

The information these sources give about Seron is minimal and his position is thus far from clear. He is described as "commander of the army of Syria" (1 Macc 3:13), which Josephus turned, wrongly, into "governor of Coele-Syria." This could not have been so, since the governor of Coele-Syria at that time was Ptolemy son of Dorymenes. "Commander of the army of Syria" is meaningless in this context and was coined after biblical phrases.

It was suggested that he might have been an official of higher rank than Apollonius, and that he commanded some unit of the Syrian army not far from Judea. Its location was suggested at Dora by Goldstein (*1 Maccabees* AB. 246), and at Gazaro or Jammia by Bar-Kochva (1989: 133). Bar-Kochva also suggested, according to his name, that he was Thracian by origin, and so might have been a commander of a garrison of Thracian mercenaries (*Ibid.*). Seron was defeated by Judas Maccabeus, sometime in the spring of 165 B.C.E. at the Ascent of Beth-Horon.

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URIEL RAPPAPORT

SERPENT (RELIGIOUS SYMBOL). In comparative religions the term "serpent" refers to a number of creatures, real and imaginary, distinguished by physical serpentine characteristics. Serpents play a major role in mythological and religious traditions throughout the world from arctic peoples (where snakes are rare or nonexistent) to equatorial cultures (where snakes are plentiful). The diversity of serpent figures within a culture may be demonstrated by N European traditions where this category includes, in addition to snakes, such beasts as sea serpents (usually huge, scaly ocean monsters), dragons (snake-like reptiles with four legs), wyverns (two legged dragon-like creatures with wings), cockatrices and basilisks (rooster-headed wyverns), and hydras (multi-headed serpents). Though each religious tradition views its own serpent symbols within its own world-view, certain correspondences may be found in several widely separated cultures. The ANE peoples shared in the use of serpentine symbolism, though the extant artifacts often leave an imprecise understanding of the snake images. Serpents do appear in literary texts, however, so some idea of their significance to the culture may be determined.

The creation of the universe arising from a titanic struggle of deities, monsters, or both is a fairly common motif. In *Enuma Elish* the monster Tiamat is defeated by Marduk; with her defeat the cosmos can be designed. It has often been posited that Tiamat was a dragon or some form of serpent; though the text is quite unclear on her nature, it is certain that monstrous serpents aided her in her battle with the gods. In the Bible, God is pictured as struggling with sea serpents, which are controlled, and such texts have been interpreted as examples of creation myths. Serpents aid other deities in the creation of the cosmos in certain Indian, African, South Pacific, and South American religious traditions (Ions 1967: 108; Parrinder 1982: 25; Poignant 1967: 94; Sullivan 1988: 297); yet in some cultures the serpents are themselves the creators. Wollunqua, an Australian rainbow serpent, set out the souls of

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humanity (Butterworth 1970: 189) and for various peoples in Angola it is claimed that the python is the creator of all life (Mundkur 1983: 260), a notion which finds its parallel among the Warao of Venezuela (Wilbert 1975: 168). Moreover, serpents may be representations of both chaos and creation simultaneously (Sullivan 1988: 58; Roe 1989: 16-17) or the benevolent side of creation which saves people from the chaotic events of creation itself (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971: 26).

In cosmic terms the universe always sits on the threshold of relapse into chaos. In numerous cultures the ordered cosmos includes serpents as central figures in the vision of the created world. Often it is the serpent which holds the universe together by lying in the sea surrounding the land, tail in mouth, physically containing the ground (Parrinder 1982: 24; Roe 1989: 12; Wilbert 1975: 164-65; Davidson 1964: 32, 34-35). In this form the serpent symbolizes both the boundaries of the created world and the notion of eternity. By holding the universe together tightly in coils, any movement by the snake will cause ground to buckle and quake; therefore the serpent is both protection against chaos and a potential danger. The fact that the serpent surrounding the land is clearly enormous and powerful provides for a cosmic sea serpent; not unlike *Im* from Ugarit's myths or the biblical Leviathan.

