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Tiled mosaic of the Bronze serpent in the desert and Moses by Matthew Digby Wyatt

WHY DID JESUS COMPARE HIMSELF TO THE BRAZEN SERPENT?

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

John 3:14–15

THE KNOW

On one occasion during the Exodus when the children of Israel murmured in the wilderness, “the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people,” and many Israelites died from the serpents’ fiery bite (Numbers 21:6). After the people repented, the Lord instructed Moses to make a “serpent of brass” and raise it on a pole, which would cause those bitten to live if they only would look at it (Numbers 21:8–9).

While speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus compared Himself to this brazen serpent: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14–15). Several Book of Mormon prophets also used the brazen serpent as a symbol for Jesus Christ.¹

As Douglas W. Ullmann explained, in many ways this comparison “captures the main thought of Numbers 21:4–9 and applies it to Jesus Christ” in a straightforward way: “The Lord provided only one means of salvation (from

the snake bites): the bronze serpent. If anyone refused to look at the uplifted serpent, he was not healed. In a similar way . . . God had provided Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation. If anyone refused to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, he was not saved.”²

Yet some may still wonder why Jesus would be compared to a serpent since serpents often have a negative connotation and are even used as a symbol for Satan in other parts of scripture (see Genesis 3; 2 Nephi 2:18). In the ancient Near East, serpents actually had both negative *and* positive symbolic attributes—and several of the positive symbolic associations directly relate to the attributes of Jesus Christ.³ Below are just a few examples that illustrate how ancient serpent symbolism relates to the roles and attributes of Jesus Christ.

Serpents as Symbols of Healing

The most common and universal meaning of serpents in the ancient world was as symbols of healing.⁴ This symbolism can be found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, Greece, and

Rome and has been carried over into modern times through the use of the Caduceus and the Rod of Asclepius (both Greco-Roman symbols) by modern medical associations.⁵ Such symbolism is obviously relevant to the brazen serpent, which Nephi said was raised to “heal the nations” (2 Nephi 25:20).

During His mortal ministry, Jesus was the consummate healer. People from all around Galilee and Judea came to Him be cured of a variety of maladies (Matthew 4:23; 9:35). After His death, He rose “with healing in his wings” (2 Nephi 25:13; Malachi 4:2).⁶ To this day, His healing power continues to mend broken hearts and wounded souls that repent and turn to Him.

Serpents as Symbols of Life, Immortality, and Resurrection

Serpents were also commonly associated with life, including life after death, immortality, and resurrection.⁷ According to biblical scholar Victor Hurowitz, the most common Hebrew word for snake or serpent (*nḥš*) sounds similar to the words for “live, life” in Akkadian (*na’ āšū, nīšū*), while the Hebrew words for “live” (*ḥyh, hyy, ḥwh*) sound similar to the word for “snake” in the closely related Aramaic language (*ḥwy*).⁸ In many ancient Near Eastern myths, “the slaying of the dragon, or serpent, provides life.”⁹ Snakes shedding their skins were symbolic of resurrection and eternal life in Egypt and other cultures.¹⁰

Jesus Christ is “the resurrection, and the life” (John 11:25). His sacrificial death provides eternal life to all who will put their faith in Him (John 3:14–15). Nephi son of Helman explained, “As many as should look upon the Son of God with faith, having a contrite spirit, might live, even unto that life which is eternal” (Helaman 8:15).

Serpents as Symbols of Salvation and Deliverance

Serpents were also associated with providential deliverance or salvation.¹¹ Andrew C. Skinner explained that snakes were seen “as a bringer of salvation and giver of everlasting life” in the ancient Near East.¹² In Numbers 21, the brazen serpent is used to deliver the children of Israel from the fiery serpents, and a Jewish apocryphal text refers to it as “a sign of salvation” (Wisdom of Solomon 16:5–6).

True deliverance and salvation are obtained only through Jesus Christ (see 1 Thessalonians 5:9), the only “name given under heaven . . . whereby man can be saved” (2 Nephi 25:20).

Serpents as Agents of Purification and Atonement

Serpents were also connected to purification and atonement.¹³ The word translated as “fiery serpents” in

Numbers 21 is *seraphim* (the plural form of *seraph*). As a verb, this Hebrew root means “to burn,” and according to LeGrand Davies it primarily refers to “cleansing, purifying or refining of ritual objects, people, cities, etc.”¹⁴ The fiery serpents can likewise be seen as agents of purification, cleansing the body of Israel before it entered into the promised land.¹⁵

The fiery angelic beings of Isaiah 6 (see also 2 Nephi 16) are also called seraphim, and many scholars have seen a connection between these and the fiery serpents.¹⁶ Here, Isaiah sees God on His throne, surrounded by heavenly seraphim, and worries about his worthiness to be in the divine presence (Isaiah 6:1–5). Then, a seraph brings a live coal to Isaiah and puts it to his lips and declares, “Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged” (Isaiah 6:7). As John N. Oswalt observed, this coal “taken from the altar which stood just in front of the holy of holies . . . [had] an atoning and purifying effect.”¹⁷ Isaiah was then able to worthily participate in the divine council (Isaiah 6:8–13).

