fluent in the language of the scriptures, one must be fluent in the language of symbolism.

The dictionary found in the back of the LDS Bible, (the 1611 King James Version), includes these words under "Symbolism:" "The scriptures are rich in symbolism and figurative expression. Ceremonies and ordinances are symbolic in their performance, and all bear record of Jesus Christ. Biblical names especially are symbolic. The tabernacle ceremony was symbolic of eternal things as was the entire Law of Moses, containing types and shadows of Christ."

Cultural Lens

All of us tend to view the world through our own cultural lens. Thus, we are all wearing cultural sunglasses that shade what we see through the knowledge we've thus far gained. Our mind views everything through the mirror of our past experiences and our political, social, and religious predispositions.

Things are surely not quite as they seem, but generally-speaking our understanding of events and our reaction to them tend to work in our particular cultural setting. We usually think of our immediate response to new things as "logical" or "common sense." But common sense can, and frequently does, elicit a different reaction depending on your cultural bias. In the study of ancient history it is important to step outside this cultural bias and attempt to view things from the perspective of a person living in that place and time.

This paper began by suggesting that Western culture is unfamiliar with symbolism, what it should have said was that we are "typically" unfamiliar with the meaning and intent of "ancient" signs and symbols. Actually, the process of conveying packets of information via a single symbol is very much alive in the West, in fact, particularly so. Reflect for a moment on a few icons like Coca-Cola, Nike, BMW, Fed Ex, and the like. Each of these companies' marks and logos mean something specific to us. There are thousands of logos like these with which we are familiar. Each time we are confronted with one, our mind's eye is stimulated with some mix of factual information and emotional corollary.

Explore for a moment your emotional response to the Nazi Swastika, the Christian Cross, the Star of David, the Hammer and Sickle, the Crescent Moon of Islam, and the American flag. The longer you reflect on any one of these symbols the more information flows into your mind. The Ancients also used logos, symbols, and icons, to convey information and elicit emotional response.

The same symbol may evoke a very different response depending on its setting, for example the American eagle was formerly that of the conquering Roman Legions. But, then...Nazi Germany also flew the eagle flag. I suspect that your response to the American eagle was likely modified when you considered its Roman influence. And, if you are old enough to have been deeply moved by World War II, your visceral response to the German eagle notation would surely have sobered your initial feelings regarding eagle symbology. So...where does that leave us?

A small rendering of a polo pony on a garment a century ago would have carried a very different significance than it does today.

The viewer's response to a given symbol tends to modify over time. Therefore the interpretation of a given symbol's meaning is a time-sensitive issue. Winston Churchill's famous dictum that "If you aren't a Liberal in your twenties you haven't got a heart, and if you're not a Conservative by your forties you haven't got a brain," is a catchy phrase that may not be true for many, but it quickly makes the point that people tend to shift their philosophical positions over time. The stylized donkey that represents the

Democratic Party verses the elephant of the Republican Party are symbols easily recognized by any American of voting age but they surely elicit different responses from different people. But, those responses may indeed change over time and in likely proportion to one's exposure to their respective media campaigns.

The Serpent as a Symbol of God

In our age and our culture, the Satan-Serpent association is strong because of our pervasive familiarity with the Garden of Eden story. Viewed through our cultural eyes, the serpent is bad, its associations evil. But was this the cultural link of the ancient world? Is there a different, yet legitimate, way of viewing serpent symbology? Are we able to consider other possibilities or are we so entrenched in our cultural taboo that we are incapable of approaching the subject from a different perspective?

If one is interested in learning how the ancient's approached the serpent subject, we'll need to set our "common sense" aside as it is so thoroughly shaped by our cultural bias.

In Mesopotamia, the place name archeologists refer to as the "cradle of civilization," the serpent motif was an icon of the creator god, the god of life. The serpent was also a symbol of resurrection, enlightenment, and the power on earth of celestial deity. In ancient society the serpent was accepted as the ultimate icon of wisdom and salvation.