Also common in world mythology is the notion of the world tree which forms the center of the created universe. This is understood to reach from heaven to the nether-world forming a natural pillar on which all levels of the cosmos exist. Either at the roots or around the trunk of the tree there is usually a serpent which appears contrasted with an eagle in the branches above (Butterworth 1970: 49-50, 85, 149; Davidson 1964: 26-27). Both the Etana myth and the story of Gilgamesh and the Huluppu tree reflect these notions (Kramer 1938: 5). The serpent may either be guarding the tree or destroying it. The eagle and serpent as a symbol of perpetual animosity appears to be a common motif portraying the eternal battles between good and evil or, more properly, order and chaos, which are then represented as the extremes of the cosmos (Jordan-Smith 1989: 64).

In some traditions the central axis of the world is a serpent, either transversing the planes of existence or upholding the center of the earth (Ions 1967: 25, 108; Wilbert 1975: 164-65; Paper 1978: 28). Common among Indian and American religious traditions, it has been argued to have been represented as early as the 5th millennium B.C.E. in the Ukraine (Gimbutas 1982: 101-13). Within the cosmic realm serpentine beings form bridges from the area of human habitation to other abodes; most common is the perception of the rainbow as a snake bridging this land with heaven, a pervasive belief throughout Oceania, South Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Serpents also convey souls to the land of the dead for the Ojibwa and Dauavani (Paper 1978: 29; Sullivan 1988: 532). As with certain serpentine deities who are related to rivers in Mesopotamia (and possibly with Ug *tpt nhr*), snakes create, inhabit, and are rivers in various cultures (McEwan 1983: 226-29; Parrinder 1982: 25; Roe 1989: 9).

The final area of the cosmos in which serpents play a significant role is the underworld. In western Christian tradition the serpent as a sign of evil belongs to the realm

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of hell, but long before Christian iconography the ancient Egyptians could use the serpent Apophis as the very underworld through which Re had to travel; not to mention the myriads of snakes which could destroy the soul of the dead on the way to the afterlife should the departed not know the correct spells for getting by them. Among the Dinka of the Sudan there is some notion of a world beneath the earth inhabited by cobras which act as humans; in India the nagas, who appear in both human and cobra forms, also exist as a counterpart to human life (Lienhardt 1961: 117; Rawlinson 1986: 137). In South America such python-people are thought to live on an island (Roe 1989: 27).

If there are human-like serpents, it is natural that for several peoples around the earth their own ancestors are seen as snakes. In these situations the particular species of snake becomes a symbol for the group. In Oceania the snake is one of four animals from which all people derive (Poignant 1967: 90–91); in Africa and the Americas particular snakes (python, cobra, anaconda, rattlesnake, etc.) commonly are held to be the direct ancestors of tribes who then hold the serpents in honor (Mundkur 1983: 57, 91, 96; Lienhardt 1961: 118; Luckert 1976: 124; Voth 1903: 352). For these people snakes can be very much like humans and may breed with them.

Serpents have been connected to the destruction of life in several cultures. As in Gen 3:1–15, ANE and African narratives tell how serpents diverted a form of immortality meant for humans. This usually refers to a plant or extra skin which is taken by or given to a snake before the humans could make use of it; therefore snakes may become young again but people may not, a motif which may be seen in the tales of Gilgamesh and Adapa (Joines 1974: 70–71; Parrinder 1982: 56–59; Wrigley 1988: 375). Serpents appear in several fashions with the dead. In Africa, classical Greece and South America the souls of the dead may appear in the form of snakes (Mbiti 1970: 216; Cole 1982: 61; Küster 1913: 67; Burkert 1985: 195; Sullivan 1988: 544). Pythons convey messages between the dead and God in Turu belief (Mbiti 1970: 91), but more often poisonous serpents are sent as messengers of death by sorcerers (Mbiti 1970: 255–56; Sullivan 1988: 485). Of course chthonic deities and deities of death may take the form or attributes of snakes (Hultkrantz 1979: 63; Burkert 1985: 201; Lawuyi and Olupona 1988: 2). Finally, the shed skins of snakes have been taken as symbols of immortality of the soul and the mortality of the flesh in Hinduism (*Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad* 4.4.7 and *Prasna Upanishad* 5.5).