The seraph of Isaiah’s vision fulfilled the same role as Jesus Christ in atoning for our sins, purifying us, and allowing us to worthily enter the presence of God.¹⁸

Serpents as Symbols of Kingship

Serpents were also part of royal symbolism.¹⁹ This was especially the case in Egypt, where the symbol of an upright cobra, called the *uraeus*, “was placed in royal palaces and on the heads of pharaohs to symbolize their godly and kingly powers.”²⁰ Likewise in Israel, some royal seals from the eighth century BC use a winged seraph (fiery serpent) “to symbolize Judean kingship.”²¹ As Karen Randolph Joines put it, “Israel was acquainted with the symbol of the winged serpent and, apparently incorporated it into its royal symbolism.”²² Thus, Isaiah 14:28–32 symbolically describes a future king who will deliver Zion as a “fiery flying serpent.”²³

Jesus Christ is the true King of kings who will deliver Zion in the last days (1 Timothy 6:14–15).

THE WHY

These are only a handful of the many meanings embedded into serpent symbolism in the ancient world. Several more could also be discussed that relate in various ways to the roles and attributes of Jesus Christ.²⁴ Armed with these examples of serpent symbolism, however, readers can better appreciate why the brazen serpent would be used as a symbol for Jesus Christ.

Given their broader cultural setting, when the children of Israel looked up at the brazen serpent, they likely saw more than just a snake on a pole. They would have seen a

symbol of healing, a symbol of life, a symbol of salvation and deliverance. When they went to Moses, they were seeking to repent and reconcile their relationship to the Lord (Numbers 21:7), and the brazen serpent would have been seen as a symbol of atonement and reconciliation. Furthermore, they would likely have recognized it as a symbol of kingship and understood that by looking to the serpent, they were actually looking upward to the Lord and assenting to His rulership.

For Latter-day Saints and other Christians, Jesus Christ is the fulfillment and embodiment of all these things that the brazen serpent symbolized. He came to the earth as a healer and a life-giver. He brings salvation and deliverance to those who will look to Him. His Atonement can purify all who repent of their sins and make them worthy to enter God's presence. Jesus Christ is the one and only true King of kings and Lord of lords. It is only to Him that "if we will look we may live forever" (Alma 37:46).

FURTHER READING

Neal Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire and Brass: A Contextual Study of the Brazen Serpent Tradition in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 229–241.

Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Miracles of the Book of Mormon: A Guide to the Symbolic Messages* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2015), 107–114.

Andrew C. Skinner, "Serpent Symbols and Salvation in the Ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 42–55.

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NOTES

1. See 2 Nephi 25:20; Alma 33:18–22; Helaman 8:13–15.
2. Douglas W. Ullmann, "Moses's Bronze Serpent (Numbers 21:4–9) in Early Jewish and Christian Exegesis" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 93, 258.
3. For an in-depth treatment of both the positive and negative symbolism of serpents, see James H. Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 188–268.
4. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 254–256.
5. For more on the healing role of serpents, see Neal Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire and Brass: A Contextual Study of the Brazen Serpent Tradition in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 232–233. Andrew C. Skinner, "Serpent Symbols and Salvation in the Ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 42–55, also mentions various examples of healing serpents in ancient mythology.

6. See Book of Mormon Central, "Why Does Malachi Refer to the Sun of Righteousness? (Malachi 4:2)," *KnoWhy* 653 (December 13, 2022).
7. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 250–251.
8. Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "Healing and Hissing Snakes: Listening to Numbers 21:4–9," *Scriptura* 87 (2004): 278–287.
9. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 250.
10. Skinner, "Serpent Symbols," 44; Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire," 233.
11. See Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire," 234.
12. Skinner, "Serpent Symbols," 48.
13. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 257–258.
14. LeGrande Davies, "Serpent Imagery in Ancient Israel: The Relationship between the Literature and the Physical Remains" (PhD diss., University of Utah, 1986), 83; see pp. 82–105 for a full review of the usage of this verbal root in the Bible.
15. See Davies, "Serpent Imagery in Ancient Israel," 103–105.
16. John Gee, "Cherubim and Seraphim: Iconography in the First Jerusalem Temple," in *The Temple: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021), 97–108.
17. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 184.
18. See Book of Mormon Central, "Why Did Isaiah Refer to the Heavenly Hosts as 'Seraphim'? (2 Nephi 16:1–2; Isaiah 6:1–2)," *KnoWhy* 645 (September 6, 2022).
19. See Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 238–239.
20. Charlesworth, *Good and Evil Serpent*, 238.
21. J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah, a Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 226.
22. Karen Randolph Joines, "Winged Serpents in Isaiah's Inaugural Vision," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86, no. 4 (1967): 414.
23. See Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire," 236.
24. For more complete discussions of this topic, see Skinner, "Serpent Symbols," 42–55; Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire," 229–241.