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ANOTHER LOOK AT THE SERPENT ON THE POLE

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In the Gospel of John, chap. 3, Jesus was attempting to explain to Nicodemus the mystery of salvation. As a teacher in Israel, Nicodemus should have had a thorough understanding of how a person comes to salvation, but Jesus was having trouble getting even the basics through to him. Finally, He explained it on the basis of an analogy from the OT, with which Nicodemus must have been familiar. Citing the experience of Israel in the wilderness of Zin, Jesus said to Nicodemus in vv. 14-16, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."¹

This well-known passage is not always properly understood due a lack of clarity regarding what actually happened in the original incident. The analogy becomes confusing when we lose sight of the nature of the original event and how it functioned as a type of Christ's work for human salvation.² Many wonder how

¹Scripture quotations in this paper are from the NIV.

²Some scholars do not understand the original event to have been typological in its essence, but rather that Jesus made a typological application of it later in His illustration to Nicodemus. See, e.g., Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary Critical, Experimental and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 1, *Genesis–Deuteronomy* (N.p., 1868; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948; Robert A. Watson, *The Book of Numbers*, Expositor's Bible (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, George H. Doran Co., n.d.), 248. However, Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical Τύπος Structures*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981), 397, 402, 420-22, argues convincingly that typology requires that the original event contain already within it, by divine design, the essential features that make it typological. See also Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, *Genesis–Song of Solomon* (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 215. This paper attempts to implement such a typology.

a snake could properly function as a type of Christ that would reveal the way of salvation. Actually, Nicodemus, as a scholar of the Scriptures, may have understood better than we do.

Background

The original event involved another in a series of rebellious acts on the part of God's people. They had rebelled against God's instruction to go in and possess the land of Canaan (Num 14:1-12). Then they had rebelled at His decision to let them die in the wilderness, and they decided to try to possess the land after all (14:39-45). Korah, Dathan, and Abiram then led another rebellion, against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, which God signally put down with an awesome display of divine indignation (16:1-35). Although God provided abundant evidence of His choice of Moses and Aaron as the leaders of His people, Israel continued to rebel against them and against God (16:36-17:13).

The people rebelled again at Kadesh, this time because of a shortage of water (20:2-5). After the death of Aaron at Mount Hor, Israel was attacked by Arad, king of the Canaanites. God delivered them from Arad after they promised to destroy the Canaanite cities (21:1-3).

This should have prompted a better attitude on Israel's part, but it did not. No sooner had they begun to move again than they became impatient with having to travel around Edom. Num 21:5 says, "They spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!'" They were referring, of course, to the manna, which typified Christ, the true Bread from heaven (John 6:32-33,49-51). They despised it, denying that they were given bread. They also denied being provided with water, though the water from the rock in Meribah, which typified the water of life from Jesus, followed them in their travels (1 Cor 10:4; cf. Pss 78:15-16,20; 105:41).³ They preferred the food and drink of Egypt to that which Heaven provided, and they wished to return to that

³Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical: 1 Cor*, enlarged type ed., ed. Robert Frew (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), 181-82, observes that it is entirely reasonable to assume that the text is correct in declaring that the abundant water from the rock did not form a pool but rather a flowing stream that accompanied the Israelites in their wanderings (or vice versa). A. R. Fausset, "1 Corinthians—Revelation," in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary Critical, Experimental and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 4, *Acts—Romans, 1 Corinthians—Revelation* (N.p., n.d; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 310, notes the tradition of Rabbi Solomon that the rock, or at least the stream from it, followed the Israelites in their wanderings during the nearly forty years they spent in the desert.

pagan land. They spoke as though God was unable to provide for their sustenance and protection in the wilderness.

After all He had done for them, God was very displeased. He sent poisonous snakes among them, which bit them so that many died. Then the people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us" (Num 21:7). So Moses interceded on behalf of the people. Then God said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live" (v. 8). So Moses cast a snake out of bronze and put it up on a pole. When anyone who had been bitten by a snake looked in faith at the bronze snake, he or she was restored.

