

THE SUBTLE SERPENT.

THE serpent has a great place in ancient legend; and 'Serpent Worship' has been the title of more than one modern treatise. Books and chapters on the serpent commonly bring together myths and legends impossible to reconcile. The serpent is the author of evil, and yet there is an Agathodaemon or good serpent. The serpent bites, and the serpent heals. In the garden of the Hesperides it guards the apples; in the garden of Eden it tempts Eve to take the fruit. People worship the serpent, or they worship Apollo for destroying it. It is the serpent who tempts Eve, yet Eve herself is the serpent. It will not be mere idleness if we try to reconcile these anomalies.

It is not sufficiently recognized that the legends of the ancient world were full of serious meaning for those to whom they were first addressed. A system of teaching existed in which truth was often set forth in dramatic representation, or suggested by symbols. The sun was a symbol of the Deity, as Lord of light and life, and Ruler of the seasons of the year. The welfare of man required that he should become acquainted with the laws of heaven, and regulate his life's activities thereby. To begin with, he must know the times and seasons for agricultural operations; and whatever power deranged his calendar or altered the declination of the stars on which he had depended, was the enemy of God and man alike. There is no doubt that the inimical power was represented by a serpent; though the reptile was no more the actual devil than the sun was the veritable Deity. But the sun and the serpent were thus brought into opposition and conflict. The system of teaching under which this was done may be described as astro-religious; for it took account of the general movement of the heavens, and inculcated reverence for the divine order. Its basis was so ample and its fabric so large that it found room for more than one serpent symbol: and we in these days must learn to distinguish if we desire to understand.

In Egypt the serpent Apophis or Apepi, the enemy of Ra the sun-god, is not necessarily the same as the serpent Typhon who caused the death of Osiris. Nor is a dragon possessing wings quite the same sort of creature as a wingless and limbless reptile gliding or creeping on the ground. Lenormant, writing on the First Sin, and remarking that there are in ancient legend divine serpents, essentially benign in character, protective, prophetic, linked with gods of health and healing, says that we do find by their side a gigantic serpent who personifies a hostile and nocturnal power, a wicked principle, material darkness, and moral evil. Let us seek a clue in natural facts.

When we look at a celestial globe and observe such constellations as *Andromeda*, *Hercules*, and *Pegasus*, we must acknowledge some connexion between Greek legend and the stars, whether the constellations suggested the stories, or were afterwards framed as a lasting record of events. Astronomy has several serpents, and it may be that this diversity will afford some clue to the different and sometimes opposite character of the serpents in legend. There is a *Draco* near the Pole and a *Serpentarius* near the Equator, besides a *Hydra* and a *Cetus* in southern waters. Of course whales and hydras are very different from serpents zoologically; but sometimes all that the legend requires is a monster of the waters. Egyptian charts of the northern skies shew a hippopotamus and a crocodile; and these as well as the serpent were emblems of Typho, the evil genius. Wilkinson tells us that the people of Apollonopolis ate the crocodile upon a certain occasion, in order to shew their abhorrence of Typho; and solemnly hunted this animal upon a particular day set apart for the purpose.

Take first the Polar Dragon. Around the present Pole as a centre, all the stars apparently revolve in circles; and the curves in fact do not differ perceptibly from circles. But in reality they are slightly cycloidal, like the curves made by any point in the circumference of a carriage wheel; for the polar axis, like the carriage axle, is in motion. It makes a circle round the pole of the ecliptic; and the motion of the stars near it becomes a motion in coils. Our astronomical charts or celestial spheres—which are derived from ancient zodiacs and star-temples—shew a dragon coiling round the pole of the ecliptic, though not

extending out to the wide circle which theory seems to demand. It is shrunken, and its tail, if it ever was between its teeth, has escaped. In the classical description of the Shield of Hercules, which Mr. R. A. Proctor, with much probability, regards as relating to the dome of a zodiac temple,—

The scaly horror of a dragon coiled
Full in the central field, unspeakable ;
With eyes oblique, retorted, that askant
Shot gleaming fire.