As long as humanity has kept records, serpents were used as emblems of the power of God. In ancient times and as widespread and diverse as Australia, China, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Babylonia, Sumeria, Egypt, India, and Central America, serpents were viewed as symbolic of god, including healing and the resurrection. To this day, serpents, or flying serpents, (dragons), signify divine heritage and royalty in many Asian countries, while in the West the serpent represents wisdom, knowledge and the healing arts. For example, a coiled serpent around the staff of god continues to symbolize the healing arts. (See the "Caduceus" the physician's symbol)

There was a common conception that the serpent was able to regenerate itself and come back to life. A snake can lay dull and immobile for long periods, and then within an hour or so, slough off its dry old skin and emerge like new. This ability to periodically renew its entire body without bleeding, illness or infection is remarkable. In accomplishing this miraculous feat the serpent frees itself from scars, dermatosis, and ticks. Such ability is beyond the scope of human efforts. This early connection between the serpent and healing became a permanent facet of serpent worship.

Mesoamerica is the place name archaeologists call the area of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Mesoamerica also refers to a time frame prior to the arrival of Europeans to this geographical region. This is the area where the oldest and most advanced civilizations in the western hemisphere developed. In Mesoamerica, serpent typology represented Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec or Nahuatl, name for the Mayan Kukulcan, the creator god and giver of the resurrection. The latter half of the title-name Quetzalcoatl, or "coatl," is literally the word for serpent. The great civilizations of

Mesoamerica include the Olmeca, Mayan, Zapotec, Toltec, Teotihuacanos, Mixtec, Totonacs, Otomis, Huastecs, Aztec, and others. All of these high civilizations revered the serpent as a symbol of god, or representation of the power of god.

On opposite sides of the world the apparent process by which these societies arrived at their common symbolism was the same. Water is the source of all life. This fact was an everyday concern of the Ancient's. Seeds would not sprout and life could not sustain itself without life-giving water. Without water no living thing could survive, not animals, crops or people. The undulating body of a snake is symbolic of a riverbed, (a riverbed is never completely straight). A mirror image of the curving riverbed, or body of a snake, is seen in the Milky Way and the constellation of Draco. (The word Draco is Greek for serpent.) The heavens are in turn symbolic of the residence of God. It is from the sky that water comes, which is the source from which the rivers fill. Thus, serpent symbology signified the god of rain, or the creator god and the giver of life.

The Greek word *geras* (the root of geriatrics) denotes the cast-off skin as in the example of a serpent's rejuvenation. Since the snake's old skin is sloughed off in one piece it appears as virtually resurrected. This remarkable phenomenon was seen as evidence of the possibility for the rebirth of other creatures. In Melanesia, the expression used to refer to the Christian concept of eternal life is "to slough one's skin." It is interesting to note, that the Chinese image for the concept of eternal life, is an old man exchanging his skin for a new one.

There is other serpent symbology with curious links to the mesmerizing stare of the snake, its forked tongue, the chevrons frequently displayed on its scales, the healing value of potions made from venom, etc., but for now these anciently meaningful signs and symbols will be set aside so as to carry on with other themes.

Biblical and Egyptian Associations

In Egypt, the main feature of the Pharaoh's crown was a serpent's head. It was here, in ancient Egypt that the Biblical Moses threw down his rod, which then became a serpent. The symbology of this act could not have been lost on the Pharaoh or his court and in fact, the Bible records that the king's counselors replicated this mysterious feat.

Moses was born in Egypt and grew up in the royal household of Pharaoh. Acts 7:22 states "And Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians." The Israelites who escaped Egypt with Moses in the exodus were saturated and reared in Egyptian culture, having lived as a unique people within Egypt for at least three hundred years. (Traditional dating claims four hundred and thirty years but for several reasons Biblical scholars now believe the actual time spent in Egypt may have been about three hundred years.) Regardless, the children of Israel were in Egypt a very long time and had become in all practical ways Egyptians themselves. A look at the use and meaning of serpents in Egyptian beliefs may therefore help in bringing a deeper understanding to the Biblical passages that refer to serpents.