Many have wondered at this seemingly strange situation. Snakes were the cause of the people's death, yet God had Moses prepare a representation of the snake to be held up before them, by looking at which they would be restored. There was no restorative power in the bronze snake. Why did God choose to use a snake on a pole to heal their deadly wounds? Certainly they were not expected to worship the snake as a deity with healing power.⁴ The command of God explicitly forbade the formation and worship of images as deities. What was the function of the serpent on the pole as a means of effecting a remedy against the poison of the serpents? Let us assess the situation as described in the text of Num 21 first. Then we will turn to the use Jesus made of it in John 3 and to other biblical backgrounds for understanding the theological significance of the symbolism.

Num 21:4-7

The text says that "the people grew impatient on the way" (v. 4); as a result, "they spoke against God and against Moses" (v. 5). This was in direct violation of Exod 22:28: "Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people." The penalty for blasphemy, one of the most serious of offenses, was death by stoning

⁴A number of scholars have noted that snakes were held by peoples in contemporary religious cultures to have life-giving powers and to function as healing deities. See, e.g., Karen Randolph Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968): 251; John Joseph Owens, "Numbers," *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, *Leviticus-Ruth*, ed. Clifton J. Allen et al. (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 139; However, as observed by James Philip, *Numbers*, Communicator's Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 232, these observations of contemporary pagan beliefs and practices "do not explain why this particular symbolism was enjoined by the Lord and enacted by the people." Similarly, Watson, 248, observes, "It has been rightly pointed out that the heathen view of the serpent as a healing power has no countenance here." On worship, see 2 Kgs 18:4.

(Lev 24:16).⁵ After death, the law required that the corpse would be hung up on display as a warning to others (Deut 21:22-23).⁶ In this case, since God was the one to carry out the sentence, He provided a symbolic substitute. Rather than stoning and hanging up the guilty people, He sent serpents, symbols of their ancient enemy who sought their destruction, to punish them with fiery poison, then He executed the sentence, symbolically, against the serpent rather than against His people. A representation of a dead serpent must be hung up for all to see. In the symbolic death of the serpent, the instrument of death to them, God's people were to see the substitute for their own deaths, the opportunity for the gift of life of which they were unworthy. In looking to the serpent held aloft on the stake, they were to see not an object of admiration or worship but the death of their hated enemy, the death they had deserved to die.

The text indicates that their first complaint was that God had brought them out of Egypt to die in the desert (21:5). This slanderous accusation came despite the many miracles by which He had delivered them both from Egypt and from the many perils in the wilderness for thirty-eight years. It was right for God to let them see what it was really like to die in the wilderness when His protection should be withdrawn. The snakes had been there all along, but Israel had been protected from them (Deut 8:15). Now God removed His protection so they could see the falsity of their accusation. At the same time, God could effect their restoration again by a miracle of His power without any effort on their part, just by the seemingly absurd obedience of looking at a metallic representation of the lifeless instrument of their destruction.

The second part of their complaint was that they had no bread or water. This was, of course, totally untrue. God had provided bread from heaven faithfully for the past thirty-eight years, and water had been provided from an ever-abundant source. But they despised the manna from heaven: "We detest this miserable food!" (v. 5). The Rabbis point out that, in the curse, the serpent had been given dust to eat, but had never complained; now God's people are given bread and water by a daily miracle from heaven, yet they complain vehemently.⁷ Thus the serpents

⁵Cf. Matt 26:65-66; John 10:33; Herbert Danby, ed., *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 391-92 (Sanh. 7.4-5).

⁶*Mishnah*, 390 (Sanh. 6.4): "All that have been stoned must be hanged. So R. Eliezer. But the Sages say: None is hanged save the blasphemer and the idolator." Cf. J. Duncan M. Derrett, "The Bronze Serpent," *Estudios biblicos* 49 (1991): 324, who says, "The standing punishment for blasphemy, idolatry, and rejection of YHWH (John 15:24) is to be stoned, then hanged: Dt 21:22-23."

