Far too often scholars assume that the meaning of the serpent in Rev 12 defines the symbol of this animal in the Bible and especially in the New Testament. The purpose of this short article is to clarify that while the serpent often has negative connotations and denotations, in the Middle East and in the Bible it frequently symbolizes something good. The serpent has symbolized fertility, fruitfulness, energy, power, beauty, goodness, creation, light, chronos, kingship, divinity, unity (or oneness), magic, mystery, life, water, the soul, health, transcendence, rejuvenation, immortality, riches, wonder, awe, wisdom and ancestor worship. The serpent often is used to represent God’s messenger, the cosmos, the chthonic regions and is the quintessential guardian.1

1. The Greek and Roman World of the New Testament

With the exception of the Egyptian religion in antiquity, the Greeks—followed closely behind by the Romans—employed serpent symbolism the most. Both the Greeks and the Romans, of course, were deeply influenced by Egyptian ophidian symbolism.

Ophidian or anguine iconography appears on the painted walls of homes in Pompeii, on pithoi (large storage jars), on ornately decorated jars (like the Athenian red-figured hydria [water jars]), on coins, and through words in epics, poems, and official documents. The serpent appears characteristically on statues of Asclepius, Hygieia,
and Hermes (Mercury), and also sometimes with Apollo and Zeus. Of course, the depiction of the war between the gods and the giants, reveal the latter with anguipedes (serpents as legs). This is evident on the Pergamum altar and was most likely expressed in bronze on the upper level of the Pantheon, before its 40,000 pounds were recycled to decorate the Vatican.

It is impressive to note briefly how ophidian or anguine symbolism permeates Greek and Roman legends and myths, shaping Hellenistic culture. Demeter and her daughter, Persephone, are often depicted sending Triptolemus to humans with the gift of wheat. He is often shown seated on a chariot drawn by raised serpents.2

Well-known on buildings and painted vases, beginning at least in the eighth century B.C.E., are depictions of Medussa. She and the other gorgons are shown as women with serpents rising from their hairs. Serpents are the ones who reveal to Melampus the languages of animals; he thus becomes the first human with prophetic powers. The serpents had licked his ears when he was sleeping. Scylla had six snaky heads. Basilisk is the king of serpents. Asclepius almost always appears with a staff around which a serpent is coiled, and Hermes is associated with the caduceus (two raised serpents facing each other).

Ovid describes Phaëton’s ill-fated ride into the heavens on a chariot. The venture resulted in cosmic disasters; in particular, the serpent, which had been coiled harmless around the North Pole, rises with rage. In order to avoid the advances of Peleus, Thetis changes into fire, monsters, and serpents. When Priam’s wife was pregnant with Paris she dreamed of giving birth to a torch from which streamed hissing serpents. When Laokoon, Poseidon’s priest, during the Trojan War, warned about the Wooden Horse the Greeks had left, he and his two sons were strangled by two massive serpents that had been called out of the sea, presumably by the warlike Athena (who is often depicted with serpents on her chest).

In the legend of the Golden Fleece, perhaps older than the Iliad and the Odyssey,3 Aeetes hangs the fleece in a grove that was guarded

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2 See the Greek vase in the British Museum numbered BM GR 1873.8–20.375 (Vase E140). For a published drawing, see L. Burn, Greek Myths (London, 1990; 1999), 9.
3 So L. Burn, in Greek Myths, 59.