Possibly the most powerful use of serpent imagery in the Scriptures reads: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life." (John 3: 14, 15)

It is in the first five books of the Old Testament, known by the Hebrew's as the "Torah," or in Greek as the "Pentateuch," where the most ancient of biblical writings refer to serpents, and creatures interpreted as serpents. Significant passages include the serpent in the Garden of Eden tempting Eve (Genesis Chapter 3); Jacob's blessing on Dan (Genesis 49.17), wherein it says that Dan would be a "serpent by the way"; the miraculous sign given to Moses and Aaron when their rods are turned into serpents (Exodus Chapters 4 and 7); the fiery serpents who bite the children of Israel, and the bronze serpent that brings them healing ((Numbers 21).

When Aaron threw his rod down before Pharaoh, it became a snake. When Moses set the plagues upon Egypt, he did so by stretching forth his serpent-rod. When Moses parted the sea for the passage of his people, he did so with the assistance of this powerful serpent-rod. In the wilderness Moses struck a rock with the same rod to bring forth water. The serpent-rod was considered so sacred that it was stored in the Ark of the Covenant.

Egyptian documents such as the Westcar Papyrus and other archeological evidence have uncovered evidence of snake-charming and magic spells performed to turn staffs into serpents. It is important to note that due to the power believed to be represented by the serpent on the crown of Pharaoh, the transformation of Aaron's rod into a serpent was a direct assault on Egyptian magic and beliefs. As Aaron's serpent swallowed the magician's snakes, so later would the Red Sea swallow the Egyptians pursuing the Israelites, where once again the serpent-staff of Moses was employed.

In Exodus 32.19-23 Moses condemned Aaron for making a golden image of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, (or perhaps the Canaanite Baal), and yet Moses himself produced a brass image of the most ancient religious icon, the serpent, and then held it before the people as an agent of healing and as a foreshadow and symbol of the atonement and the resurrection. (See also John 3.14-15)

The action by Moses might reflect his Egyptian and Midianite heritage and his understanding of the universal recognition of a belief in the divinity of the serpent, but one is also left with the question as to why God condemned the golden calf but approved the brazen serpent? What is it about the snake that commands such reverence and loyalty?

In II Kings 18.4, it seems that the serpent symbol was so popular that the people of Israel had revered it until the time of King Hezekiah (719-691 BC). According to the record, Hezekiah, "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had burned incense to it." The association of the serpent and rod, as well as the serpent and the Tree of Life, is very ancient and is present in the

mythology of numerous cultures. As already noted, the rod and serpent form the symbol of the medical profession today.

Philo of Alexandria, a revered early Christian scholar, before the politicalization of the church in Rome, was so impressed with the serpent's ability to rejuvenate itself and its ability to kill and cure (an ability he saw as indicative of the positive and negative cosmic powers that rule the world) that he saw the serpent as "the most spiritual of all animals."

German coinage of the 16th century, especially the German golden "Thaler," from whence our name for the "dollar" comes, shows a theme of the era: Jesus on the cross on the obverse side of the coin, and a serpent on the reverse, both depicted lifted up on a cross or tree. Thus, the serpent's role as healer is expanded to include the resurrection.

Returning to the snake as a divinity in Egypt we need look no further than the great crowns worn by the divine Pharaoh. No matter which crown, the Blue crown, the informal crown, the great double red, or the white crown we will find the snake god of Lower Egypt present. Even when the hawk or vulture god of Upper Egypt is missing, the Egyptian cobra, (also known as an "asp"), is always there.

