

“ The Bronze Snake Lifted Up in the Wilderness” Numbers (B’ Midbar) 21:4-9

Biblical text from the NLT, with slight rephrasing from the Hebrew, **bolding for emphasis and [comments]**

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The Setting: The people of Israel had now reached the 40th year of their Wilderness Wanderings. Moses continued to lead the people toward the Land. As this story occurs they were advancing eastward along the southern border of Canaan, avoiding entering Canaan proper. The Canaanite king of Arad (in the southern Negev) heard of their advance and sent a force out to attack them. Israel asked Yahweh for victory. The LORD heard and granted it. Israel defeated the Canaanite king and put his towns under the ban. This happened at “Chormah” (means “Destruction” in Hebrew), the same place where they were earlier defeated in the presumptuous expedition (Num. 14:45). So they had just experienced a redemptive reversal of their fortunes. Things... (and they) ...were looking up.

But after this victory, Israel again fell into disobedience/unbelief (we are all more vulnerable to temptation after a victory). Moses had turned south to skirt around the land of Edom, which was barren and had enemies. They went by the long route to Eilat, on the coast of the Gulf of Aqabah. The people grew impatient and frustrated. A difference in this story from earlier complaint stories is that here they revile the very food God had given them as a gift to sustain them. So God immediately responds with lethal punishment—sending venomous snakes.

In Biblical studies, a “type” is a historic person or event in the Hebrew Bible (OT) that serves as a prophetic pattern or example for a corresponding New Testament person or event. This story is a true type from the Torah pointing to Messiah. Jesus the Messiah would later refer to this story in his conversation with Nicodemus as an analogy for his own “lifting up” in *John 3:14-15* ...“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up”. Explore deeply the typological and theological significance of this story — How is it that a snake, usually representing Satan in Scripture, points to the Redeemer Messiah?

The lifted up serpent was to save the physical lives of those who looked to it. The Messiah lifted on the cross was to save the souls of those who look to Him in faith. The first lifting up was to save from physical death, the other from eternal death.

Bronze is associated with or represents judgment in Scripture (e.g. the bronze altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle, Exodus 27:1-8; 35:16). The “fiery serpents” were indeed a punitive judgment on the people. Fire is itself a symbol of judgment. The symbolism of Satan by the serpent must be part of the pedagogy here — it was as a consequence of the first humans yielding to the serpent’s (Satan’s) power in Eden that God brought judgment to Adam and Eve. In this story of the bronze serpent, God brings a powerful reminder to the people of the deadly nature of sin, “*the sting (bite) of death is sin*” (1 Corinthians 15:56a).

Recall here the first prophecy of redemption announced just after the Fall in Eden, when God said to the serpent,

*“Cursed are you... and
I will put enmity between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her seed;
He shall crush your head,*

And you shall bruise his heel” (Genesis 3: 14-15)



The venomous snakes were sent to bite the people of Israel because of their sin. Sin itself is poison to our souls and bodies. All of us deserve the deadly venom judgment due our sin. But Messiah himself partook of flesh and blood, radically identifying with sinful humanity *“that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is the devil”* (Hebrews 2:14 NASB). Messiah was *“made sin on our behalf”* (2 Corinth. 5:21) and therefore the judgment due sin was enacted upon Jesus, as Satan was allowed to bruise the Messiah as he was lifted upon the pole (the cross). The verse, *“Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree”* (Deuteronomy 21:23), is applied to Jesus in Galatians 3:13. So Jesus was made sin, He took the curse, and He absorbed the death-dealing venom of the Fiery Serpent, who hence cannot inject his venom into those who look in faith to Jesus. The Serpent bruised Jesus, but Jesus thereby defanged him, crushing his head.

The people were required to look at, to face directly the representation of judgment on their sin (the bronze snake). They were required to actively look and realize — *“Our sin brought these snakes of death! We must face our responsibility for this.”* When they looked the look of obedient faith to the one who was lifted up, and thereby faced the judgment their sin required, they were healed and lived. We might call this *“vaccination, biblical style”*—The source of the poison became the source of the cure.

“He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18).

“Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” (John 12: 31-32). Here is the story:

4 Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the Way of the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient with the long journey, **5** and they began to speak against God and Moses. *“Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die*

here in the wilderness?" they complained. "There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this horrible manna!"

6 So the Lord sent poisonous snakes ["fiery serpents", because their bites inflicted venom producing burning inflammations] among the people, and many were bitten and died. **7** Then the people came to Moses and cried out, "**We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes.**" So Moses interceded for the people.

8 Then the Lord told him, "Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live **if they simply look at it!**" [a choice]. **9** So Moses made a snake out of bronze ["nachash" is snake and "nachoshet" is bronze in Hebrew] and attached it to a pole. Then anyone bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed.

[Missiological Note: Centuries later, the people of Judah worshipped this bronze snake as an idol; it was named "Nechushtan." King Hezekiah had to destroy it. See **2 Kings 18:4**. A perennial human sin is to idolize representations of God, or some aspect of God (or gods, saints, or creatures), rather than worship the Creator God Himself (Romans 1:18-23). For example: some uses of the *crucifix* in Roman Catholic tradition, icons, votive objects, amulets and fetishes in many folk religious practices of all religions].

To ponder: "**Tradition is the living faith of the dead; Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.**" (Jaroslav Pelikan)



WHO



Professional medical associations around the world, including the American Medical Association (AMA) and the World Health Organization (WHO), whose logo is above, use the traditional symbol of medicine, the **Staff of Asclepius** with a single serpent encircling a staff, classically a rough-hewn knotty tree limb. **Asclepius**, an ancient Greek physician deified as the god of medicine, is traditionally depicted as a bearded man wearing a robe that leaves his chest uncovered and holding a staff with his sacred single

serpent coiled around it. Since the Numbers 21 account is earlier than the Greek myth, it may well be that the Greek myth finds its origin in the Biblical event.



Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion For Unbelievers

- 1) God sent the snakes because the Israelites rebelled. What are ways people rebel against God today?
- 2) What are some consequences you have seen as a result?
- 3) The people were healed when they confessed their sins and turned to God. Have you ever confessed your sins?
- 4) What did Nicodemus struggle to understand? In what ways are you like Nicodemus? Why?
- 5) How did Jesus' being lifted up on the cross make it possible for God to save the world?
- 6) Is anything keeping you from responding to His invitation to be born again?

For Mature Believers

- 1) Scripture says, "*The Son of God appeared for this purpose—that He might destroy the works of the devil.*" (I John 3:8 NASB). How do you see this implemented by the Bronze Serpent and by the Cross?
- 2) Were the venomous snakes and their deadly bites evil? (Remember who sent the snakes 21:6).
- 3) The people asked the LORD to take away the snakes. God did not, but He provided a remedy and healing for the consequences of evil instead (apparently the snakes were still around). Would this remedy have been predictable by the people? (Could they have guessed how God would save them?)
- 4) How might this story apply today when people ask for evil to be removed? Can evil be totally removed from the world before the Second Coming of Messiah? Should we in the Christian mission movement try to remove it all?