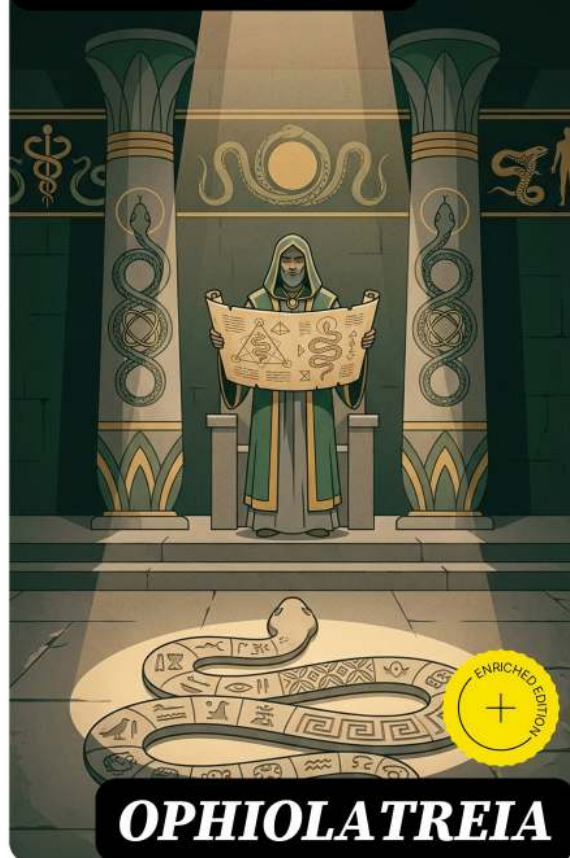


EDWARD SELLON



OPHIOLATREIA

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Ophiolatrea

**Enriched edition. An Account of the Rites and
Mysteries Connected with the Origin, Rise, and
Development of Serpent Worship in Various Parts of
the World**

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Quinn Theodore

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PREFACE.

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Our words by way of preface and introduction need be but few. The following volume forms a companion to one already issued bearing the title "Phallism[1]." That work, though complete in itself, meets in this a further elucidation of its subject, since, in the opinion of many, Ophiolatrea, the worship of the Serpent, is of Phallic origin. Such a view, and others of a contrary nature, have been honestly set forth, and the best and most trustworthy authorities have been consulted for history, arguments, and illustrations by which they may be understood. No attempt has been made to insist upon any one method of interpretation as undoubtedly correct, but simple facts have been stated, and the reader has been left to form his own independent judgment.

CHAPTER I.

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Ophiolatrea an extraordinary subject—Of mysterious origin—Of universal prevalence—The Serpent a common symbol in mythology—Serpent-worship natural but irrational—Bacchic orgies—Olympias, mother of Alexander, and the Serpent emblem—Thermuthis[2], the Sacred Serpent—Asps—Saturn and his children—Sacrifices at altar of Saturn—Abaddon[3]—Ritual of Zoroaster—Theologo of Ophion—The Cuthites—The Ophiogeneis—The Ophionians—Greek Traditions—Cecrops—Various Serpent worshippers.

Ophiolatrea, the worship of the serpent, next to the adoration of the phallus, is one of the most remarkable, and, at first sight, unaccountable forms of religion the world has ever known. Until the true source from whence it sprang can be reached and understood, its nature will remain as mysterious as its universality, for what man could see in an object so repulsive and forbidding in its habits as this reptile, to render worship to, is one of the most difficult of problems to find a solution to. There is hardly a country of the ancient world, however, where it cannot be traced, pervading every known system of mythology, and leaving proofs of its existence and extent in the shape of monuments, temples, and earthworks of the most elaborate and curious character. Babylon, Persia, Hindostan, Ceylon, China, Japan, Burmah, Java, Arabia, Syria, Asia Minor, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Italy, Northern and Western Europe, Mexico, Peru, America—all yield abundant testimony to the

same effect, and point to the common origin of Pagan systems wherever found. Whether the worship was the result of fear or respect is a question that naturally enough presents itself[1q], and in seeking to answer it we shall be confronted with the fact that in some places, as Egypt, the symbol was that of a good demon, while in India, Scandinavia, and Mexico, it was that of an evil one. It has been remarked that in the warmer regions of the globe, where this creature is the most formidable enemy which man can encounter, the serpent should be considered the mythological attendant of an evil being is not surprising, but that in the frozen or temperate regions of the earth, where he dwindles into the insignificance of a reptile without power to create alarm, he should be regarded in the same appalling character, is a fact which cannot be accounted for by natural causes. Uniformity of tradition can alone satisfactorily explain uniformity of superstition, where local circumstances are so discordant.