⁷Patrick J. Willson, "Snake on a Stick," *Christian Century*, 2 March 1994, 223, cites *Targum Neofiti* on this verse, in which the divine voice declares: "Let the serpent which does not murmur concerning its food come and rule over the people which has murmured concerning their food."

are permitted to get their revenge on those from whose seed is to come One who will crush the head of the serpent.

When the people begin to die from the venom of the deadly serpents, they realize that it is a punishment for their sin of complaining against God and His provision for them. They come to Moses and admit, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” Moses prayed, but God did not remove the snakes. Instead He elected to deliver them in the midst of the snakes, indeed, through a representation of the very instrument of their deaths.⁸

Num 21:8-9

God instructed Moses to fashion a snake and mount it atop a pole so that anyone who had been bitten could look at it and live. So Moses fashioned a bronze snake, mounted it on a pole, and when anyone looked at the snake, he or she lived (21:8-9). The text does not say that Moses was instructed to make the snake of bronze, but to make a *saraph*, literally, a “fiery” or “burning” object, a snake in the context. Moses made it of bronze.⁹ Why of bronze? Some scholars speculate that the light reflecting from the bronze most closely imitated the natural colors of the “fiery serpents” (KJV).¹⁰ Others argue that bronze (*n^oḥošet*) naturally belongs to the snake (*nāḥāš*), and that this may be seen in the description of what Moses made: *n^oḥaš n^oḥošet*.¹¹ J. D. M. Derrett sees a typological significance in that the bronze makes it a light-bearing object pointing to Christ as the light to be

⁸Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1, *Genesis to Deuteronomy* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 665, observes: “That which cured was shaped in the likeness of that which wounded. So Christ, though perfectly free from sin himself, yet was *made in the likeness of sinful flesh* (Rom. viii. 3), so like that it was taken for granted that this man was a sinner, John ix. 24.” (Emphasis his.)

⁹Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England, and Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 156-57, argues for “copper” as the better translation, and sees in the reddish color a symbol of the blood of the atonement. However, most commentators opt for “bronze,” although the Hebrew word can have either meaning. I follow the latter in this paper, but it is not a critical point in the discussion. Either alternative is valid.

¹⁰The Hebrew term is *hann^ochāšim has^orāphim*, which is translated literally “fiery serpents” in the KJV, but is more correctly translated “venomous snakes” in the NIV, since *has^orāphim* no doubt refers to their fiery or poisonous bite more than to their color or appearance. See C. F. Keil and F[rantz] Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 3 vols. in one, trans. James Martin, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 3:139; and Watson, 246. Still, Moses may have made an association with the color, since he could not make it poisonous.

¹¹See Derrett, 320, n. 53.

gazed at when He is lifted up before the world.¹² Merrill Unger says that the bronze symbolizes judgment, as suggested by the bronze altar and bronze laver in the court of the sanctuary.¹³ It may be speculative to propose a final solution to this query. Perhaps there is validity in more than one of these answers.

The significance of the fabrication of a bronze snake on a pole seems to lie in three things: (1) the relationship of the snake to the cause of their pain and death; (2) the mounting of the snake on a pole or standard for all to see; and (3) the necessity of looking to it in order to find life.

As for the relationship between the poisonous snakes that were causing death among the people and the harmless snake on the pole, it was apparently important that a link be made in the mind of the observer that the instrument of their death should be transformed into the means of obtaining new life.¹⁴ This could only be true if the snake on the pole were represented as dead.¹⁵ A representation of a live snake would be meaningless as a symbol to those who were dying of snake venom. But a representation of a dead snake held aloft as a trophy of victory over the snake and its poisonous bite would give hope to the dying and would typify the death of the coming Savior who would make life available by enduring the death of the sinner. A single look, in faith, at this illustration of God's plan for the salvation of the human race would be sufficient to give life to the dying.

