

The Brazen Serpent

There was a problem in the wilderness that required the construction of a serpent made of bronze and fastened to a pole. That same problem exists today, and again, God has provided the solution; which also causes offense and stumbling.

In your minds eye, take yourself back to the days of the wilderness wandering of Sinai. It is several years after Moses brought down the tablets of the law given to him by God at Mt. Sinai. You're leaving the area of Mt. Hor, traveling along the shores of the Red Sea. The dwindling of food and fresh water begins to fuel fear; you get caught up with the mob and begin speaking against God and against Moses.¹

Your complaints result in chastisement from God in the form of venomous serpents. The entire camp (including yourself) is bitten by these deadly creatures and now, suddenly, the need for food and water seems low on the list of priorities.

In desperation you join with the rest of the twelve tribes of Israel and repent of your murmuring; pleading that Moses ask God to remove the serpents from the camp. But God knows that removing the serpents would be like putting a bandage over an infected wound. The poison has already entered the bloodstream and time would run out soon when the toxin hits the nervous system. Removing the snakes would not solve the problem of a poisoned bloodstream.

In answer to their cries, God commands Moses to construct, out of bronze, the likeness of the serpent that gave the people their death sentence. The resulting image was then fastened to a pole and lifted up on a hill for all to see. God then commanded that all who had been bitten need only look to the bronze serpent and they would not die.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

As you picture yourself in the previous situation, you must ask yourself a very important question— “what would you do?” Would you choose to ignore the command of God and take your chances with the burning poison? Or would you be obedient to His word and, by faith, look to the serpent for your salvation? You may think that you would easily pick the latter, but remember, you are to place yourself in the shoes of a *Hebrew* in the wilderness. Forty years before this incident, Moses descended from Mount Sinai with two tablets of stone containing the ten commandments of God. You, along with all the other elders, confirmed that “all that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient”.²

¹ Reference the following with Numbers 21:4 - 9

² Ref. Exodus 24:7

This brings in a conflict; the command of God dictates that the image of a serpent be created with bronze, yet the second commandment specifically charges not to make any likeness seen in the astrological zodiac³ or on the earth. The bronze serpent violates both of these criteria, for along with being a creature that creeps upon the earth; it is also an astrological image of *Hydra* the “Fleeing Serpent”.

Now what would you do? God has commanded that you obey His law, yet also charges you to cast a graven image to keep from dying.

MAKING THE IMAGE

The image of the serpent was to be made using bronze or, more accurately translated, copper. Copper was also used in the construction of the altar of sacrifice; therefore we can assume that the metal of bronze (or copper) is an idiom of fire or judgment. This is also seen in the description of the serpents as being “fiery”. It may be due to the possibility that the desert adder was bronze in color.

The image of the serpent was then to be fastened to a pole. The word “pole” in the Hebrew is actually *nace*, which means “ensign” or “standard”. In those days, the tribal communities designated their location with the use of flags hung on the cross-beam of a long staff. The bronze serpent was to be nailed or tied to the standard and lifted up in full view of the people.

Philo, a first century Jewish historian in Alexandria, regarded the brazen serpent as being a symbol of God.

...if the mind that has been bitten by pleasure, that is by the serpent which was sent to Eve, shall have strength to behold the beauty of temperance, that is to say, the serpent made by Moses in a manner affecting the soul, and to *behold God Himself through the medium of the serpent*, it shall live.⁴

Today’s orthodox Jew would bristle at such an idea of attributing a graven image to God; and rightfully so. To explain this, the Jewish sages assume that the image was to be raised in a *high place* so that the people would look upward toward the Father.

Did then the brazen serpent possess the power of slaying or of bringing to life? No, but so long as the Israelites looked upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, were they healed. But when they refused, then they were destroyed. - The Mishnah

³ The Hebrew word for "heavens" refers to the images in the stars (i.e. crab, bull, lion, scorpion, bird etc.

⁴ Philo, Allegorical Interpretations II XIX vs. 81

This interpretation tries to explain away the fact that God purposely charged Moses to make a graven image and that looking upon said image will keep the victim from dying. Yes, the image had no power over life and death; it was obedience to the command of God that gave the image its relevance to the preservation of life.

A ROCK OF OFFENSE

Philo rightfully drew the parallel to the serpent in the garden and the sin of the people. Sin injects itself like the venom of a viper.

Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men; Preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their hearts; they continually gather together for war. They sharpen their tongues like a serpent; *the poison of asps is under their lips.* - Psalm 140:1-3

We must also remember that every living soul has been injected with the venom of this serpent of sin.

...there is not a righteous man on earth that does good and does not sin - Ecc. 7:20

The good news is that sin has been judged as is seen in the material of copper. It is my opinion that the image of the serpent was cast using one of the adders that were prevalent throughout the camp. Since time was of the essence, carving or fashioning the serpent would be slow and difficult. A dead adder could be encased within compressed dirt, molten copper poured in, evaporating the carcass and resulting in a cast facsimile. The cause of the death sentence is now replaced through the judgment of God's crucible.

With the aid of nails or rope, the brazen serpent is fastened to the standard and lifted high for all to look upon. The image is a stumbling block for the Jews who are accustomed to living their lives according to the law. And it will not be the first time God would do such a thing, for He has said,

“The Lord of hosts, Him you shall hallow; Let Him be your fear, And let Him be your dread. He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken, be snared and taken.” - Isaiah 8:13–15

No bigger stumbling stone has been brought before the Jewish people than Jesus HaNazarite. I have one Jewish friend in Israel who has said, “...to believe that Jesus was God in the flesh is *polytheistic* and not *monotheistic*. Therefore, Christians are engaging in idolatry and paganism.”

