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PURIFICATION OR REDEMPTION

Those who grew up before the 1970s probably remember either the S&H Green Stamps or Gold Bond Stamps. (There were local loyalty stamp programs in various locations, but these were the largest.) Certain stores, gas stations, or other businesses would give out these stamps based on the amount spent during a visit. People would collect the stamps in a special booklet, and when the booklet was filled it could be redeemed for merchandise. The merchandise would require a certain number of books, and ranged from inexpensive toys to fur coats. Gold Bond Stamps was at one time the world's largest supplier of fur coats. People would often choose what businesses to frequent based on what stamp loyalty program they used.

When economic factors, including the internet and cash loyalty programs, made collecting the stamps less popular, Gold Bond Stamps diversified by buying Radisson Hotels and TGI Friday restaurants, and eventually stopped issuing the stamps altogether. S&H held on a little longer, but by the late seventies they could no longer brag that their catalog was the largest publication in the United States. Nevertheless, for eighty years people understood the meaning of redemption because of these loyalty programs.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews understood redemption. He or she wrote of the difference between purification and redemption in what we now know as chapter 9.

The Israelites were familiar with purification. There were many things that could make a person unclean. In some cases, purification just meant washing oneself and waiting for evening. In the case of touching a dead body, however, the ceremony for purification was more complicated. The priests were ordered to slaughter a red heifer and burn it. On the third and seventh day after touching the dead body, the individual was sprinkled with the water of purification mixed with those ashes. (Num 19) The writer of Hebrews mentions this, stating that it was effective for purification. "The ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh." (Heb 9:13)

They were also familiar with redemption of a sort. There are three Hebrew words translated redemption. The firstborn child was to be dedicated to God, but since

children were not to be sacrificed, they were to be redeemed. A second word is also translated division and is used in three verses with the concept of separating Israel from those around them. The third word is related to kinship. This is the word used for the redemption of the land at the Jubilee. Land was not to leave the family, so if it was sold it had to be redeemed or it would revert to the family at Jubilee. In no case did redemption relate to sin.

The Hebrews writer, however, does say that redemption is directly related to sin. In the same context as purification, redemption is mentioned as permanent rather than temporary.

Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:12-14)

This redemption is properly considered in the context of paying the price of a slave in order to free that person. Jesus paid our purchase price, and then freed us from sin.

Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves slaves to obey, his slaves ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the slaves of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. (Rom 6:16-17)

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MYTHICAL BEASTS

I collect dragons. Most of my hundred or so dragons are stuffed animals. Beyond that I have dragons made of wood, plastic, porcelain, composite, metal, and other materials. I have dragon jewelry, dragon pictures, and Lego dragons. Some are toys; some are distinctly not toys but decorative knick-knacks. I have books and movies about dragons. While I am partial to the Chinese dragons, most of my dragons are of the European (winged) variety. Dragons are considered mythical beasts, and so they are.

In 1611, when the King James Version of the Bible was translated, some mythical beasts were thought to be real. Maps of the oceans bore the legend, "Here be dragons." The principal story of England was that of Saint George and the dragon. The tales of knights and chivalry often included stories of knights rescuing fair maidens from dragons. And, of course, every knight wanted to relieve a dragon of its hoard of gold and jewelry. These beliefs were fueled by travelers' tales of fantastic beasts

Aaron cast down his rod and it turned into a dragon.

such as the camel-leopard (giraffe) and the gigantic monitor lizard still known as the Komodo dragon. Because people still believed mythical beasts existed, it is not surprising that the King James Version of the Bible makes reference to dragons and other such beasts.

Dragon

Even if you don't count the symbols of the dragon in the Revelation, dragons are mentioned 22 times in the King James Version. Almost all are in the Old Testament, and are translations of the Hebrew word *tannin*.