By mounting the snake atop a pole or standard, it was elevated or lifted up for all to see. If the snake was to be represented as dead, it would make sense to impale it on the pole as on a stake or gibbet.¹⁶ Thus it would function as an ensign for the people to rally around. The word for the pole used by Moses is *nāš*, which most commonly refers to a standard with a banner affixed or a military ensign with the symbol of the authority atop. However, this does not preclude the use of a stake, lance, or spear on which to mount the object being displayed. George B. Eager says that a banner was sometimes formed by applying something to a

¹²Ibid., 319-21. Derrett bases this on John 12:32-36, a parallel to John 3:14-15, which seems to imply that Jesus is to be raised up as a light. In answer to the question of who the Son of man is who is to be lifted up, Jesus points to Himself as the light in whom they should put their trust.

¹³Unger, 214. See also Philip, 234.

¹⁴Wenham, 157-58, suggests that "the clue to the symbolism should be sought in the general principles underlying the sacrifices and purificatory rites in the Old Testament. Animals are killed so that sinful men who deserve to die may live. Blood which pollutes when it is spilled can be used to sanctify and purify men and articles. . . . In all these rituals there is an inversion. . . . In the case of the copper serpent similar principles operate. Those inflamed and dying through the bite of living snakes were restored to life by a dead reddish-coloured snake."

¹⁵Ibid., 158, notes the significance of the fact that the snake was represented as dead. See also Keil and Delitzsch, 3:140.

¹⁶Derrett, 320, says it was "pierced (no doubt) to be fixed to the pole."

streamer on the end of a lance.¹⁷ A snake impaled on a stake would make a very meaningful trophy to hold aloft as a standard if one wanted to give hope to those bitten by venomous snakes.

The necessity of looking at this representation of God's plan for salvation from the poison of sin involved not only the act of obedience but also the cultivation of faith. To see beyond the symbol to the salvific realities to which it pointed would require faith. What possible good could come from looking at the representation of a dead snake? If God supplied the grace to turn a curse into a blessing for those willing to take Him at His word and obey, anything was possible. That was asking a lot, though, from those so recently complaining at God's providences. Faith would develop only as one saw meaning in the symbolism of the bronze serpent lifted up on the pole. The meaning must have been evident to those asked to look at the serpent, and the meaning appears to derive inherently from the portrayed death of the serpent.

Jesus' Use of the Story in John 3:14-15

Jesus took this incident and brought out of it a meaning that might otherwise have been overlooked. He compared the lifting up of Moses' serpent in the desert with His own lifting up (v. 14). The use of the term "lifted up" (from *hypsōō*) is full of significance. John later explains what Jesus means by it. In John 12:32-33 we learn that the lifting up of Jesus is a reference to the death He would die on the cross. Jesus' use of the term is a probable allusion to Isa 52:13-53:12,¹⁸ where the Servant of Yahweh is to be lifted up very high (52:13) in the context of great suffering and death, to be stricken for the transgression of the people (53:8) and to bear the sin of many (v. 12).

He made the comparison explicitly in terms of the faith required to gain life: "that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (v. 15). This pointed to the fact that one must see something beyond the external appearance. The bronze snake had no power to give life to the people. It was their faith in God's promise to do what He said on condition of their obedience that gave life to the dying. But the condition was to look in faith to the serpent on the pole. In what sense could looking to the serpent on the pole produce faith? Only if the individual needing life could see some significant meaning beyond the external appearance of the serpent. A dead snake pierced on a stake would provide that significant meaning.

¹⁷George B. Eager, "Banner," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1956), 1:384. Herbert Lockyer, Sr., ed., *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (1986), s.v. "Standard," states that "standards were probably . . . raised on a spear or pole (Num 21:8-9)," and mentions that the "Assyrian armies carried the moon sickle mounted on a spear" for their standards.

¹⁸So Derrett, 325-26.

It would speak of the triumph over the enemy causing their death. Specifically, it would represent the death of the source of evil whose fiery poison was killing them.

Is it reasonable biblically to see the serpent on the pole as a dead serpent pierced through by a stake and raised in a show of triumph to serve as a standard to rally around? Indeed, there is considerable evidence to support such a view. First, we will look at the textual and historical evidence, then we will look at the theological support for such a view.