“The serpent is the symbol which most generally enters into the mythology of the world. It may in different countries admit among its fellow-satellites of Satan the most venomous or the most terrible of the animals in each country, but it preserves its own constancy, as the only invariable object of superstitious terror throughout the habitable world. ‘Wherever the Devil reigned,’ remarks Stillingfleet, ‘the serpent was held in some peculiar veneration.’ The universality of this singular and irrational, yet natural, superstition it is now proposed to show. *Irrational*, for there is nothing in common between deity and a reptile, to suggest the notion of Serpent-worship; and

natural, because, allowing the truth of the events in Paradise, every probability is in favour of such a superstition springing up.”^[1]

It may seem extraordinary that the worship of the serpent should ever have been introduced into the world, and it must appear still more remarkable that it should almost universally have prevailed. As mankind are said to have been ruined through the influence of this being, we could little expect that it would, of all other objects, have been adopted as the most sacred and salutary symbol, and rendered the chief object of adoration. Yet so we find it to have been, for in most of the ancient rites there is some allusion to it. In the orgies of Bacchus, the persons who took part in the ceremonies used to carry serpents in their hands, and with horrid screams call upon “Eva, Eva.” They were often crowned with serpents while still making the same frantic exclamation. One part of the mysterious rites of Jupiter Sabazius was to let a snake slip down the bosom of the person to be initiated, which was taken out below. These ceremonies, and this symbolic worship, are said to have begun among the Magi, who were the sons of Chus, and by them they were propagated in various parts. Epiphanius thinks that the invocation “Eva, Eva,” related to the great mother of mankind, who was deceived by the serpent, and Clemens of Alexandria is of the same opinion. Others, however, think that Eva was the same as Eph, Epha, Opha, which the Greeks rendered Ophis, and by it denoted a serpent. Clemens acknowledges that the term Eva, properly aspirated, had such a signification.

Olympias, the mother of Alexander, was very fond of these orgies, in which the serpent was introduced[3q]. Plutarch mentions that rites of this sort were practised by the Edonian women near Mount Hæmus in Thrace, and carried on to a degree of madness. Olympias copied them closely in all their frantic manœuvres. She used to be followed with many attendants, who had each a thyrsus with serpents twined round it. They had also snakes in their hair, and in the chaplets which they wore, so that they made a most fearful appearance. Their cries also were very shocking, and the whole was attended with a continual repetition of the words, Evœ, Sabœ, Hues Attes, Attes Hues, which were titles of the god Dionusus. He was peculiarly named Hues, and his priests were the Hyades and Hyautes. He was likewise styled Evas.

In Egypt was a serpent named Thermuthis, which was looked upon as very sacred; and the natives are said to have made use of it as a royal tiara, with which they ornamented the statues of Isis. We learn from Diodorus Siculus that the kings of Egypt wore high bonnets, which terminated in a round ball, and the whole was surrounded with figures of asps. The priests, likewise, upon their bonnets had the representation of serpents. The ancients had a notion that when Saturn devoured his own children, his wife Ops deceived him by substituting a large stone in lieu of one of his sons, which stone was called Abadir. But Ops and Opis, represented here as a feminine, was the serpent deity, and Abadir is the same personage under a different denomination. Abadir seems to be a variation of Ob-Adur, and signifies the serpent god Orus. One of these

