Snake pits and reptile pens are one of the most visited and sought-after areas in zoos. Children continue to be fascinated by everything slithery, and humans have been intrigued by the mysterious powers of the skin-shedding venom-harbouring reptile since the dawn of history.

The snake occupies a peculiar place in the modern globalised world, and particularly within the parts of it still influenced by one form or another of Judaeo-Christian heritage. Today, images of snakes directly recall to mind associations with evil, the devil, the fall of a once-beautiful angel, or the expulsion from Eden. The iconic depiction of the serpent in Genesis being the cause of the eternal curse on itself and humans are inescapable to anyone who has grown up within a culture in touch with Biblical heritage. The following lines from Genesis will be familiar to such readers:

“Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’
The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’
So the Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.’”

(Genesis 3:13–14).

The snake was not always regarded as a symbol of evil, danger or fallibility, however. In ancient cultures which predate the Old Testament—and particularly within ancient Egyptian mythology—the snake was largely admired and associated with good magic and positive energy.

Feared now, but revered then

The Snake Who Was God

Haythem Bastawy

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(TOP IMAGE) A drawing of an ostracon (limestone flake containing an inscription) from Deir el-Medina featuring the 19th-Dynasty royal tomb-builder, Khnummose, adoring the local cobra-goddess Meretseger. This deity dwelt on the mountain that overlooked the Valley of the Kings where Khnummose worked. This piece, collected from Thebes in 1818, was purchased by the British Museum in 1843 (Acc. No. EA8510).
The snake was also believed to be a chosen form assumed by several gods and goddesses for specific situations, such as protecting a man from harm in the wilderness or aiding a woman during childbirth. As American Egyptologist, Molly Youngkin explains, “the Egyptian serpent is strongly associated with fertility and rebirth because of its ability to shed its skin and regenerate; Egyptians ‘honoured’ rather than ‘feared’ snakes, as is more common in the West.”

Youngkin also asserts that “unlike Western traditions, in which the serpent image often has negative connotations, the image carries more positive connotations in Egyptian mythology.” Barbara S. Lesko of Rhode Island’s Brown University supports this observation in her book, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt*: “The earliest portrayals of serpents in Egyptian art associate them with elephants in a mutual relationship, not a hostile one. Here she is referring to a tiny Predynastic ivory comb, shown above.

In the Egyptian creation myths, Egyptologist Geraldine Pinch explains that Amun is the creator god “most commonly shown as a bearded man in the prime of life.” In one sense he can be equated with the “only true God” (John 17:3) of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic heritage, being classed as “everywhere, unseen but felt like the wind.” In one creation myth, Amun assumed his ram-headed serpent form known as “Amun-Ra” (Amun, the creator of the universe; Ra, the sun god). This dual form allowed Amun to embody both the creative and destructive aspects of the universe.

How do you turn an image royal? Simply add a uraeus, the royal cobra that has been a part of royal iconography since the 1st Dynasty (ca. 3100–2890 B.C.E.). In the late 18th Dynasty, Horemheb—Commander-in-Chief under Tutankhamun—prepared a tomb at Saqqara before he ascended the throne and commissioned a new burial place in the Valley of the Kings. Before they abandoned the Saqqaran tomb, however, the masons added a small detail to reflect their new king’s regal status. Look carefully, and you can see a faint royal uraeus carved onto Horemheb’s brow.

A rare and delicate survivor from the end of the Predynastic Period (ca. 3200–3100 B.C.), just prior to the consolidation of the Egyptian state under a single king.

This is the top of an ivory decorative hair comb, just five centimetres tall (the teeth are mostly broken off). It was likely a prized possession of one of the elite members of a regional kingdom; perhaps even, belonging to the king or his queen.

On both sides of the comb are rows of animals in orderly procession, which demonstrates the main role of the Egyptian king: to control chaos. The top row, a row of elephants shown standing on serpents.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art—in whose collection it now resides—states that “the mythologies of many African peoples associate elephants and serpents with the creation of the universe. The uppermost row of this comb may symbolize a creative deity to whom the rest of the animals owe their existence.”