Biblical Methods of Exposing the Dead

In the OT it was a frequent practice to expose the dead after death.¹⁹ This occurred primarily in one of two contexts. Either the victim was notoriously evil, and the corpse was exposed as a warning to others, as in Num 25:4, or the victim was a conquered foe whose corpse was exposed to show that the enemy was dead, as in Josh 8:29 and 10:26. Both of these practices have significance for the serpent on the pole, as we will see.

In Gen 40 two of Pharaoh's officials were put in prison because they had angered him. Each one had a dream and came to Joseph to interpret their dreams. Joseph told the chief butler that after three days Pharaoh would lift up his head and restore him to his office (v. 13), but he told the chief baker that after three days Pharaoh would lift off his head and hang him on a tree (v. 18). This is exactly what happened (vv. 20-22). The chief baker was beheaded and his corpse exposed by "hanging" it on a tree. This does not mean that he was hanged by the neck, for his head was cut off. The word translated "hang" is a form of the verb *tālāh*, which

¹⁹"Suspension, whether from cross, stake, or gallows, was not used as a mode of taking life, but was sometimes added after death as an enhancement of punishment." *The Bible Commentary on the Old Testament: Exodus-Ruth*, ed. F. C. Cook, abridged and ed. J. M. Fuller, Barnes' Notes on the Old and New Testaments (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 312. Keil and Delitzsch, 3:408, concur: "The hanging, not of criminals who were to be put to death, but of those who had been executed with the sword, was an intensification of the punishment of death (see at Num. xxv.4), inasmuch as the body was thereby exposed to peculiar kinds of abominations."

means to suspend, to hang up, or to impale or gibbet.²⁰ It later came to be used for the act of crucifixion.²¹

This is the same verb used in Josh 8:29 and 10:26, cited above, as well as in 2 Sam 4:12, where David killed the murderers of Ishbosheth and exposed their bodies by the pool in Hebron. It is also the verb used throughout the book of Esther for execution, which was not by the gallows, as many believe, but by impalement and exposure on a tall stake.²² More significantly, the same verb is used in Deut 21:22-23, a text of great significance for our study, both historical and theological, to which we will return later.

A different verb is used in Num 25:4, namely *yāqa*ʿ, which when used causatively means to expose by impalement.²³ There God commands Moses to take those leaders who had indulged in sexual immorality with Moabite women and kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the Lord, so that His fierce anger would be turned away from Israel. This passage offers solid evidence that in the book of Numbers impalement on a stake was used by the people of Israel as a means of exposure after death.

The same verb is also used in 2 Sam 21:6,9,13, which records the actions of the Gibeonites against the sons of Saul to avenge Saul's massacre of the Gibeonites by killing and exposing seven of Saul's sons before the Lord in Gibeah.

²⁰William Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, trans. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), s.v. "*tālāh*," says that when used with *ʿal hāʿēš* the expression means "to hang anyone on a stake, to crucify, a kind of punishment used among the Israelites, Deuter. 21:22; the Egyptians, Gen. 40:19; the Persians, Est. 7:10; 5:14." Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, 241, state, "The language of Joseph describes minutely one form of capital punishment that prevailed in Egypt—viz., that the criminal was decapitated, and then his headless body gibbeted on a tree by the highway, until it was gradually devoured by the ravenous birds (Deut. xxi. 22, 23)." Keil and Delitzsch, 1:348, concur.

²¹Ronald F. Youngblood, "*tālāh*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 3:971, argues that *tālāh* in the OT signifies impaling and includes various forms of crucifixion in the later period.

²²Ronald F. Youngblood, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Hanging," says, "The Persians hanged persons by impaling them on a stake (Ezra 6:11; Esth. 6:4)." Henry Snyder Gehman, ed., *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* (1970), s.v. "Gallows," states, "Hanging by strangulation was not a Persian method of punishment. Haman no doubt intended to impale Mordecai (cf. Esth. 2: 23; Herod. iii. 159); the 'tree' probably was a pole or stake."

²³Paul R. Gilchrist, "*Yāqa*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:397, says, "The Hiphil clearly brings out the causative, although it serves euphemistically for the idea of execution by hanging or, more likely at that time by impaling (as in Num 25:4 . . .)." See also John Arthur Thompson, "*yq*," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (1997), 2:521.

