

GENESIS
Chapter 3:1

Technical Notes of Matthew Poole

(1) Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

The serpent; or rather, this or that serpent; for here is an emphatical article, of which more by and by.

The serpent's eminent subtlety is noted both in sacred Scripture, Gen. 49:17; Psal. 58:5; Matt. 10:16; 2 Cor. 11:3, and by heathen authors, whereof these instances are given; that when it is assaulted, it secures its head; that it stops its ear at the charmer's voice; and the like. If it be yet said that some beasts are more subtle, and therefore this is not true; it may be replied, 1. It is no wonder if the serpent for its instrumentality in man's sin hath lost the greatest part of its original subtlety, even as man's sin was punished with a great decay both of the natural endowments of his mind, wisdom, and knowledge, and of the beauty and glory of his body, the instrument of his sin. But this text may, and seems to be understood, not of the whole kind of serpents, but of this individual or particular serpent; for it is in the Hebrew *Hannachash, that serpent, or this serpent*, to signify that this was not only an ordinary serpent, but was acted and assisted by the devil, who is therefore called *that old serpent*, Rev. 12:9. And this seems most probable, partly from the following discourse, which is added as a proof of that which is here said concerning the serpent's subtlety; and that surely was not the discourse of a beast, but of a devil; and partly from 2 Cor. 11:3, which hath a manifest reference to this place, where the apostle affirmeth that *the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety*; not surely through that subtlety which is common to all serpents, but through that subtlety which was peculiar to this, as it was possessed and acted by the devil. There seems indeed to be an allusion here to the natural subtlety of all serpents; and the sense of the sacred penman may seem to be this, as if he said, The serpent indeed in itself is a subtle creature, and thought to be more subtle than any beast of the field; but howsoever this be in other serpents, it is certain that this serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field, as will appear by the following words. If it be said, the particle *this, or that*, is relative to something going before, whereas there is not a word about it in the foregoing words; it may be replied, that relative particles are often put without any antecedents, and the antecedents are left to be gathered not only out of the foregoing, but sometimes also out of the following passages, as is apparent from Exod. 14:29; Numb. 7:19; 24:17; Psal. 87:1; 105:19; 114:2; Prov. 7:8; 14:26. So here, *that serpent*, that of which I am now to speak, whose discourse with the woman here followeth.

Quest. How the serpent could speak, and what the woman conceived of his speech, and why she was not affrighted, but continued the discourse with it? There be two satisfactory answers may be given to these questions. 1. The woman knew that there were spirits, and did freely and frequently converse with spirits or angels, who also did appear in some visible shape to her, which seems very credible; because in the following ages not only the angels, but even the blessed God himself, did in that manner converse with men. And as they afterwards used to appear in the shape of men, why might not one of them now appear to her, and converse with her, in the shape of a beautiful serpent? And why might she not freely and securely discourse with this which she thought to be one of those good angels, to whose care and tuition both she and her

husband were committed? For I suppose the fall of the angels was yet unknown to her; and she thought this to be a good spirit, otherwise she would have declined all conversation with an apostate spirit. 2. A late ingenious and learned writer represents the matter thus, in which there is nothing absurd or incredible: The serpent makes his address to the woman with a short speech, and salutes her as the empress of the world, &c. She is not affrighted, because there was as yet no cause of fear, no sin, and therefore no danger, but wonders and inquires what this meant, and whether he was not a brute creature, and how he came to have speech and understanding? The serpent replies, that he was no better than a brute, and did indeed want [lack] both these gifts, but by eating of a certain fruit in this garden he got both. She asked what fruit and tree that was? Which when he showed her, she replied, This, no doubt, is an excellent fruit, and likely to make the eater of it wise; but God hath forbidden us this fruit. To which the serpent replies, as it here follows in the text. It is true, this discourse is not in the text; but it is confessed by Jewish and other expositors, that these words, *Yea, hath God said, &c.*, are a short and abrupt sentence, and that they were but the close of a foregoing discourse; which might well enough be either this now mentioned, or some other of a like nature. And that expression which follows, ver. 6, *when the woman saw*, i.e. understood *that it was a tree to be desired to make one wise*, may seem to imply, both that the serpent told her, and that she believed, that the speech and understanding of the serpent was the effect of the eating of that fruit; and therefore that if it raised him from a brute beast to the degree of a reasonable creature, it would elevate her from the human to a kind of Divine nature or condition.

He said unto the woman, who had upon some occasion retired from her husband for a season (an advantage which the crafty serpent quickly espieth, and greedily embraceth, and assaulteth her when she wanteth the help of her husband). *Yea, or why, or, is it so, or, indeed, or, of a truth.* It is scarce credible that God, who is so bountiful, and the sovereign good, and so abhorring from all parsimony and envy, should forbid you the enjoyment of any part of those provisions which he hath made for your use and comfort.

Of every tree, or, of any; for the word is ambiguous, which therefore the cunning adversary useth to hide the snare which he was laying for her.