Mr. Proctor says, however, that any one who considers attentively the aspect of the constellation Draco in the heavens will perceive that the drawing of the head in the maps is not correct. The head is no longer pictured as it must have been conceived by those who first formed the constellation. The two bright stars Beta and Gamma are now placed on a head in profile ; whereas formerly they marked the two eyes. Mr Proctor considers that the attitude of the animal is far more natural when the star Iota of Hercules marks the tongue, for then the creature is situated like a winged serpent hovering above the horizon and looking downwards.

The second great serpent of the legends may be called the Equatorial Serpent ; and this again ought theoretically to lie all round the Equator, with sinuosities above and below that line. But only the great snake which is handled by Ophiuchus (or Serpentarius) remains now, as a serpent of the sun's path. Sir William Drummond says that with the Egyptians a serpent was the hieroglyph of the ecliptic circle, the path of the sun. Mr King also, in *The Gnostics*, alluding to the serpentine legs of the Abraxas god, observes that the serpent symbolized the sun's winding course through the zodiac. The serpent with its tail in its mouth, as the Phoenicians represented it, has seemed so apt an emblem of eternity—or at least of time-cycles, never-ending, still beginning—that any search after a meaning has been apt to end there. But it is not the mere annual course of the sun that is chiefly concerned when his path is likened to a serpent. The constellation Ophiuchus, if not a remnant of a serpent that once extended all round the ecliptic, seems at least to suggest and represent such a serpent. The backward motion of the equinoctial points has a very marked effect on

the position of the zodiacal constellations, carrying them above the Equator in succession, on one side of the heavens, and below on the other. The movement is wave-like, and might be described as serpentine; it is slow and insidious, and on that account deceptive. Stars which had formerly heralded the spring, or the autumn, pass below or above; and no longer tell the season accurately. Men are deceived if they depend on them. This sinuous movement of the glittering stars explains Isaiah's reference to Leviathan the crooked serpent, gliding, winding, girdling the earth, and associated with the dragon that is in the sea (xxvii 1). The prophet seems to glance at Egypt, where the evil earth-serpent, Apepi, was the enemy of the sun-god Ra; and by connexion of thought the enemy of Jehovah whose symbol was also the sun. In the Egyptian story Apepi made a chine or chasm which was dangerous to sun and stars (thus clear is it that the serpent had astronomical connexions) into which the luminaries fell and were helpless. Through the shifting of the Pole the declination of the stars was changed; and for sun and stars alike the equinoctial point was moved. The gap between the old trysting-place and the new was the hiatus here called the chine. In the language of symbols the jaws of the serpent were thereabout; and in work-a-day fact it had become uncertain where the spring began¹, or where the summer ended. The Egyptians spoke of a crocodile of the west who swallowed down the stars.

The dragon of high heaven would be in full accord with the serpent of the ecliptic; because the shifting of the Pole and the recession of the equinoxes result alike from the conical motion of the earth's axis. The phenomena in the two regions bear a corresponding appearance. Certain stars fall away from the Pole; and those in league with them depart from the equinoctial point. In Egypt these stars or their tutelary divinities are 'children of failure', like angels who kept not their first estate. They disturb the ancient order and lead men into error. Apepi is spoken of as their leader.

These two serpents, however, do not exhaust the list. In

¹ Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days began, and caused the day-spring to know its place!—Job xxxviii 12.