The serpent as the end of life is also found in cosmic scope. Those serpents which surround the earth may also destroy it. In Norse mythology this is a certain fate, for the Midgard serpent eventually will destroy the universe and kill the god Thor in the process (Davidson 1964: 37). In the same vein, the Fon believe that if the serpent around the earth is not properly fed it will consume itself, destroying the universe (Parrinder 1982: 27). In an Oaxacan myth of Mesoamerica gigantic snakes attempt to devour the earth (Vázquez 1983: 9, 13) while South American traditions see periodic cycles of destruction in the universe precipitated by the slaying of two mythical anacondas (Sullivan 1988: 197).

Serpents clearly are used for symbols of both good and evil. Few serpent symbols are as unambiguously positive as the use of the boa constrictor among the Tukano to reflect the joy of dancing (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971: 103). Yet as ancestors of various peoples serpents appear as positive symbols. They also are beneficent as signs of gods and royalty. Deities may appear as serpents or have aspects of snakes and still be good gods; this is especially true in East Asia where serpents (dragons in particular) are perceived as beneficial (Paper 1978: 29; Faure 1987: 338). Buddha may, in fact, be represented by the Naga Mucilinda which had protected him (Rawlinson 1986: 136). Among the Elamites serpent figures are common and may reflect divine attributes reflected in "Master/Mistress of the animals" representations, often with snakes, and in the thrones, which appear to have held deities, composed of entwined serpents for a base and with four hooded serpents crawling up the back, for which comparisons with the Naga thrones of Indian tradition should be made (Amiet 1966: 58, 310–11 fig. 233 A-B, 378–79 fig. 286 A-C). Mesopotamia had several minor serpent deities, the exact realms of which are largely unknown (Joines 1974: 70–71; Frayne 1982: 512; McEwan 1983: 215). Major deities of Latin America have been portrayed as serpents, including Tlaloc, Cihuacoatl, and the reknowned Quetzalcoatl (Luckert 1976: 49; Delhalle 1982: 130; Carrasco 1982: 79, 96–98). The terror or power of serpents may also be ascribed to deities in the form of serpent attributes, as with Athena (Burkert 1985: 229), where in Greek myth some serpents may slay with a glance.

Serpents also serve as royal symbols. In Egypt the uraeus was worn by the ruler as part of the crown and serpent-shaped sceptres have been found in Elam (Amiet 1966: 382). In China the dragon was a standard royal symbol into the 20th century and the sword, one of three symbols of emperorship, in Japan is said to have come from a dragon, probably representing lightning (Paper 1978: 29; Holtom 1972: 24). Moreover, the poison of serpents may give mortals an invincibility in battle if bathed in or drunk in European and South American traditions (MacCulloch 1973: 139–40; Sullivan 1988: 444). In some cultures of Africa and America the first ruler of the world, the origin of royalty itself, was a serpent (Wrigley 1988: 375; Carrasco 1982: 79).

Serpents have been used as representations of lightning throughout the Americas and often are associated with rain throughout the world. In China it is the dragon which causes or withholds rainfall and this is a common belief across Asia including India where the nagas hold such power (Cohen 1978: 255; Vogel 1926: 4). In Latin America and Oceania the great gods of rain are the celestial serpents (Roe 1989: 9; Mountford 1978: 23–24). In Africa the same serpent who may "be" a river or the rainbow also can supply rain (Wrigley 1988: 372). With this symbolic use of the serpent, however, the snake creatures become ambiguous figures, for drought also is caused by the serpent and hail, flooding, and ruination of crops may come with the rains if the serpents in charge wish to punish people.

