

Serpent to Savior

I recently wrote an article, [*Sharing the gospel using star imagery*](#) which poses some thought provoking questions: “If God, in his wisdom, chose to accomplish his purpose by speaking through Balaam's donkey, what's to stop him from communicating gospel truth through an evil diviner like Balaam himself? (Numbers 24:17ff) Or, likewise through two pagan philosophers who Paul quoted in his gospel sermon on Mars Hill? (Acts 17:28) Or even through the image of a bronze serpent?”

A prominent archaeologist and theologian recently noted that the bronze image of a snake on a pole in Moses' time “focused the Israelites' faith on God, who pledged that everyone bitten would look to His promise and live. ... [Interestingly,] Snake cults existed in the Bronze Age prior to the Israelites' arrival [in the promised land]. Excavations have uncovered snake cult objects in (five Canaanite) cities. Because the bronze serpent (preserved from Moses' time) became like an idol, Hezekiah destroyed it. (2 Kings 18:4)” (*From Snake to Savior*, by Randall Price)

Snake cults and serpent symbols are not only found in the ancient past; they exist in modern times. Interestingly, in the small Canadian city where I live, there are 600 newcomers who traditionally have venerated the (black) snake, “one of the enigmas and mysteries of Yezidism.” (p.49, *The Serpent Symbolism in the Yezidi Religious Tradition and the Snake in Yerevan*, by Dr. Peter Nicolaus)

The author further explores the **brass** image of a sacred serpent and bamboo stick associated with a Yezidi cult which he, himself, discovered in Yerevan, Armenia. Nicolaus also notes that “Any visitor to Lalish in Northern Iraq will be stunned ... by the image of a huge black snake that greets them on entry into the courtyard of the Yezidi main sanctuary.... In addition to these snake images carved into the walls of ... many sanctuaries, the Yezidis also possess at least one statue of a snake cast in **bronze.**” (p. 50, bold font added for emphasis) Isn't this fascinating?

I'm asking God for wisdom to make the most of the opportunities – not only to build genuine friendships with Yezidis but also to point them, in a seasoned-with-salt manner, to Jesus who, in John 3:14-16, “used the fiery serpent incident to explain how He interceded for us. We were fatally bitten by that old serpent, the Devil, through the fall (Rev. 12:9; 20:2) and were dying from the poison of sin. ... Once we realize we are doomed to die for our sin (Rom. 5:12) and look to the One God has raised up, Christ on the cross, to heal us, we will live (eternally).” (Price, op. cit.)

Mystery

The Scripture passage instructing believers in Christ to relate to unbelievers in a gracious, seasoned-with-salt manner mentions the “mystery” of the gospel. (Colossians 4:2-6) Indeed, the Bible often talks about the gospel as a **mystery** that we need to present in a clear, understandable way.

Dr. Peter Nicolaus notes that Yezidism acknowledges senjaqs (like peacock and snake) as “symbols of the supreme divine being (Xwade, Allah, etc,) ... the symbolism of the snake remain(s) mysterious and inaccessible for non-Yezidis.” This emblem is shrouded in secrecy as Nicolaus has carefully documented. For example, he recounts a conversation in 1846 between Yezidi leaders and the famous archaeologist, “Sir Austen Henry Layard, whose excavations

greatly increased the knowledge of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia. ... Layard was invited to participate in almost all events connected with the celebration of the principal feast of the Yezidi religious year. The religious leadership appeared to reply openly to all his questions in the friendliest and frankest manner. Nevertheless, they did not tell him the full truth. For instance, when he saw a black snake carved into the wall near the doorway of the main temple at Lalish ... Layard considered it 'particularly conspicuous' and suspected that the snake and the other figures on the same wall were emblematical. However, he could 'obtain no other explanation from Sheikh Nasr, than that they had been cut by the Christian mason who repaired the tomb some years ago, as ornaments suggested by his mere fancy.'" (Layard, 1882: 184)

More recently Joanna Bochenska probes the fascinating, if perplexing, snake symbol in her article, *Following the snake: Yezidi Interpretations in Contemporary Literature*. Bochenska cites three modern Kurdish authors (Mehmed Uzun, Hesene Mete & Jan Dost) who "admit that many [Yezidi] symbols are 'mysterious' and one is unable to understand them fully." So she suggests that creative new interpretations of mythical Kurdish stories "await to be discovered in its intertextual dimension. That is why the modern interpretation should rather expand the borders and seek new perspectives and approaches." (p.124)