Alternatively, Barbara S. Lesko suggests that the “serpents seem to lead or protect the elephant, which may have been meant to stand as the image of the chief, if not a clan divinity, which afterwards disappeared from the Egyptian belief systems.”
Not all snakes were considered bad. This scene comes from the tomb of Ramesses I (KV 16), the 19th Dynasty’s founding pharaoh. Pictured is a moment from the Book of Gates, which narrates the journey of the sacred barque of the sun-god Ra (shown here in his nocturnal form) as it passed through the perilous netherworld.

While Ra was constantly threatened by his nemesis, the giant serpent Apep, who represents eternal chaos, he was protected by another snake deity, Mehen. This latter god shelters Ra by coiling his body protectively around the kiosk in which the sun-god stands. Guarding Ra at the bow of the boat is Sia, who represents Ra’s divine perception. At the back is the god Heka, the personification of the magical power that pervades the universe.

as Kematef (“He who has completed his moment”) in order to create and fertilise a “world egg” in his head. Consequently, all life originated within him and the world began. Atum, the father of all beings and the one who multiplied himself into millions, also chose the serpent form for his retirement in the reigns of his offspring, Osiris and Horus.

The cobra was used by the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty (ca. 332–30 B.C.) as a symbol of their power, knowing how it was respected and admired by the Egyptian public. Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemies, assigned particular importance to it, and statues of her wearing a triple-uraeus crown remain iconic today (see page 33). Moreover, as Plutarch chronicled, Cleopatra “gave audience to the people under the name of the New Isis…” and “appeared in public, dressed in the habit of the goddess Isis….” The powerful cobra was significant in creating this public image.

In Egypt the serpent was the chosen form for forces of good as well as forces of evil (see the above image from Ramesses I’s tomb). In Judeo-Christian tradition, however, the snake had transformed into an exclusive symbol of pure evil; a tempter of Eve, and largely the cause of the expulsion from Eden and the primary source of humans’ perpetual suffering. Why would this be? There are three main reasons:

Firstly, the snake was despised for being a reminder of pagan times when diverse forms of belief in various gods and goddesses was widespread, as opposed to the belief in one god by monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Secondly, due to its pagan symbolic nature, the snake elevates an animal form to the level of sacred divinity, which is sacrilegious and blasphemous within the contexts of monotheism. In Book I of Paradise Lost, 17th-century English poet, John Milton, solves the mystery of the older Egyptian civilisation by explaining that it was, in origin, based on faith in the true God, until:

“A crew, who, under names of old renown, Osiris, Isis, Orus [Horus], and their train, With monstrous shapes and sorceries abused Fanatick Egypt, and her priests, to seek Their wandering Gods disguised in brutish forms Rather than human…”

Here John Milton reflects the traditional Christian views of pagan divinity as taking “brutish forms”.

The third explanation for the serpent's transformation from revered to reviled is that the snake was also a feminine symbol, being a favoured form for Wadjet, the goddess of pharaonic protection (the royal cobra poised menacingly
on the kingly brow). This goes against the Biblical and Islamic traditions where power and sacred knowledge is chiefly preserved within the male-dominated spheres of a male God and His male sages.

In full eloquence, Book Nine of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* sees Eve asking Satan (in his famed snake form) how it is he is able to talk. The answer, of course, involves a certain tree in a certain garden:

“There, Serpent, subtlest beast of all the field
I knew, but not with human voice endued;
Redouble then this miracle, and say,
How camest thou speechable of mute, and how
To me so friendly grown above the rest
Of brutal kind, that daily are in sight?
Say! for such wonder claims attention due.”

To whom the guileful Tempter thus replied.