The most ambiguous function of the serpent as symbol is as killer/healer. The naga serpents of India are often evil and bite people, causing death; but they may also use their poisons to save lives (Vogel 1926: 17–18). Similar

serpents are found concerning serpents in South America (Sullivan 1988: 444) and Europe in the healing cults of Asclepius and Glycon. The caduceus has become the symbol of medicine in European tradition. The story of the fiery serpents sent to kill and the serpent image used to heal in Num 21:8-9 may reflect this aspect of serpent symbolism. It may be noted that in some cultures the serpent only brings disease not a cure (Walker 1980: 91).

In some cultures serpents play the role of the villain. Pali belief allows no nagas to grow in dharma and the Lakota believe that snakes are not allowed into the spirit world (Rawlinson 1986: 137; Walker 1980: 71). As symbols of chaos and gluttony, snakes are a constant threat to the existence of the universe and humans. In Asia and Europe dragons are often seen as killing people, consuming vast amounts of livestock, and holding young women captive or eating them. Evil spirits, monsters, and demons come in the shape of snakes throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Classical mythology has a number of serpentine chaos monsters, including Hydra, Typho, Echidna, and Skylla; Illuyanka, the vast serpent of the Anatolian myth falls into this chaotic vision of the serpent (Beckman 1982: 11). Volcanoes can be seen as monstrous destructive serpent mouths (Luckert 1976: 44-46; Burkert 1985: 127-28). Finally serpents are presented as examples of slyness, lying, and seduction all of which would conform to the serpent which appears in Eden (Ions 1967: 113; Hultkrantz 1979: 63; Walker 1980: 122).

Snakes may be used for sexual symbols. In Europe and the ANE there seems to be reason sometimes to view serpents as symbols of sexuality (Mundkur 1983: 180-208). Clearly the serpent has been a symbol for fertility in many cultures among the Oceanic peoples, Africans, and Latin Americans (Poignant 1967: 91; Hauenstein 1978: 529; Luckert 1976: 46; Hultkrantz 1979: 236). But there is no universal gender distinction in the use of serpents. While Moor (1988: 111) has seen serpent references in the ANE as masculine symbols, it must be noted that in East Asia and Japan serpents are more apt to represent women (Mundkur 1983: 176-77); this is true also in Borneo and West Africa (Davidson 1964: 193; Hauenstein 1978: 530) while Celtic tradition seems to use serpents for a male symbol (Mundkur 1983: 180). The Tukano of South America use one snake, the anaconda, to represent women and another, the boa constrictor, to symbolize men (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971: 102). So while serpents are related to gender, they are multivalent symbols with regard to sexuality.

Serpents also appear consistently as guardians and as companions to the divine realms. As guardians they are perhaps most noted for protecting pools and wells (Vogel 1926: 4; Poignant 1967: 92; Ross 1967: 348; Mountford 1978: 23; Paper 1978: 29; Roe 1989: 12), though they also protect territory and can stand guard at boundaries (McEwan 1983: 221-22). Serpents as guards for people are attested in the Eastern Mediterranean and South America (Burkert 1985: 30, 130; Sullivan 1988: 493); in the same manner, serpents guard the deities and their dwellings (Grimm 1888: 1491; Butterworth 1970: 80; McEwan 1983: 219). Buddhist monks, from the time Mulinda protected Buddha, have had guardian serpents (Faure 1987: 339, 356). In the heavenly realm fire-spitting

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snakes protected the divine drink in Indian tradition (Ions 1967: 102) in much the same manner that beings interpreted as fire-serpents stand in the presence of God in Isa 6:2. Finally, serpents are renowned for guarding treasures of gold and jewels in both East Asian and European traditions.