This friend of mine could accuse his ancestry of the same practice, given the criteria dictated by God. So he would, in effect, rather ignore the command of God and take his chances with the venom, rather than disobey one of the commandments. This is his prerogative, but we must take heed to the facts as they are given in the scriptures, whether Jew or Gentile.

THE PRIMARY FOCUS

I believe the greatest error of the Jewish nation is the notion that their primary doctrinal focus is that they are to be *monotheistic*. This is not true, the central directive dictated to the Jewish nation is to be obedient. This is not to assume that they are *not* to be monotheistic, but that their first and foremost priority is toward obedience.

This is not the case in many of their writings; monotheism is always the end result of their conclusion. If God is in any way regarded more than a singular being, the Jewish sage will fudge the text to meet their own preconception. For example, the first verse of the Pentateuch states:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. - Genesis 1:1

The transliterated Hebrew would read, “Reshiyth bara Elohim shama yimeth erets.” Notice the word for God is not the singular *El* or “God”, but the plural *Elohim*, or “Gods”. To account for this, the Jews forsake the literal and replace it with the figurative saying the term *Elohim* represents the awesome power of God. Then why does He say,

“And [in other nations] you will serve *gods*, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell.” - Deuteronomy 4:28

Since the word “gods” is the same word *Elohim*, what happened to the awesome power? For this *Elohim* can “neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell”. The fudging of scripture can cut both ways. But why is the orthodox Jew so affixed to the concept of a singular God? It is because of the much beloved statement of God termed the “Shema”.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is *one!*” - Deuteronomy 6:4

The Hebrew transliteration reads, “Shema Y’Israel Y-h-v-h Elohim Y-h-v-h echad”. Here we see, once again the plural use of “Gods”. What is equally compelling is the use of the word *echad*. The word *echad* is a compound unity as is used with Adam and Eve becoming one or *echad* flesh. Now the two did not morph into a singular humanoid species, but rather came together as a singular unit. If God, whose existence is beyond our petty imaginations, wished to convey that He was singular in nature, why did He not use the word *yachiyd* which denotes “one and only”.

The question for the orthodox Jew is, which is more central to their faith, the adherence to monotheistic doctrine or obedience to the word of God as dictated in the Torah? To the Gentile believer, these two can be reconciled.

BASIS FOR THE TRINITY

It is of no surprise that the average Christian believes in what is termed the “Trinity”, that is, a tri-unified deity of the Father, the Messiah and the Holy Spirit. This belief is not without scriptural fortification, for Isaiah describes the birth of the prophesied Messiah as the coming of God in the flesh.

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, *Mighty God*, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. - Isaiah 9:6

Notice that the word God is actually the singular *El* in the Hebrew. So when speaking of the Messiah apart from the Father, God is singular. The Jewish scholars interpret the above as...

For a child is born unto us, a son is given unto us; and the government upon his shoulder; and his name is called “Wonderful in counsel is God the Mighty, the everlasting Father, the Ruler of peace”.⁵

Again, is the text being fudged for the sake of an agenda? We see three distinct personalities in the Most High in Isaiah 63:7-14 as well,

“Come near to Me [who is the first and the last], hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; From the time that it was, I was there. And now *the Lord God and His Spirit Have sent Me.*” - Isaiah 48:16

⁵ Isaiah 9:5 as translated by The Jewish Publication Society of America

To abandon the concept of a triune God would make the above a contradiction to the monotheistic foundation. The speaker refers to Himself as being from *everlasting to everlasting* (that is, vs. 12 “the first and the last” and vs. 16 “from the time that it was, I was there”) and then describes Himself as three separate identities— “the Lord God and His Spirit Have sent Me”.

It seems as if God has once again put a stumbling block in the way of those who would abandon obedience in order to adhere to a status quo.

THE BRAZEN SERPENT INCARNATE

Jesus spoke to a member of the Pharisees named Nicodemus and said,

“Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

But Jesus interrupted him to address a deeper need,

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be confounded that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

“How can these things be?,” answered Nicodemus

“Are you a rabbi of Israel, and do not know these things?” replied Jesus, “Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and *you do not receive Our witness*. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

“*As Moses lifted up the [brazen] serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved...” - Yochanan 3:1-16

In the above exchange, Jesus identifies Himself as the embodiment of the brazen serpent, and that as long as you look toward Him, the One who was to be fastened onto an ensign pole, you will not die from the venom of sin. For it is upon this cross (or standard) that sin was judged as with hot molten copper.

IN CONCLUSION

Are the Gentile Christians pagan idolaters because they believe that Jesus was God manifest in the flesh? I have always wanted to ask a rabbi, is God all powerful? “Yes,” he would, no doubt, reply, “for He is Almighty, blessed be His name.” I would then follow-up my question with a second, “Is God powerful enough that *if* His will demanded, could come down to earth as a man and dwell with us for a time as He did with Adam?” This question would only be a dilemma to an individual with a limited God. The God *I* worship, the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'acov, is not limited to man's feeble intellect.

If Jesus is indeed the Messiah of Israel, then it would be prudent of my Jewish friends to be sure that they have investigated thoroughly the evidence at hand; else one may find himself not beholding the antidote for the venom of sin prescribed in the form of the brazen serpent.