Perhaps the most famous of the Old Testament references to dragons, because it has been incorporated in the hymn *Praise the Lord, Ye Heavens Adore Him*, is found in Psalm 148:7. "Praise the LORD from the earth, ye dragons, and all deeps." This would accord with the old maps that put dragons in the oceans. So would the passage that reads, "Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters." (Ps 74:13)

Other passages, though, hint that the dwelling of dragons is in desolate places. The prophets, particularly, speak of nations being destroyed and becoming dwellings of dragons. "And Babylon shall become heaps, a dwellingplace for dragons." (Jer 51:37) Jeremiah says the same about Jerusalem (Jer 9:11), the cities of Judah (Jer 10:22), and Hazor (Jer 49:33) Malachi talks about "the

dragons of the wilderness" (Mal 1:3) in relation to Esau. Isaiah predicts that Israel will return to her dwelling places and

the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water: in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes. (Isa 35:7)

Moses spoke of dragons as of a venomous land animal. Of Israel's enemies he said, "Their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps." (Deut 32:33)

Dragons are frequently associated with owls. Job was the first to say, "I am a brother to dragons, and a companion to owls." (Job 30:29) But he was not the only one. Isaiah spoke of dwellings of dragons and of owls. (Isa 34:13; 43:20) So did Micah (1:8).

The translators of the King James Version also used the words whales (Gen 1:21; Job 7:12), sea monster (Lam 4:3), and serpents (Ex 7:9, 10, 12) instead of dragons in place of the same Hebrew word. The reference to serpents is when Moses was before Pharaoh and Aaron cast down his staff and it became a serpent. The Egyptian magicians did likewise, but Aaron's serpent ate theirs. It would make an interesting translation to use the word dragon instead of serpent.

This shows a problem in understanding what type of beast (real, not mythical) was meant by the Hebrew word. More modern translations frequently say it is the jackal, but in places the same translators use whales, sea creatures, or serpents. It is impossible to accurately translate the word, because various contexts indicate different types of animal.

In the New Testament, dragon is exclusively used in the Revelation. It is a transliteration of the Greek word *drakon*, which we still use to indicate a dragon. The dragon primarily appears in chapters 12 and 13. It is specifically identified as a symbol of "the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world." (Rev 12:9) He is unable to defeat the Messiah, so he causes the Roman government to wage war against the church, the followers of the Messiah. Ultimately the church is given victory over the dragon.

Cockatrice

What is a cockatrice and why is it in the Bible? To start with, a cockatrice is an impossibility. It was believed to have the head of a rooster and the tail of a serpent. If that isn't impossible enough, a cockatrice was hatched from a rooster's egg. The gaze of a cockatrice would turn a person to stone, and the only effective way to kill one was with a mirror.

The creature was common in English literature even as late as William Shakspeare, who was contemporary to the King James Version. The first use in English was in Wycliffe's translation of the Bible, where he used it to translate words later translated as dragon, viper, and fiery serpent.

In the King James Version it is used three times, all in Isaiah or Jeremiah, although the Hebrew word is translated once as an adder (Prov 23:32)

The prophets most commonly threatened to send cockatrices among the sinful people. (Isa 14:29; 59:5; Jer 8:7). The most quoted passage using the word, though, is of an ideal world.

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea. And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious. (Isa 11:6-10)

More recent English versions of the Bible use the terms cobra, viper, or serpent. Indeed, this is probably what was meant by the Hebrew word. It is different than a serpent, but probably a cobra or an adder, as the contexts bear out. Clearly the committee that translated for King James considered a cockatrice as fearsome as any cobra, which was not common in England.

Unicorn

We tend to think of a unicorn as a cute little horse with one horn on its nose. That image dates back at least to the Unicorn Tapestries, which were commissioned in France one hundred years before King James commissioned his translation of the Bible. Nowadays they are associated with glitter and rainbows.

The unicorn of the Bible was not very like those images. It does have a horn or horns (Ps 92:10). Its most prominent feature, though, is its strength. "He hath as it were the strength of an unicorn." (Num 23:22; 24:8) It was not easily tamed. "Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib? Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? or will he harrow the valleys after thee?" (Job 39:9-10)

Modern translations use the term wild ox. Some scholars think this was the aurochs, an ancestor of modern cattle. It was the largest species of ox, standing nearly six feet at the shoulders, and had heavy horns that spanned approximately that same width. By 1611 it was probably extinct in England, and so was replaced in the translators' minds with the mythical unicorn.

Satyr

The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the wild beasts of the island, and the satyr shall cry to his fellow; the screech owl also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest. (Isa 34:14)

It is unclear why the translators chose to refer to the mythical satyr in this passage. The satyr was a man with the legs and feet of a goat. In that sense it agrees in part with other uses of the Hebrew word in the Bible. Most of the 59 uses of the word in the Bible are translated kid or goat. Most of those are used in the requirements for offerings, as listed in Leviticus or Numbers. These would include the two goats used on the Day of Atonement.