Egypt there is a devil of darkness called Typhon, and his mischief is of a slightly different sort from that of Apepi. The encroachment of the dark hemisphere upon the light, through precession, is continuously in one direction, whereas the mischief wrought by Typhon was intermittent, varying, and admitted of advance and retreat. It was in all respects such as would result from a defective calendar, which assigned a wrong measure to the year, and was repeatedly altered this way and that without being made perfect. We know from Herodotus that the Egyptian year at one time consisted of twelve months of thirty days each; to which five days were added and called a 'little month'. Experience would shew that even this left the year too short; and it must be eked out with some form of intercalary. The new effort would perhaps make the year too long; and there would be a vexatious period of calendar-mending, with alternate give and take. The practical effect on the beginning of the year, or any season of the year, would resemble that produced by the precession of the equinoxes—the spring might be anticipated in the calendar, and then, six months later, the winter would come too soon. The two hemispheres were opposed as summer and winter, as light and darkness, as Heaven and Hades; and one was encroaching upon the other. Yet whereas the precession movement was continuously in the same direction; the effect of calendar changes was advance and retreat, as uncertain as the fortune of war.

This condition of things makes it easy to understand how there came to be two serpents, one of the summer and the upper air, the other of winter and the nether world. The two hemispheres are the double lands over which the sun-god reigns; and they were assumed to have their counterpart in the Upper and Lower Egypt, reigned over by the Pharaoh. Symbolically, Pharaoh was the sun-god, and sat on the throne of the sun-god; and in fact was addressed as the god. On the Stele of the Dream, Pharaoh beheld in his vision two snakes, one to his right, the other to his left; and the interpreters said, 'Thou wilt have the southern lands and seize the northern, and the two crowns will be put upon thy head.' The two snakes belonged to the two hemispheres, the dominions of Horus and Set respectively, and looked defiance at one another across the boundary. Set

or Typhon, the evil power of the nether world, has his basis in the defective calendar.

Typhon, as Serpent or Crocodile, stretches from west to east along the under hemisphere. He is the evil one of Egypt; but as he fills only half the circle there is room for him to be opposed by the good. When this monster of the darkness is allowed to advance, pushing the New Year's Day out of its proper place, the calendar year ceases to correspond with the facts of Nature: the truth is not told; the serpent speaks lies.

Horus and Set fought many battles, and each combatant suffered in turn. The dispute was about the boundary line; and the wrong-doing was always charged on Set (or Typhon). Plutarch had learned that the name Typhon signifies 'that which tyrannizes and constrains by force'; and also a return, and again an overleaping; a certain forcible and impeding check, opposition and turning upside down¹. Typhon, though often killed in these battles, was soon on his legs again. Finally, however, a treaty of peace was made between the combatants; and that we must take to mean that the two halves of the year were satisfactorily adjusted. Thoth, the lord of the balance, acted as arbitrator, and adjudged the kingdom to be divided between Horus and Set². Again we read that Seb, the earth-god (of the Equator circle), terminated the war, assigning to the one combatant Lower Egypt, to the other Upper Egypt, fixing with precision the limit of their domains. In an ancient version Horus and Set stand on opposite eminences, in the character of two land surveyors, and solemnly agree respecting the natural boundaries of each other's domains. Each pronounces the formula, 'The land of An is the boundary of the land'—An being On or Heliopolis, the city of the sun, the terrestrial representative of the spring equinox. Such was the symbolism.

So satisfactory was the new arrangement deemed to be—probably the adoption of the tropical year—that the north and south were believed to be eternally reconciled. Horus and Set had become friends. The erstwhile evil serpent is now as good as

¹ 'As though alternately attracted and repelled by a lodestone.' Plutarch *On Isis and Osiris* xlix and lxii.

² See *Proc. Soc. Bib. Archaeol.* xii 8. 424; Maspero *Dawn of Civilisation* p. 178; Comp. Renouf on the *Book of the Dead* chap. cx.

the other. They are like brothers, and are sometimes called the two Horuses. They were united as a two-headed god, with an ass-head facing one way, a hawk-head the other—the symbolic heads which had belonged to them respectively: or again with the heads of the black vulture and the golden hawk, the colours being symbolical of the two hemispheres. Horus and Set are alike healers, giving efficacy to drugs and imparting strength to invalids. They were both adored throughout Upper and Lower Egypt, and were considered part of the same divine system.