Imhotep, the "Serpent Holder," was the world's first named architect who designed and built Egypt's first pyramid. He is also revered as the world's first doctor. Imhotep was a priest, a scribe, sage, poet, and astrologer. He served under Pharaoh Djoser who is thought to have lived from 2630–2611 BC. For various reasons I suspect the traditional dating for the early Pharaohs is too early but that is a topic for another paper. At any rate, current academics put Pharaoh Djoser as living over forty-six hundred years ago. (Djoser was the second king of Egypt's third dynasty.) Imhotep may have lived under as many as four kings during a period of at least twenty years. An inscription on one of Pharaoh's statues gives us Imhotep's titles as the "chancellor of the king of lower Egypt", the "first one under the king", the "administrator of the great mansion," the "hereditary Noble," the "high priest of Heliopolis," "chief sculptor," and finally the "chief carpenter."

After demonstrating that Imhotep, the serpent holder, was a foreign dignitary to Egypt and not Egyptian by birth, Dr Hugh Nibley makes a compelling argument that Imhotep may actually have been the Patriarch Abraham. Imhotep's foreign origin and honorariums also sound a great deal like the Biblical Joseph in Egypt. However, Joseph's Egyptian name was Zaphnath-paaneah, not Imhotep, as reported in Genesis 41.45. (Although either of these names could be titles.) However, the time frame appears too early for Joseph but might fit for Abraham if our dating of Pharaoh Djoser is slightly off.) Almost three thousand years later, during the early Christian era, the memory of Imhotep the serpent holder, was still so revered it bordered on worship and he was widely considered a type and shadow of Christ.

The serpent was the symbol of Isis, the consort of the son-of-god known in Egypt as Osiris. It was also a symbol of their son Horus, (child of the son of god), and also of the living Horus, incarnate in Pharaoh. The serpent was connected to the great father god, Ra, later known as Atum, who was the personal god of Pharaoh, through which Pharaoh claimed lineage. (Atum and Adam are apparently the same word.) It is not an accident of history that the legendary Cleopatra chose to be joined to the Egyptian cobra, by being bitten by the serpent. She was identifying with Isis, whom she represented as the High Priestess, along with the sacred serpent who was her symbol and under whose protection she would be led into eternal life. Interestingly enough, December 25th, on the ancient Egyptian calendar, was considered to be the "going forth of Isis."

The existence of a Serpent Resurrection tradition was widespread. It was common amongst the ancient seafaring Phoenicians, the tribes of Africa, South America and various islands of the South Pacific. It was understood throughout the high-cultures of the entire ancient world. The idea most intimately associated with the serpent was life, not present, but future, and ultimately, no doubt, eternal. Thus the snake Bai was figured as guardian of the doorways of those chambers of Egyptian tombs, which represented the mansions of heaven.

The Flying Serpent Connection

In many ancient societies there was a definitive link between the serpent and the heavens. The inclusion of a remarkable bird with the serpent motif conveyed an impression of power, as birds are able to leave the earth and soar high in the heavens. The Medes, the Persians, and the Assyrians all flew standards that included stylized serpents with wings, which are known as Sky Serpents.

In early Egypt the serpent was linked to the hawk, much later the vulture motif would replace the hawk, likely a sign of their specific times. In other societies the serpent link was with an eagle showing up all over the world and today firmly taking center stage on the national flag of Mexico.

In the case of Quetzalcoatl, which is a title name for what the early Spaniards referred to as the "Fair God," he was known as the "anointed one," the "son of god," "the creator," and the power of resurrection. The first half of the title name is "quetzal," which in the Mayan and Nahuatl languages was the name for the bird-of-paradise. The Quetzal is a rare and incredibly beautiful bird of the Guatemala rain forests with plumes and tail feathers extending over 3 feet in length. It is regaled as the most magnificent bird in the world and was virtually always identified with royalty. To wear quetzal feathers in Mesoamerica meant you were a crown prince or a king. Today, the famous Quetzal is the national symbol of Guatemala and the name of its currency. As previously mentioned, the second half of the famous Quetzalcoatl name is coatl, meaning snake or serpent.