stones, which Saturn was supposed to have swallowed instead of a child, stood, according to Pausanias, at Delphi. It was esteemed very sacred, and used to have libations of wine poured upon it daily; and upon festivals was otherwise honoured. The purport of the above was probably this: it was for a long time a custom to offer children at the altar of Saturn; but in process of time they removed it, and in its room erected a stone pillar, before which they made their vows, and offered sacrifices of another nature. This stone which they thus substituted was called Ab-Adar, from the deity represented by it. The term Ab generally signifies a father, but in this instance it certainly relates to a serpent, which was indifferently styled Ab, Aub, and Ob. Some regard Abaddon, or, as it is mentioned in the Book of the Revelation, Abaddon, to have been the name of the same Ophite god, with whose worship the world had been so long infected. He is termed Abaddon, the angel of the bottomless pit—the prince of darkness. In another place he is described as the dragon, that old serpent, which is the devil, and Satan. Hence the learned Heinsius is supposed to be right in the opinion which he has given upon this passage, when he makes Abaddon the same as the serpent Pytho.

It is said that in the ritual of Zoroaster the great expanse of the heavens, and even nature itself, was described under the symbol of a serpent.^[2] The like was mentioned in the Octateuch of Ostanès; and moreover, in Persia and in other parts of the East they erected temples to the serpent tribe, and held festivals to their honour, esteeming them *the supreme of all Gods, and the superintendents of the whole world*. The worship began among the people of Chaldea.

They built the city Opis upon the Tigris, and were greatly addicted to divination and to the worship of the serpent. From Chaldea the worship passed into Egypt, where the serpent deity was called Canoph, Caneph, and C'neph. It had also the name of Ob, or Oub, and was the same as the Basilicus, or Royal Serpent; the same also as the Thermuthis, and in like manner was made use of by way of ornament to the statues of their Gods. The chief Deity of Egypt is said to have been Vulcan, who was also styled Opas, as we learn from Cicero. He was the same as Osiris, the Sun; and hence was often called Ob-El, or Pytho Sol; and there were pillars sacred to him, with curious hieroglyphical inscriptions, which had the same name. They were very lofty, and narrow in comparison of their length; hence among the Greeks, who copied from the Egyptians, everything gradually tapering to a point was styled Obelos, and Obeliscus. Ophel (Oph-El) was a name of the same purport, and many sacred mounds, or Tapha, were thus denominated from the serpent Deity, to whom they were sacred.

Sanchoniathon makes mention of a history which he once wrote upon the worship of the serpent. The title of this work, according to Eusebius, was Ethothion, or Ethothia. Another treatise upon the same subject was written by Pherecydes Tyrus, which was probably a copy of the former; for he is said to have composed it from some previous accounts of the Phoenicians. The title of his book was the Theology of Ophion, styled Ophioneus, and his worshippers were called Ophionidæ. Thoth and Athoth were certainly titles of the Deity in the Gentile world; and the book of Sanchoniathon

might very possibly have been from hence named Ethothion, or more truly, Athothion. But, from the subject upon which it was written, as well as from the treatise of Pherecydes, we have reason to think that Athothion, or Ethothion, was a mistake for Ath-Ophion, a title which more immediately related to that worship of which the writer treated. Ath was a sacred title, as we have shewn, and we imagine that this dissertation did not barely relate to the serpentine Deity, but contained accounts of his votaries, the Ophitæ, the principal of which were the sons of Chus. The worship of the serpent began among them, and they were from thence denominated Ethiopians, and Aithopians, which the Greeks rendered Aithiopes. They did not receive this name from their complexion, as has sometimes been surmised, for the branch of Phut and the Luhim, were probably of a deeper dye; but they were most likely so called from Ath-Ope, and Ath-Opis, the God which they worshipped. This may be shewn from Pliny. He says that the country Ethiopia (and consequently the people), had the name of Æthiop, from a personage who was a Deity—*ab Æthiope Vulcani filio*. The Æthiopes brought these rites into Greece, and called the island where they first established them Ellopia, *Solis Serpentis insula*. It was the same as Eubœa, a name of the like purport, in which island was a region named Ethiopium. Eubœa is properly Oub-Aia, and signifies, the Serpent Island. The same worship prevailed among the Hyperboreans, as we may judge from the names of the sacred women who used to come annually to Delos; they were priestesses of the Tauric Goddess. Hercules was esteemed the chief God, the same as Chronus, and was said

to have produced the Mundane egg. He was represented in the Orphic theology under the mixed symbol of a lion and a serpent, and sometimes of a serpent only.