Interestingly, *talah* is also used in the same context (v. 12) to refer to the hanging up of the corpses of Saul and Jonathan by the Philistines in Beth Shan.

A third word which refers to impalement, *m^eha'*, is found in the Aramaic of Ezra 6:11. There Cyrus threatens anyone who changes his edict concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem that "a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it." C. F. Keil notes that the word translated "lifted up" in this passage is the usual word used for being crucified, and because *m^eha'* has the meaning of "to strike," with *al* it implies that the person is to be fastened or nailed to the beam as in crucifixion.²⁴ They further report that this was a common means of capital punishment among the ancient Assyrians and Persians, though the manner of impalement or crucifixion varied.²⁵

Since there are at least three different words used in the OT for hanging or impaling a body after death for the purpose of public exposure, and since there are numerous examples of this kind of activity, including one in the book of Numbers itself, we must conclude that it was a fairly common means of displaying the dead when they wanted the people to take notice of the execution. Thus it is not unreasonable to assume that the serpent may have been portrayed as impaled on the pole, even though the text may not make it explicit. If its death was to be flaunted before the people, that would be the most natural way of accomplishing the task. The fact that it was to be displayed on a *nēš* (standard) indicates that the purpose of lifting it up was to flaunt it before the people as a rallying point. The people would be much more likely to have rallied around the symbol of a serpent impaled on the end of the *nēš* than around the symbol of a live serpent like the ones that were in the process of killing them.

Let us return briefly to Deut 21:22-23 to learn more about the significance of being exposed by having the body impaled on a stake. There God instructed the people of Israel,

If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's

²⁴C. F. Keil, *I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 3 vols. in one, trans. James Martin, Andrew Harper, and Sophia Taylor, Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978 reprint), 3:88.

²⁵"Among the Assyrians it generally consisted in the impalement of the delinquent upon a sharp strong wooden post; comp. Layard, *Nineveh and Babylon*, p. 355, and *Nineveh and its Remains*, p. 379, with the illustration fig. 58. According to Herod. iii. 159, Darius impaled as many as 3000 Babylonians after the capture of their city (ἀνεσκολόπισε). Crucifixion proper, however, i.e., nailing to a cross, also occurred among the Persians; it was, however, practised by nailing the body of the criminal to a cross after decapitation; see the passages from Herodotus in *Brissonii de regio Persarum princip.* I. ii. c. 215." Ibid.

curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

The word translated “tree” in this passage is *עֵץ*, which also means a piece of wood, a branch, a stick, a pole, a beam, and so forth.²⁶ The executed criminal might be either impaled on the end of a pole or stake, or his hands might be tied together and he would be suspended from a branch or cross member; affixed to an upright post.²⁷ This treatment, we can see from the text, was for those who had committed capital crimes. We see also that the issue takes on theological dimensions, since God states that anyone who receives this kind of treatment is under God’s curse. God made a rule that the corpse should not be left exposed overnight, because the curse would desecrate the land.²⁸

This passage makes the connection between the exposure of the corpse of an executed criminal and the curse of God, thus introducing us to the theological dimension of the significance of the serpent on the pole.

Theological Significance of Exposing Criminals

The apostle Paul in the NT points to the theological significance of the exposure of criminals in relation to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In Gal 3:13 he writes, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” In this short analysis everything comes together. We can now see why Jesus could say to Nicodemus that the serpent on the pole becomes an analogy to His own impending death on the cross. Jesus had to become a curse for mankind in order to redeem mankind from the curse of the law.²⁹ He did this by being killed as a criminal who had committed a capital offense, being nailed to a tree and exposed to public humiliation. By so doing He came under the curse of God in our place, dying the death we deserved to die. And by manifesting faith in this substitutionary atonement, we receive the gift of new life from God. The serpent had played a similar role in the wilderness, representing the cursed one who committed a capital offense and deserved to die and suffer public exposure. By its symbolic death the serpent provided, by the mercy of God, a means of attaining life through the obedience of

²⁶Larry L. Walker, “עֵץ,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (1997), 3:474.

