

# The Bronze Serpent:

## The Crushed Serpent Lifted Up

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Among the most enigmatic symbols in Scripture stands the *bronze serpent* of Numbers 21, a serpent raised on a pole, through which those bitten by “fiery serpents” were healed. At first glance, this symbol appears disturbingly similar to ancient Near Eastern serpent idols, the Egyptian *uraeus*, the Greek *rod of Asclepius*, or the Canaanite healing deities associated with serpentine imagery. Yet the biblical account cannot be an imitation of these pagan motifs; rather, a far better case can be made that it was a deliberate subversion of them. Within the wider biblical story of the two seed lines, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Genesis 3:15), the bronze serpent serves as a vivid image of the crushed serpent displayed in defeat.

### 1. The Serpent and the Two Seeds

The serpent’s first appearance in Genesis introduces it as the provocateur of human ruin. Through deception, the serpent ushers death into creation, but God immediately declares its defeat:

*“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 3:15)

This verse forms the theological backbone of the entire biblical narrative. From that moment onward, the world would be divided into two opposing seed-lines, the seed of the serpent (those aligned with rebellion, deception, and murder) and the seed of the woman (those aligned with faith and divine promise). Later, when Israel encounters serpents in the wilderness, this old enmity resurfaces. The fiery serpents represent not only physical danger but also the *manifestation of the curse* itself.

### 2. The Fiery Serpents in the Wilderness

In Numbers 21, the Israelites once again murmured against God and Moses. The result was swift judgment:

*“Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”* (Numbers 21:6)

The Hebrew term *seraphim* (שֶׁרָפִיִּים), meaning “burning ones,” likely refers to the fiery venom. The setting, between Mount Hor and the Arabah, corresponds geographically to the habitat of the carpet viper (*Echis coloratus*), a venomous snake known for its intense burning bite, common in the Negev and Sinai deserts.[1]

These serpents symbolize the physical outworking of the Edenic curse: the *seed of the serpent* striking at the *seed of Abraham*. The people’s cry for mercy and Moses’ intercession prepare the way for divine deliverance, a deliverance that would come, ironically, through the image of the serpent itself.

### 3. The Bronze Serpent as a Paradox of Salvation

God commanded Moses:

*“Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.”* (Numbers 21:8)

At the heart of this command lies a paradox: the instrument of death becomes the symbol of life. The serpent, which represented God’s judgment against their sin, was now raised up as the means of healing. But this was not an act of serpent-veneration; it was a theological inversion.

The verb *nasa*’ (“to lift up”) is significant. Elsewhere, it denotes public exposure or execution. In Deuteronomy 21:22–23, a man hung upon a tree is declared “*accursed of God*.” Likewise, in Numbers 25:4, the leaders of Israel’s rebellion are to be “*hung before the LORD in the face of the sun*.” The serpent lifted on the pole, therefore, represents not exaltation or veneration of the serpent, but its condemnation and humiliation on display.

Those who looked upon the bronze serpent were not exalting it; they were gazing upon the image of the serpent defeated.

### 4. The Subversion of Pagan Serpent Imagery

In the ancient Near East, serpents were often emblems of divine power, wisdom, and immortality. Egyptian pharaohs wore the *uraeus*: a rearing cobra representing protective deity. The snake-god Nehebkau was regarded as a life-giver, uniting the spiritual and physical realms. In Greek tradition, Asclepius, the god of healing, carried a serpent-entwined staff; his daughter Hygieia was associated with the “Cup of Healing”. The later caduceus of Hermes, with two serpents entwined around a winged rod, became a lasting symbol of medicine.

Moses’ bronze serpent, however, overturned these associations:

- In pagan mythology, the serpent is divine and benevolent; in Scripture, it is cursed and condemned.
- In the pagan image, the serpent is entwined around the staff, an emblem of vitality; in the biblical image, it is impaled or hung dead upon the staff, a symbolic reminder of its defeat and judgment.
- The pagan serpent brings life through its power; the bronze serpent brings life through its defeat.

What the nations saw as sacred, YHVH exposes as slain. The bronze serpent stands not as a rival to the gods of Egypt and Greece, but as a polemic against them, a public declaration that the serpent's reign has been overthrown.

## 5. The Bronze Serpent as a Type of Christ

Centuries later, Jesus drew directly upon this imagery to reveal His mission:

*“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.”* (John 3:14–15)

Here the typology reaches its fulfillment. The serpent lifted on the pole becomes the pattern for the crucified Messiah. Christ, though sinless, takes upon Himself the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3) and bears the curse and punishment of death. He is “lifted up” not as a serpent, but as the One who nullifies the venom of the serpent's strike and destroys its power through death.

This is the fulfillment of Genesis 3:15: the seed of the woman crushed the serpent's head by being struck in the heel. The cross is the true bronze serpent, the moment where judgment becomes healing, and death becomes life.

## 6. The Corruption and Destruction of Nehushtan

Over time, Israel forgot the meaning of the symbol and turned the bronze serpent into an idol:

*“He [Hezekiah] broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had been offering incense to it; it was called Nehushtan.”* (2 Kings 18:4)

What God had ordained as a picture of judgment and mercy became an object of pagan devotion. Hezekiah's destruction of *Nehushtan* was therefore an act of theological clarity, the

serpent is not to be venerated, but crushed. The only proper place for the serpent lifted up is as a prophetic symbol of its own defeat through Christ.

## 7. Conclusion: The Serpent Crushed and Displayed

The bronze serpent is not an echo of pagan religion, but a divine subversion of it. It reclaims and reverses the serpent motif that dominated ancient Near Eastern theology.

Where the nations saw the serpent as healer, Scripture portrays it as accursed. Where they exalted the serpent as giver of life, YHVH displayed it as defeated in death. Where they wrapped it around the staff as a symbol of health, Moses impaled or hung it upon the staff as a sign of judgment.

The bronze serpent is therefore a foreshadowing of the cross, where the serpent would be defeated. The bronze serpent was not the glorification of evil, but its exposure. Not the serpent exalted, but the serpent impaled.

### Footnotes

1. See *The Mystery of the Bronze Serpent*, p. 3; *Echis coloratus* (the carpet viper) is identified as a plausible species in the Negev corresponding to the “fiery serpents.”
2. *The Mystery of the Bronze Serpent*, pp. 5–12, for comparative imagery of Asclepius, Hygieia, Hermes, and the Egyptian *uraeus*; cf. the serpent-god Nehebkau in Egyptian mythology.
3. Cf. Deuteronomy 21:22–23; Numbers 25:4; both associate public hanging with divine curse and exposure.
4. For the typological connection between Numbers 21 and John 3:14–15, see also 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 8:3; Galatians 3:13.
5. On the theological motif of serpent reversal, see Genesis 3:15; Revelation 12:9–11, 20:2.