Twice (Lev 17:7; 2 Chron 11:15) the translators

The unicorn of the Bible was not very like the cute little horse with a horn on its nose.

used the word devils. In both of those instances it referred to sacrifices to other gods, and probably meant goat idols.

Two other times the word is translated as hairy. In both of those instances it was descriptive of Esau, son of Isaac. Apparently Esau's hair was wiry, like that of a goat.

The Bible mentions other beasts that may be considered mythical. There are several references to behemoth and leviathan, for instance. We don't know for sure what those creatures were, although they are most commonly considered today to be the whale and the Nile crocodile. Except as directly related to the Bible, though, they do not appear in medieval bestiaries.

A study of these mythical beasts as mentioned in the Bible may be interesting in itself. It does, however, bring forth a discussion about difficulties in translating the Bible. Well, maybe not difficulties so much as idiosyncrasies. In translating the Bible, we must necessarily try to use words familiar to the intended audience, contemporary readers. Sometimes choices have to be made that may be confusing to readers of a later generation. The King James Version is over 400 years old. Many words used in its translation have shifted in meaning, spelling, and/or pronunciation over those four centuries. Many scholars consider the American Standard Version of 1901 to be the most accurate translation into the English language. However, after a mere 120 years the language of that translation seems stilted and even outdated. When asked what the best translation is, then, perhaps the best answer would be one in contemporary language, keeping in mind that even those translations will be outdated within a couple of generations.

BENAIAH BEN JEHOIADA

It has often been said that there is no accounting for taste. Most Janeites (fans of Jane Austen's novels) consider Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice* to be the epitome of manhood, Edwardian or otherwise. Some consider Mr. Darcy to be haughty, rude, and generally unlikable. (Heresy if there ever was one.) Instead, Mr. Knightley in *Emma* is one to be emulated. Many critics consider Fanny Price (*Mansfield Park*) to be a cipher, a nothing, while a few of us like Miss Price because her rectitude shows the actions of those around her to be ridiculous and even blameworthy. One man's hero is another man's villain. Sometimes there are characters in the Bible that stand out to some people, but nobody can explain why. One such character is Benaiah ben Jehoiada.

Benaiah was "the son of a valiant man, of Kabzeel." (2 Sam 23:20) Kabzeel was the southernmost city in Israel, even south of Beersheba. It was on the border with Edom. Benaiah would generally be considered a "hick." If the apostle Nathanael could say of Jesus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46), the people of David's day might say the same about Kabzeel. Benaiah had this strike against him to begin with.

Nevertheless, David saw something in him. He placed him over his personal bodyguard, the Cherethites (Assassins) and Pelethites (Messengers). (2 Sam 20:23) He held that position throughout David's reign and was promoted to the head of the whole army under Solomon. (1 Kings 2:35)

What was it that caught the attention of the kings? The chroniclers of David's reign mention two specific incidents. "He slew two lionlike men of Moab: he went down also and slew a lion in the midst of a pit in time of

snow." (2 Sam 23:20; 1 Chron 11:22) Now, it is possible that these men of Moab were sons of a man named Ariel, but the usual translation is "lion-like." It was obviously a great deed that he did. And then he went down into a snowy pit to face a lion one-on-one, in close quarters. This alone might have recommended him to David, who had slain a lion himself. He also faced an Egyptian who was armed with a spear while he was unarmed except with a staff. He took the spear from the Egyptian's hand and killed him with it.

Because of such deeds, Benaiah was considered just below David's "Three Mighty Men," but above the Thirty. The Thirty were thirty-seven heroes in David's army. Benaiah was thus the elite among the elite.

Benaiah was so much "David's man" that when David's son Adonijah tried to take his father's throne, he specifically excluded Benaiah from his conspiracy. (1 Kings 1:8-10) When Adonijah was told about Solomon's coronation, it was specifically mentioned that Benaiah was one of those who set him on the throne.

After Solomon's accession, Benaiah lived up to his reputation as the head of the "Assassins." When Adonijah proved himself a traitor, it was Benaiah who killed him. (1 Kings 2:25) When Joab was captured for his part in Adonijah's conspiracy, Benaiah was his executioner. (1 Kings 2:34) When Shimei, who had cursed David, broke the terms of his parole, Benaiah was sent to kill him. (1 Kings 2:46)

Benaiah may not be the best-known character in the Bible. He may not be particularly important. But what's not to love about a man who "slew a lion in the midst of a pit in time of snow"?

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