²⁷The latter is described in the *Mishnah*, Sanh. 6.4.

²⁸Keil and Delitzsch, 3:408, point out that the desecration was not a matter of hygiene but of spiritual defilement, since it had to do with the victim being under the curse of God.

²⁹“The curse of the law” means that we are under a curse because of our inability to keep the law perfectly (v. 10).

faith, looking to God's provision and seeing beyond it God's readiness to extend forgiveness and life to the sinner.³⁰

We gain a further insight into the significance of the serpent on the pole as a type of Christ from Paul's statement in 2 Cor 5:21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The concept represented by the impalement of the serpent on the stake is substitutionary atonement: the serpent is judged and killed not because it has sinned but for what it represents, while those who have sinned and deserve to die are forgiven, healed, saved, given life. John Philip writes concerning the bronze serpent,

As Israel was given this symbol of substitutionary atonement—their sin, represented by the bronze serpent, was cursed and cancelled, and it was this they were bidden to look upon—so also Christ, for our sakes, and for our healing, was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, and made sin for us, and was lifted up from the earth, when he bore in His own body the judgment of a holy God upon sin.³¹

Paul further elaborates the theology of Christ's atonement in Rom 8:3: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man." Jesus came into this world in the likeness of sinful man, to be an offering for sin (cf. Heb 9:28; 10:5-12). Through His perfect, sinless life while in the garb of sinful flesh (Heb 7:26-27; 1 Pet 1:19), God condemned sin in the flesh, showing that there was no excuse for sin. Still, Jesus paid the penalty of the sinner on his or her behalf.³² Although innocent, He became a condemned criminal in place of the sinner, so that those who were condemned to die might be spared by the mercy of God in providing the substitute. Similarly, the bronze serpent apparently represented the death that must occur so that others could live. Notably, R. H. Lightfoot observes that the serpent in the wilderness was lifted up "on a pole or stake, like a condemned criminal, for all to see."³³ The symbolic corpse of the condemned serpent became an ensign for the people, signifying God's provision of life through the death of the enemy, which represented sin.

³⁰Unger, 214, states, "It was the divine purpose that the lawless principle of sin, expressing itself so fully in fallen man (cf. Matt. 27:27-31), should be judged and condemned in man, the God-man, Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:3)."

³¹Philip, 234.

³²Rom 5:6,8; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14-15; Gal 1:4; 3:13; 1 Tim 2:6; Tit 2:14; 1 Pet 3:18.

³³R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary*, ed. C. F. Evans, Oxford Paperbacks (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 117.

In this connection, Matthew Henry points out that “Christ crucified *stands for an ensign of the people*, Isa. xi.10.”³⁴ The NIV of Isa 11:10 states, “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious” (cf. v. 12). The serpent on the pole functions as a type of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, being lifted up as a banner for the people to rally around as they look in faith to God’s provision for their forgiveness and salvation.

Conclusion

In taking another look at the bronze serpent on the pole, we have observed that there appears to be a typological connection between the serpent’s being lifted up on the pole and the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross. This typology appears to transcend a simple analogy between two things that are lifted up to be looked at in faith. Meaningful faith requires comprehension, and comprehension requires that the symbols used be understandable within the context. Looking to the representation of a live venomous serpent lifted up on a pole would not be very understandable as inspiring faith in the context of people dying from the bite of such serpents. The more likely response would be either fear or, in the context of Canaanite and Egyptian practices, worship. Neither of these were the responses intended by God in giving directions to Moses.

Only a slain serpent, portrayed as impaled on a stake and lifted up as a banner to rally around would properly symbolize the victory over the enemy that would instill faith and hope in the hearts of a disconsolate and dying people. Looking in faith to the vanquished serpent lifted up as a trophy on the pole would serve to remind the people of God of the promise in Gen 3:15 that the head of the serpent would be crushed by the Seed of the woman, but the heel of the promised Seed would be bruised in the process. Thus, within the type was already found, by divine design, the essential elements of the archetype, and these elements could be perceived by faith on the part of the original observers and participants, if they were so inclined.

³⁴Henry, 665.