As companions of the deities serpents usually serve as a means of transportation. Vishnu floats along on the cosmic sea on his snake raft (Ions 1967: 108); Mawa, the Fon creator deity, rides about in the mouth of a snake (Parrinder 1982: 25); the Japanese goddess of fortune, Bentein is conveyed on the back of a dragon (Piggott 1969: 132); back (Sullivan 1988: 143). The Elamite representations of serpents with deities mounted on them may reflect the same traditions (Amiet 1966: 286). In Hindu mythology the serpent Vasuki is used by the gods and the demons to churn the milk ocean into amrita, the sacred drink and then becomes a constant companion of Shiva. The Fon of Africa perceive snakes to be the intermediaries of the ritual experts and the gods (Mbiti 1969: 91).

This relationship between the gods and humans through serpents is perhaps best represented by the serpent as symbol of wisdom. In Japan, Siberia, Africa, and South America one becomes a shaman through the intermediary of snakes (Kitagawa 1969: 318; Mundkur 1983: 77; Mbiti 1970: 91; Sullivan 1988: 282, 444). Wisdom may be conveyed to humans through serpents either as oracles or through the consuming of parts of the serpent (Grimm 1888: 1491; MacCulloch 1973: 140). Magic is a particular form of wisdom which serpents can impart to humans (Piggott 1969: 93; Rawlinson 1986: 137). However, culture itself may be a product delivered to humans by a serpentine agent. This is clearly the case with Quetzacoatl in Mesoamerica, but in South America as well anacondas bring culture and art (Roe 1989: 27); even the snakes which are evil by nature may be forced to impart valuable information for the culture as with the Algonkian tradition that snakes taught humans about poison and medicine (Hultkrantz 1979: 63). Within the various Buddhist traditions, in fact, serpents, especially the nagas, can be used as examples of the devout followers of the Buddha, filled with wisdom.

Finally, serpents appear as regular objects of omens. For the most part a snake is an ill omen, but not always. Among the ANE omen texts the sighting of snakes often reflects an impending death or ill fate (Whiting 1984: 208); this is a common notion with the sighting of snakes, especially pythons, in Africa, where the snake is taken to be the soul of an elderly man who is about to die (Cole 1982: 61, 202). Messages may be sent to humans by the gods through the intermediaries of common snakes and these then will tell the future or diagnose illness (Kitagawa 1969: 319; Piggott 1969: 132; Hauenstein 1978: 532).

For further discussion of the biblical tradition, see Schlüter 1982 and SERPENT, BRONZE.

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LOWELL K. HANDY

SERPENT'S STONE (PLACE) [Heb ⁷eben hazzōhelet].

A symbolic landmark at En Rogel where Adonijah, a rival of Solomon for King David's throne, made sacrifices during his abortive attempt to become king (1 Kgs 1:9). The Hebrew word, *zōhelet* is derived from a verb that means "to shrink back, crawl, glide." The LXX translation, *lithou tou Zōeith*, where serpent is simply transliterated, would seem to support that the stone was a recognized landmark near En Rogel. This landmark was most likely a sacred stone dedicated to a deity whose symbol was a serpent—frequently a sacred symbol on objects in Palestine—and thus a logical place for Adonijah to legitimize his attempt to seize the throne with sacrifices and feasting.

Various attempts have been made to locate the landmark geographically. The most frequently recognized location is En Rogel at the S end of the Kidron Valley near its confluence with the Hinnom Valley. Another interpretation attempts to locate more precisely the Serpent's Stone with reference to the Serpent (Heb *tannin*, "serpent, dragon") or Jackal (Heb *tan*) Well mentioned in Neh 2:13. This well is outside the city in the vicinity of the Dung Gate. This would place the well (identified by many with Job's Well at En Rogel [Myers *Ezra*, *Nehemiah* AB, 104, 118]) most likely near En Rogel and the sacred Serpent Stone. Some link the word *zōhelet* with a modern Arabic word *zahueileh*, "a slippery rock slope." This has been

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