Another seminal correspondence of the serpent and the heavens was the constellation Draco. This constellation crosses the entire northern sky undulating as the snake it represents. The Greek name for snake is Draco; the head of the Draco constellation

approaches the circumpolar region, which, in the Stellar Epochs, was known as the Aaru, or the Garden of Eden, and by later cultures as Hesperides, Arcadia, Avalon and eventually the mythical Camelot! The constellation Draco is in the shape of a serpent, but because it is a heavenly image the serpent symbol is shown with wings, hence the root of the term Dragon, a serpent with wings.

In a carved wall panel from a Mayan temple in Central America is a Mayan version of the classical Egyptian final judgment scene. They contain common elements. In the Egyptian judgment scene, the hawk and serpent motif is above the judge. In the Mayan judgment scene, the hawk and serpent motif is behind the judge. A figure behind the judge is holding two plumed serpents. In the Egyptian scene, a row of sun disks appears in the frieze above the scene. In the Mayan scene, the sun disk is behind the judge.

In the Egyptian judgment scene, Isis, the "twice-wise" serpent goddess is behind the judge. In the Mayan scene, the figure behind the judge is Quetzalcoatl holding two plumed serpents. In the Egyptian scene, Heru the hawk god is in front of the judge. In the Mayan scene, Quetzalcoatl with the plumed serpents represents both Isis and Heru. In the Egyptian scene, a bearded Egyptian is before Assur pleading his case. In the Mayan judgment scene, a beardless Mayan is pleading his case before a bearded judge.

The stepped fret design is considered to be a stylized representation of the Sky Serpent that encircles heaven and earth. This unique pattern is found in temples throughout the ancient and modern world, concentrated most particularly in Mesoamerica. The design also appears in clothing and various other architectural renderings from Greece and Rome to Egypt and Mesopotamia and throughout the Americas.

The Serpent, Satan, and the Garden of Eden

The association of the serpent and Satan is common in western cultures and because this motif is so well known I will not address it here other than noting hints of its multi-cultural origin.

In the Garden of Eden story, the serpent is clearly aware of God's prohibition against partaking from the Tree of Knowledge and it seems to know why God will enforce that command. The serpent appears to know just what the gift of the Tree of Knowledge is, as if it already possessed that gift!

It is interesting to speculate that it might be that Satan's appearance in the form of what would become a pervasive creator symbology is a graphical illustration of his usurper status.

As reported by Stephen Ricks and according to Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer 14 and Genesis Rabbah 196, when Eve partook of the fruit, "her glorious outer skin, a sheet of light smooth as a fingernail, had fallen away." Similarly, Satan, according to 3 Baruch 9:7, took the form of a serpent "as a garment" in order to deceive Adam. When God cursed the

serpent, he caused it to lose its skin every year, even as Adam lost his skin of light when he became naked. (For more information on this subject see the author's paper entitled "The Hymn of the Pearl")

The Chaldean god Hea, who was symbolized by the serpent, was also the god of life and knowledge and there are good grounds for connecting him with the serpent of scripture and with the paradisiacal traditions of the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. The Tree of Life motif is connected with the serpent and Sky Serpent symbology, as in the case of the Persian tree Gaokerena, or the Tree of the Hesperides, and the holy trees of India around which are dozens of naga (snake) stones.

In 1834 a Catholic padre translated an ancient Mayan document known as the "Title of the Lords of Totonicapan" into Spanish. The first pages have since been lost but the padre's record of what they contained is as follows: "This said manuscript consists of 31 quarto pages; but translation of the first pages is omitted because they are on the creation of the world, of Adam, the Earthly Paradise in which *Eve was deceived not by a serpent but by Lucifer himself, as an Angel of Light*. It deals with the posterity of Adam, following in every respect the same order as in Genesis and the sacred books as far as the captivity of Babylonia." (This manuscript is also remarkable because it pegs a transfer of high culture from the Middle East to Mesoamerica at the time of the first Diaspora, and includes the these words: "...they came from where the sun rises, descendants of Israel, of the same language and same customs as Israel. ... When they left.... the great Father gave them a present called Giron-Gagal (sacred director or compass).... When they arrived at the edge of the sea ... a passage opened.... for thus the great God wished it to be done, because they were the sons of Abraham and Jacob." (For more information on this subject see the author's paper entitled "In Defense of an Obsession")