The Paradoxical Symbolism of Snakes in Yezidism

Bochenska cites a snake fairy tale titled, *Cilkezi*, which involves a black and white snake. Then she "underline(s) a few meanings which can be connected with the Yezidi tradition where the **snake is a significant symbol associated with Good rather than Evil** as is widespread in Christian and Muslim traditions." (p.127, bold added) She continues to explain that it "would be more appropriate to say that the snake's 'natural evil' is understood as the source of Good not Evil." (p.128) In the final analysis, Bochenska endorses a conundrum/paradox, "based on the co-existence of opposites and implies the close relationship between God and Satan." (p.146) Nevertheless, instead of resolving the tension between these opposites, her approach ends up blurring the distinction between Good and Evil!

Interfaith-Intertext

Tragically, Bochenska overlooks two stories about serpents from the writings of Moses that can provide a key to unlock the paradox involving opposites: God/Satan, Good/Evil. In the first story YHWH, the one true God, confounds and overpowers Pharaoh's false gods by miraculously turning Moses' rod into a snake which ultimately devours the inferior snakes belonging to Pharaoh's magicians.

The second Bible story which conveys positive snake symbolism is summarized in *The Action Bible* as follows (based on Numbers 20:22-21:22):

The Israelites travel on. When they come to Mount Hor, God tells Moses that Aaron will soon die, and he should take Aaron and his son Eleazar to the mountaintop.

"Eleazar, take your father's robes. You will take his place as High Priest of all Israel."

Aaron dies on Mount Hor and Israelites mourn for 30 days. Then they move on. A cloud leads them by day, and a pillar leads them by night. But the people soon forget God's care ... and again they complain ...

“There's not enough water I'm always thirsty.”

“Hasn't God always given us water when we needed it?”

“Yes, but the food-- I'm always sick of this stuff that we have to gather every day and make into bread. I want food like we had in Egypt – melons, fruit ...”

“And you said God would give us freedom! Do you call this freedom? Wandering around the wilderness?”

Suddenly, as punishment for their grumbling, the camp comes alive with poisonous snakes.

“Help! I've been bitten!”

“Help me or I'll die!”

Moses, we've sinned against God and against you. Forgive us and take away these snakes! Please!”

“I will ask God to help you.”

Moses prays and God tells him to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole.

“Listen to me, everyone who has been bitten by the snakes. God said that if you look at this bronze snake, you will be well again.”

“I'm well! God has healed me.”

Everyone who looks up at the snake is healed.

We know that snakes were a common symbol in the ancient world. More especially, and in the time of Moses, various snake cults were known in and near the land of Canaan. Why then, did God use the image of a bronze snake lifted high on a pole as a means of deliverance?

While this story strikes many moderns [and even contemporaries] as some form of ancient magic, the text is clear that it is actually the Lord's solution and works only because of his power. By having the Israelites look at the very symbol of their judgment, the Lord is having them acknowledge, “This is the judgment that you, Lord, have justly brought upon us, and only you can deliver us from it.” Jesus uses this event to explain his death on the cross. (John 3:14-16) [Footnote to Numbers 21:8-9, NIV Zondervan Study Bible, D.A. Carson]

Connecting the dots: SNAKE to SAVIOR

Christ's disciples found it extremely difficult to comprehend what Jesus was saying even when he clearly predicted that he would be killed and rise again three days later. (Luke 18:33-36; cf. John 20:9) If Jesus' closest associates struggled to grasp this teaching we mustn't think it will be easy for modern unbelievers, including Yezidis, to recognize how the bronze snake which Moses lifted up corresponds with Jesus who was lifted up (on a cross). This challenge calls to mind the earlier statement from Colossians 4 describing the gospel as a **mystery** thus implying that we need to present the good news in a way that is meaningful and understandable to our audience.

I've been in the home of certain Yezidis who have displayed a snake symbol on a wall-hanging beside a depiction of their main sanctuary at Lalish. On another occasion, while in the home of another Yezidi friend, they gave me a 'virtual' tour on a cell phone showing pictures of this special temple to which every devout Yezidi is encouraged to make pilgrimage.