On the rod of Mercury the two serpents are again face to face, suggesting either defiance or agreement; but in either case equilibrium, after a struggle in which there had been alternate gain of ground.

We have, then, a dragon of the North Pole, and a serpent of the Zodiac, with a duplication of the latter. Consistent symbolism would seem to require also a serpent or dragon for the South Pole, if only the ancients had been acquainted with the stars of that region. But apparently they were not, and the constellations of that part of the heavens are modern. Servius remarks (*ad Virg. Georg. i 205*) that there are three snakes in the sky, one lying between the Bears, the second grasped by Ophiuchus, the third to the south, around the *Crater* and *Corvus*. This third one is the *Hydra*, which lies below *Leo* and *Virgo*, and extends almost to *Libra*. 'Huge o'er heaven trail her spires' says Aratus the Greek poet. The constellation is said to represent the many-headed monster destroyed by Hercules, and probably does represent the zodiacal serpent as it figured in charts revised by Hercules—if we may take the story of his labours to be an allegorical account of certain astronomical reforms. This Hydra, though not identical with the Egyptian Set, is more or less analogous to that enemy of light. It does not in any way disturb our conclusion that Typhon, the embodiment of evil, personifies the nether half-circle of the ecliptic, associated with darkness and winter.

Myths, figures, and phrases survive to shew that a serpent or other monster was conceived of as extending all along the under side of the world, with its head at one of the equinoctial points and its tail at the other. 'The jaws of darkness' is an

expression which assumes terrible meaning when we know that they were the mouth of the monster; and 'the jaws of death' was the same thing, because that cavernous mouth was the entrance to Hades. Eclipses of the moon, because they occur when the satellite is near her nodes, are said to take place at the head and tail of the dragon. This is the language of our own astronomers, at the present day, derived by tradition from their fathers; and in view of it, the notions of the Chinese may not seem so very ridiculous. The dragon we are seeking to identify was plainly the Darkness of the Underworld, regarded as extended half-way round the ecliptic. As Night, the monster has its head and tail in the positions of dawn and sunset. As Winter the extremities are at the two equinoxes, and the monster is apt to creep onward factitiously when the calendar year is not of accurate length. As Precession Darkness or the winter of the Great Year, it creeps onward in reality, and the place of the equinox has to be readjusted.

Being opposed to Truth and the Divine Order of the world, this serpent might well enough serve as a type of the devil. In the religious system of Persia, at least, Ormuzd and Ahriman, the Deities of Light and Darkness, of Good and Evil, are plainly correlated with the two halves of the year. Such antagonisms as Apollo and the Python, St George and the Dragon, may be understood as conflicts between the two hemispheres or their champions, to hold back or to push forward the boundary between summer and winter. Ahriman's power was to be destroyed after a struggle of 12,000 years; which appears to be on the scale of the Great Year. Apollo's victory over the Python may represent the abolition of some precession anomaly—a check to the advance of the monster—when the error had not extended beyond a few degrees. In the warfare between St Michael and the Dragon (Rev. xii) the dragon according to the Scripture writer represents the old serpent, he that is called the Devil and Satan. The Feast of St Michael is appropriately fixed at the season of the autumn equinox.

This general survey should prepare us to consider whether the story of the Serpent in Paradise is not a record in symbolical language, by early priest-astronomers. The event occurred soon after the 'fall of the angels', which was the altered declination of

the stars, making them deceivers. The sun and moon had been adopted for signs and for seasons, for days and for years; and the new arrangement seemed to promise happiness. The year beginning in the spring, the palm-tree marked the first meridian, and was the tree of knowledge, where veracious words were spoken and trustworthy records were made. In Egypt a palm branch was the emblem of Thoth, the Divine Scribe, a tutelary divinity who presided over time and measure and the balance. That tree of knowledge, marking the true equinox, should be let alone; else the months and seasons will suffer disturbance, and human affairs begin to go wrong. But alas, the Deceiver has gained entrance into the garden. Here, close under the tree, is the head of the serpent whose slimy length trails through the Underworld. What the God of Light has said about the tree is contradicted by the Demon of Darkness: and those who listen are lost!