Quetzalcoatl

Quetzalcoatl, (Feathered Serpent), was the title by which the "White Bearded God" of ancient Mesoamerica is best known. His apparently lighter skin color is a curiosity. His flowing beard is also interesting inasmuch as Mesoamericans, and all other Native Americans for that matter, were unable to grow beards until many generations after intermarriage with Europeans.

Bernardino de Sahagun, a Catholic priest and historian of the middle 1500's, arrived in Mexico from Spain and recorded a comprehensive study on the beliefs and customs of the high cultures of Mesoamerica. He records that the Mexicas believed in a grand council in the heavens before the organization of the earth. He also reports: "... they said there were twelve divisions in the heavens. There existed, there dwelt, the true God and his consort. Only one was their God, Quetzalcoatl. When babies were conceived, their souls came from heaven and entered their mother's wombs. They believed in a resurrection."

The legends and mythologies of the creator-savior god of the Americas are ubiquitous. The Mexican archeologist Laurette Sejourné, makes this point: "His essential role as founder of Nahuatl culture was never questioned by any of the early historians, who always state that, just as our era began with Christ, so that of the Aztecs and their

predecessors began – approximately at the same time – with Quetzalcoatl. His image, the plumed serpent, had for pre-Columbian peoples the same evocative force as has the Crucifix for Christianity. Besides being invoked as the creator of man and his work, he was patron of two institutions, which were the foundations of Aztec social and religious life: the priesthood and the college of princes.”

The ancient Mixtec Codex Nuttall of Oaxaca, Mexico, was translated by Jill Furst and includes this comment regarding Quetzalcoatl: "In the fixed calendar of 260 days, the date Four Earthquake would be the 6th of April. The date Seven Flower would be three days later, or the 9th of April.... Birth and rebirth are symbolic of Seven Flower. What is shown in the codex is that on April 6, AD 30 a deity shown first as dead and descending into the underworld leaves the underworld and comes back to life or is resurrected (reborn) three days later."

There were at least thirty-five title names by which Quetzalcoatl "Q" was known, many of which have their corollary in names given to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Symbolic names like the "Anointed One," the "Savior," the "Good Shepherd," the "Bread of Life," "The Light," "The Lamb of God," the "Word," are representative of both Jesus Christ and Q. It is interesting that the Apostle John, as recorded in John 1.3, states succinctly that Christ was the creator. Q was known as the creator-god in the Americas. And as you will recall from the early citation above, in Numbers 21.5-10, Moses raised a stylized serpent on a pole as a symbol of God's healing power, a foreshadowing of the Messiah, the atonement, and ultimately the resurrection. This theme was further developed in John 3.14-15.

Early padres arriving with Cortez during the Conquest of Mexico and Central America almost five hundred years ago were stumped as they heard the legends of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, the Lord of the Wind and Water. They learned that Q had performed baptisms, taught uniquely Christian doctrines, had suffered humiliation and death in atonement for the sins of man and had then risen from the grave three days later. The connections were obvious and early Catholic fathers were outspoken in their belief that Christ had visited the Americas.

Shortly thereafter Catholic authorities arrived in what was then called New Spain, whereupon a heated debate raged as to who Q was. The early Catholic fathers pointed to the Gospel of John, 10.16 where Christ told his disciples that he was leaving to visit other sheep, "which are not of this fold, them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd."