“Empress of this fair world, resplendent Eve!
Easy to me it is to tell thee all
What thou commandest; and right thou shouldst
be obeyed:
I was at first as other beasts that graze
The trodden herb, of abject thoughts and low,
As was my food; nor aught but food discerned,
Or sex; and apprehended nothing high;
Till, on a day roving the field, I chanced
A goodly tree, far distant, to behold…”

With the arrival of monotheism and the exclusive worship of one god, came the loss of the ancient “wisdom” of polytheism. Forgotten was the ancient heritage of gods and goddesses who walked the earth with humans, behaved and misbehaved like us, and struggled against the powers of chaos to achieve order for humankind. People’s relationship with divinity became instead one based on discipline and reward, punishment and compensation. Christianity attempted to reach a compromise and reintroduce a type of a human role model who was divine, as well as a part of the divine essence of the Old Testament’s exclusive one God. Islam rejected Christianity’s compromise outright, and instead attempted to make it a part of Islam’s own

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When Joseph Mayer—a wealthy Liverpool jeweller with a passion for antiquities—opened a museum to showcase his collection on 1 May 1852, this wrapped bundle was among the exhibits. Mayer described it as a bird mummy. Fifteen years later when Mayer gave his collection to the Liverpool Museum (now World Museum), it was relabelled as a “Mummified cat wrapped in linen bands” (Acc. No. M13645).

World Museum’s Senior Curator of Antiquities, Dr. Ashley Cooke, told NILE Magazine that he was suspicious of that description because it lacked the shape of a cat’s head. In October 2016 Dr. Cooke finally had the chance to x-ray the mummy and solve the puzzle. It turned out to be a bundle of snakes! “An assumption made 164 years earlier was corrected in less than a minute!”

Why snakes? Dr. Cooke explained that “snakes grow new skin and came to symbolise the renewal of life. As a votive offering, there are a few possibilities for which cult it was made for; perhaps Amun in his role as a creator god of the Ogdoad [the eight deities worshipped in Hermopolis], who could take the form of a snake and resurrect himself. Snakes and eels were also sacred to another creator god, Atum of Heliopolis.”
message against their common enemy: polytheism.

The primary reason for the recurrent attempts of monotheism to assert itself against, and/or compromise with polytheism is because monotheism can only exist by claiming the exclusivity of its message (and its redemption to those who accept the one God only). In other words, monotheism cannot tolerate co-existing alongside polytheism, for polytheism negates monotheism by its very diversity of deities and beliefs.

Due to its appeal to political powers and dominions, where exclusivity is first nature, monotheism ultimately reigned supreme, and the battle continued between different forms of monotheism rather than between monotheism and polytheism, as was the case in the beginning. Nevertheless, monotheism never fully forgot its old arch-enemy and the fear of the return of polytheism lurked in monotheistic myths and religions.

This fear of ancient wisdom is encountered in forms such as “forbidden knowledge” and unattainable powers. The snake, with its colourful beauty and the mysterious regenerative powers associated with its skin, continues to be a reminder of this ancient wisdom, and the danger of its potential return as a threat to the very core of the worship of the one God. Thus “Hiss” will remain Him, Atum lives in the shadow of Adam, and “the bearded man in the prime of his life” is God, not Amun.

This is a scene from the burial chamber’s north wall in the tomb of King Horemheb (KV57). It depicts a circular Lake of Fire which is inhabited by a cobra. This is not the sulphurous, hellish punishment that we may imagine, but rather a means of protection, as indicated by the two ankh signs for “life”. The lake and equally-fiery cobra, act as a deterrent to those who may approach Osiris (represented by the two mummies) with ill intent. To help make the point, the hieroglyphs either side of the lake spell out words for “fire” (nbi ) and “to burn” (st(i) ).

Horemheb’s workers evidently ran out of time, and parts of his tomb weren’t finished in time for the king’s burial. This provides us with the opportunity to see how the ancient artists’ work unfolded. The images were firstly sketched in red by a junior artist, before being examined by a supervisor and then corrected in black by a master. Following this, a sculptor would delicately remove the background to create raised reliefs.

HAYTHEM BASTAWY is a British-Egyptian doctoral researcher and visiting lecturer at Leeds Trinity University. His research is concerned with various aspects of English and history and he has published several articles on related topics. In February 2017 he received the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Languages and Literatures Award in the U.S. www.hibastawy.com.