He came not as a Demon, but in some fascinating disguise. A serpent was one of the emblems of Thoth, the god of wisdom: and the fruit of the tree was to be desired if it would make one wise. But there is a knowledge of evil as well as a knowledge of good. Typhon as well as Thoth can assume the form of a serpent. He was a murderer from the beginning, for he killed his brother Osiris. He was a liar in offering false boundaries between the seasons: and so was Apepi, the father of him (John viii 44).

Near the beginning of this article mention was made of Abraxas, the Gnostic divinity with serpentine legs, whose connexion with the zodiac is acknowledged. The clue was not then pursued; and the relationship can be better understood now. The esoteric theology of the Gnostics appears to have been derived from Egypt and India; and where there has been development of doctrine and symbol it is best to get back to the source, if we can. We can then work the same quarries for ourselves.

In Egypt tombs were constructed on the model of the world of night, and the constellations of the sky were figured on the ceiling. The soul of the deceased went the way of the sun; and a papyrus placed with the mummy in its coffin contained the needful directions and passwords. A serpent or dragon

waylaid the sun itself; and the human soul encountered crocodiles, and various perils. The devourer waiting for the condemned was a monster, part crocodile, part lion, part hippopotamus. The Underworld being at length traversed, and the region of the rising sun attained, the Paradise was on an island, and was reached by seven steps. The island, we may suppose, was in the first instance the equinox, and the seven steps were the seven successive positions of it, marked in the ancient record of precession.

In the Ophite symbolism of the Gnostics the Abraxas god is a Pantheus, representing the sun in his passage through the zodiac. On gems and seals he appears with a lion's head and a human body, while his legs are two serpents. In early time the summer sun was in Leo, and the year began there. The circle of 360 degrees is associated with the human body (with Adam and Eden) in certain myths. The two asps of Abraxas remind us of those on the rod of Hermes, which we take to symbolize the two halves of the ecliptic circle. Abraxas is identified with the Agathodaemon. Inscriptions on the gems declare, 'I am Chnumis, Sun of the Universe', or even shew Abraxas driving the car of Sol, in the exact attitude of its proper occupant, Phoebus (see King's *Gnostics* pp. 103, 433). His shield is usually emblazoned with some word of power, declaring his perpetual warfare against the rebellious angels (King 245-6). Phoebus, as the god of day, is similarly furnished with a whip; and the serpent, according to the Egyptians, hieroglyphically expressed his tortuous course through the zodiac (King 246). Epiphanius relates (*Haer.* xxxvii) how the later Gnostics kept a tame serpent in a chest or sacred ark, and piled loaves on the table, and then called upon the serpent to come forth. Whereupon, opening of himself the ark, he would come forth, mount upon the table, and twine about the loaves, which they brake in pieces, and distributed amongst the worshippers, calling this their Perfect Sacrifice and their Eucharist (King 323). The loaves of shewbread in the Hebrew tabernacle symbolized the twelve months and therefore the twelve signs, as the seven flames of the candlestick were emblems of the seven heavenly lights (Josephus *Ant.* III vi 7). The seven lights have for a long time been assumed to be the sun, moon, and planets; but

originally they were seven stars of the polar heavens, or seven stars of the equinoctial quarter, and their seven angels, which are fallen and evil.

The grand doctrine of Gnosticism was this: the soul, on being released from the body (its prison-house and place of torment), has to pass through the regions of the Seven Powers; which it cannot do unless impregnated beforehand with knowledge. Otherwise it is seized upon and swallowed by the dragon-formed ruler of this world, Satan Ophiomorphous. . . . But should it be filled with knowledge it eludes the seven powers . . . and mounts up into the eighth heaven. The talismans and their inscriptions were to the deceased as the Litanies of the Dead to the Egyptians (King *op. cit.* p. 333).

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