The argument that Christ had visited the Americas was convincing and left to stand for a long time but eventually this position became a dangerous political view as the Spanish and Portuguese enslaved one culture after another. During the slavery epoch it was important to take the position that the Mexicas, Mayans, Zapotecs, Incas, and the other highly accomplished natives of New Spain, were somehow less than human and as such they could not have been worthy of a visit by Christ. All information to the contrary was aggressively suppressed.

An ancient, pre-Columbian painting of Quetzalcoatl represents him hanging from a doubled cross, his side pierced with a spear with a stream of blood and a separate stream of water flowing from the wound.

Summary

In the words of Dr. Robert T. Mason, "Since the very beginnings of time, on every continent of this earth where humanity has worshipped divinity the serpent has been recognized and accepted as a god. From Africa's steaming jungle to the icy wastes of northern Europe; from the Fertile Crescent to the deserted outback of Australia the serpent has been worshipped, feared and adored. Serpent mythology is arguably the most widespread mythology known to mankind."

The mysterious aspects of the serpent, including its extraordinary vitality and its seeming immortality as demonstrated by the periodic rejuvenation of shedding the old and appearing of the new must have instilled a sense of awe and invoked a powerful response in our earliest ancestors. The snake was consequently mythologized and often attributed with powers that it could control the entire cosmos.

We find representations of the serpent everywhere, including the spiral, sky band, chevrons, and the stepped fret. These symbols appear on pottery, clothing, and in temples new and old. Ancient vases show gigantic snakes winding over the sun, moon and stars representing Sky Serpent symbology. Elsewhere the snake appears below a growing plant, or coiled above the belly of a pregnant woman. The snake was clearly the symbol of creative energy, resurrection, and immortality.

The serpent symbology evoked when Moses raised the brazen serpent onto a pole in order to heal the Israelites was such powerful imagery that eventually it evolved into the Caduceus symbol, the universal sign for the healing arts and the icon of physicians worldwide. Perhaps the bronze serpent of Moses has further symbolic elements in addition to those outlined in the Gospel of John. The instrument of judgment had become the means of deliverance and the symbol of pain and death was to become a symbol of healing. The Christian cross would evoke these same sentiments some fifteen hundred years later.

In addressing the subject of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent of the Americas, Dr. Milton Hunter stated: "In ancient America, that religious genius who is supreme over all other religious teachers known, even so powerful that he could influence the cultures of all the native peoples of the Western Hemisphere so profoundly that his memory was ardently worshipped for over fifteen hundred years, could have been none other than Jesus the Christ, the Lord and God of this earth, and the Savior of the human family. Thus Jesus Christ and Quetzalcoatl are identical."

On a personal note, during the early 1980's while meeting with an order of Jesuits in Veracruz, Mexico, (the result of historical research I was working on at the time), the prefect told me openly that Jesus Christ was indeed "Feathered Serpent," "Quetzalcoatl,"

the "Fair God" of the Americas. It was the view of all the Jesuits then present, about twenty in number. President John Taylor summed: "The story of the life of the Mexican divinity Quetzalcoatl, closely resembles that of the Savior; so closely, indeed, that we can come to no other conclusion than that Quetzalcoatl and Christ are the same being."

In summary, the serpent as it appears in the Pentateuch, serves as a multi-faceted metaphor. Its symbolism in the Scriptures does not seem to have a static meaning, precisely because it does not always represent the same thing.

It may just be that as Satan used the serpent for his purposes in the Garden, so did God use the serpent to reproach Pharaoh and to show His power over Egypt, and then again for the healing of His people in the wilderness. One can observe a progression, perhaps not intended, of the serpent's treatment in the passages of the Pentateuch, going from evil in the Garden, to mildly good or perhaps ambiguous in the blessing of Dan, to a compelling tool of God's power in Pharaoh's court, to becoming a symbol or instrument of healing in the wilderness, and ultimately the image of the serpent is used by Christ Himself to illustrate His saving power over death. Thus, the deadly serpent is transformed into an icon of healing and life, just as the death that came in the Garden was trumped by the gift of eternal life as offered through Christ's atonement on the cross.