In these pictures I noticed an image of a snake next to the entrance of their temple, not unlike the one Sir Austen Layard observed 180 years ago. As a friend it would have been natural for me to make an observation or ask questions out of genuine curiosity (without judgmental overtones), but sadly, I missed that opportunity.

In such circumstances it is appropriate to comment as follows; “Seeing the snake reminds me of a story about a bronze snake that God told the prophet Moses to mount on a pole.” “Have you ever heard about this story?” Then, if/when the door opens one could read the story as recorded in Numbers chapter 20 & 21.

After reading this riveting story we need to consider, “How can we make stimulating (seasoned) conversation with our Yezidi friends?” May I suggest asking a simple question, “What do you think (or how do you feel) about this story?” Then, give a sincere listening ear. (This may also include exploring some impromptu remark from your friend involving a peculiar facet of Yezidi snake tradition.)

After listening carefully, be alert to an opportunity for posing a question based on the Bible story, “Why did the Israelites ask for advice from Moses?” ... “Do you think they were looking for a quick and easy solution or did they sincerely want healing for the sin they committed?”

Obviously, a superficial solution for outward symptoms is ineffective. This raises another question, “How do you think God's servant, Moses, would be able to discern people's heart motives?”

Any Israelite who was willing to gaze with a contrite heart at the bronze serpent – the very symbol of their judgment – would humbly acknowledge, “This is the judgment that you, Lord, have justly brought upon us, and only you [Lord] can deliver us from it.” However, anyone who was unrepentant and merely wanted relief from bodily pain would undoubtedly refuse to heed Moses instruction. They wouldn't look earnestly with faith towards the uplifted bronze snake. But those who did look with heart-felt faith were healed. In this way, Moses could tell who had humbled themselves.

Making the connection between the **uplifted** serpent and the **uplifted** Son of Man is not easy but remember that Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would guide us. Four Scriptures as quoted below are especially helpful in clarifying this challenging comparison:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” Galatians 3:13

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness... 2 Peter 2:24

Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ... Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am **lifted up** from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. The crowd spoke up, “We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be **lifted up**’? ... Who is this ‘Son of Man’?” (bold added for emphasis) John 12:23-34

Fanciful Christian ornament?

Earlier we noted how leaders in Lalish gave archaeologist Layard an evasive answer in response to his curious query, “Is there any significance to the snake emblem at the shrine entrance?” They explained that it was “cut by the **Christian** mason who repaired the tomb some years ago, as ornaments suggested by his **mere fancy**.” (bold added for emphasis) Were these Yezidi leaders perhaps inadvertently pointing in the right direction?

Furthermore, we have noted Joanna Bochenska's suggestion that creative new interpretations of mythical Kurdish stories “await to be discovered in its **intertextual dimension**.” (bold added) Undoubtedly this is true, but sadly, Bochenska (unwittingly or cleverly?) limits the scope of her “intertextual dimension” to Kurdish and Muslim writers. The fact is: most modern scholars use the term *intertextual* in the context of interfaith dialog. Therefore, Bochenska would have been wiser if she had included Jewish and Christian Scriptures (Old and New Testament) in her discussion. Clearly the Bible is the true compass enabling lost humanity to find our way home.

Final destiny of the devil

The last book of the Bible records the final events of world history, in line with the divine verdict against Satan as predicted earlier by Christ (John 12:31; cf. Genesis 3:15)

The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient **serpent** called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. ... He seized the dragon, that ancient **serpent**, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ... And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. (Revelation 12:9, 20:2,10, bold added)

All Bible quotes are taken from the New International Version.

If you have questions about the article or would like to discuss these themes further please contact me [here](#).

Postscript

The redemptive analogy discussed in this paper is not merely relevant to ancient Canaanite peoples or modern Kurdish communities or even the Middle East. It has world-wide relevance since human beings generally feel fear and hatred toward snakes. As for the smaller number of cultures/communities where they revere or worship snakes, like Yezidis, the principles obviously can be applied more directly. One example, among others, is the Nyanza region in Kenya which is inhabited mainly by the Luo tribe.

<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/entertainment/thestandard/2000113503/omieri-and-sadu-snakes-that-ruled-kenyan-communities>