The Cuthites, under the title of Heliadæ, having settled at Rhodes, as they were Hivites, or Ophites, the island was in consequence named Ophiusa. There was likewise a tradition that it had once swarmed with serpents. (Bochart says the island is said to have been named Rhodus from *Rhad*, a Syriac word for a serpent.) The like notion prevailed almost in every place where they settled. They came under the more general titles of Leleges and Pelasgi; but more particularly of Elopians, Europeans, Oropians, Asopians, Inopians, Ophionians, and Æthiopes, as appears from the names which they bequeathed; and in most places where they resided there were handed down traditions which alluded to their original title of Ophites. In Phrygia, and upon the Hellespont, whither they sent out colonies very early, was a people styled the Ophiogeneis, or the serpent breed, who were said to retain an affinity and correspondence with serpents; and a notion prevailed that some hero, who had conducted them, was changed from a serpent to a man. In Colchis was a river Ophis, and there was another of the same name in Arcadia. It was so named from a body of people who settled upon its banks, and were said to have been conducted by a serpent.

It is said these reptiles are seldom found in islands, but that Tenos, one of the Cyclades, was supposed to have once swarmed with them.[\[3\]](#)

Thucydides mentions a people of Ætotia, called Ophionians; and the temple of Apollo at Petara, in Lycia,

seems to have had its first institution from a priestess of the same name. The island of Cyprus was called Ophiusa, and Ophiodes, from the serpents with which it was supposed to have abounded. Of what species they were is nowhere mentioned, excepting only that about Paphos there was said to have been a kind of serpent with two legs. By this is meant the Ophite race, who came from Egypt, and from Syria, and got footing in this island. They settled also in Crete, where they increased greatly in numbers; so that Minos was said by an unseemly allegory, *opheis ouresai, serpentes, minxisse*. The island Seriphus was one vast rock, by the Romans called *saxum seriphium*, and made use of as a large kind of prison for banished persons. It is represented as having once abounded with serpents, and it is styled by Virgil, *serpentifera*, as the passage is corrected by Scaliger.

It is said by the Greeks that Medusa's head was brought by Perseus; by this is meant the serpent Deity, whose worship was here introduced by people called Peresians. Medusa's head denoted divine wisdom, and the island was sacred to the serpent, as is apparent from its name. The Athenians were esteemed *Serpentiginæ*, and they had a tradition that the chief guardian of their Acropolis was a serpent.

It is reported of the goddess Ceres that she placed a dragon for a guardian to her temple at Eleusis, and appointed another to attend upon Erectheus. Ægeus of Athens, according to Androtion, was of the serpent breed, and the first king of the country is said to have been a dragon. Others make Cecrops the first who reigned. He is said to have been of a two-fold nature, being formed with

the body of a man blended with that of a serpent. Diodorus says that this was a circumstance deemed by the Athenians inexplicable; yet he labours to explain it by representing Cecrops as half a man and half a brute, because he had been of two different communities. Eustathius likewise tries to solve it nearly upon the same principles, and with the like success. Some have said of Cecrops that he underwent a metamorphosis, being changed from a serpent to a man. By this was meant, according to Eustathius, that Cecrops by coming into Hellas divested himself of all the rudeness and barbarity of his country, and became more civilised and human. This is declared by some to be too high a compliment to be paid to Greece in its infant state, and detracts greatly from the character of the Egyptians. The learned Marsham therefore animadverts with great justice, "it is more probable that he introduced into Greece the urbanity of his own country, than that he was beholden to Greece for anything from thence." In respect to the mixed character of this personage, we may easily account for it. Cecrops was certainly a title of the Deity, who was worshipped under this emblem. Something of the like nature was mentioned of Triptolemus and Erichthonius, and the like has been said of Hercules. The natives of Thebes in Bœotia, like the Athenians, esteemed themselves of the serpent race. The Lacedæmonians likewise referred themselves to the same original. Their city is said of old to have swarmed with serpents. The same is said of the city Amyelæ in Italy, which was of Spartan origin. They came hither in such abundance that it was abandoned by the inhabitants. Argos was infested in the same manner till Apis came from Egypt