

I, YHVH, am your healer

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While the Christian Scriptures are replete with examples of physical healing miracles as evidence of the divinity of Jesus, the Torah offers little information about a healing tradition, while providing much guidance on matters of health and hygiene. In the Hebrew Scriptures, health is God's blessing, disease is generally a punishment for sin,¹ and God is the physician for humanity.

The rabbis teach that Torah study brings about healing and might postpone death. One commentary writes, "The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'See how beloved is the language of the Torah, it is healing for the tongue.' How do we know this? Because Scripture says: 'A healing tongue is a tree of life' (Prov 15:4) and 'tree of life' is but another term for Torah, as it is written, 'It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it' (Prov 3:18)."² The midrash goes on to explain that while Moses was not initially a "man of words" (Ex 4:10), God healed his speech impediment (Ex 4:11). The Talmud states that the Angel of Death could not prevail against David on what was to be the day of his death because he was studying Torah.³

The oral tradition (including the Talmud) has many other references to healing, including non-Scriptural stories about Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph and Solomon; there are also references to the anointing of the sick with oil, along with a whispered prayer based on Exodus 15:26 (*vide*

¹ In the Book of Job, illness comes from Satan as a test, albeit with God's permission, or a means for spiritual advancement.

² Quoted by Edward A Goldman, "The Midrash and Healing," *The Living Pulpit* 6, no. 2 (1997). It is from Midrash Rabbah Deuteronomy I:1.

³ Babylonian Talmud Sabbath 30b, also quoted by Goldman.

infra).⁴ A Qumran manuscript reports that Abram healed Pharaoh by prayer and the laying-on of hands.⁵

The objective of this essay is to examine the theme of illness and healing as presented in the Torah and its associated literature. Because the Torah associates illness with sin, as does a long-standing tradition in Christian pastoral theology,⁶ that theme will receive secondary attention. The most complex of the healing narratives is that of Numbers 21:4-9, the story of the fiery serpents in the wilderness and the crafting of the bronze serpent. This essay will examine this short, enigmatic passage in the most detail because of familiar mythical associations between serpents and healing, and because Jesus refers to it in the Gospel of John.

Abraham, post-circumcision (Genesis 18)

YHVH appeared to Abraham at Mamre. In the text, the explicit purpose of the visit is to inform Abraham that Sarah will have a son, even though she is post-menopausal, and to warn Abraham of the upcoming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Greek Orthodox tradition asserts that the three visitors were the persons of the Trinity, but the rabbinical tradition suggests that the three men were Raphael, Michael and Gabriel.⁷

The name Raphael (רַפָּאֵל) means, “El has healed. The Book of Tobit⁸ describes Raphael as one of the seven angels who stand before God (Tob 12:15), and also as a healer. The non-canonical Book of Enoch also prominently mentions him by name. Medieval mystics compared the

⁴ R.J.S. Barrett-Lennard, *Christian Healing after the New Testament*(Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994), pp. 240-241. He cites Harris, who describes passages in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123. He cites an article by Flusser.

⁶ See Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology*(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1983), pp. 78; 227, for a discussion that takes into account the story of the healing of the blind man (John 9).

⁷ Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*(New York: Schocken Books, 1949), p. 52.

⁸ The Book of Tobit appears in the Septuagint (LXX) and the Christian Apocrypha, although it is not part of the official Hebrew canon.

attributes of Raphael to those of the Roman Mercury and Greek Hermes, and to this day, Raphael has a strong tradition in Judeo-Christian folklore as the archangel associated with medicine and healing. The Roman church considers him to be a saint whose feast day is October 24, and associates him with the angel at the Bethzatha healing pool (John 5:4). However, the text of Genesis 18 does not explicitly describe a healing event.

Rashi writes that the events of Genesis 18 occurred three days after Abraham had circumcised himself (Gen 17:24) and that God came to him in order to comfort him.⁹ Thus, because God visited the ailing Abraham, humans should follow God's example and also visit the sick; the Midrash (Lev R 34:1) teaches that a person "who visits an invalid takes away a sixtieth part" of that person's pain.¹⁰ Thus, the rabbinical tradition interprets this as a story of the need to visit and console the ill, rather than as a healing narrative.

God heals

Neither the Hebrew nor the Christian Scriptures advocate use of pagan healing practices. The story of King Asa (2 Chr 16:12-13) states that he died because "in his disease he sought not to YHVH, but to the physicians (רָפָא, *rapha*)." In response to Abraham's intercessory prayer, God (אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*) healed Abimelech and his family so that they could have children (Gen 20:17-18).

The drought in the desert of Shur (Ex 15:22-26) caused the people to complain¹¹ to Moses. They had found water at Marah, but it was bitter.¹² YHVH had Moses heal the water by throwing a

⁹ (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki) Rashi, "Commentary on the Tanakh", Judaica Press http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm.

¹⁰ Goldman., p. 40.

¹¹ The English word, "murmur" commonly translates the Hebrew (לָוַן, *lwn*), but does not adequately convey the magnitude of *kvetching* to the point of near-rebellion that the Hebrew word implies.

tree into it, and said (Ex 15:26), “If you will obey the voice of YHVH Elohim, and do what is right in His eyes, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all his statutes, then all the illness that I put upon Egypt I shall not put upon you because I YHVH am your healer (רָפָא, *rapha*).”¹³

The non-canonical Sirach 38:1-15 offers commentary on this episode, noting that just as God made water sweet by means of wood, so God created medicines from the earth. Healing comes from the Most High. God created healers and gave them knowledge and skill, so that God might be glorified through the healer’s works. The author advises those who are ill to pray to God, to distance and cleanse themselves from their sins, and make appropriate offerings to God. The healer will also pray to God.¹⁴

Skin disease and sin

Leviticus 13:1-46 is a Biblical manual for diagnosis of human dermatological disease, as well as disease of cloth and houses. A person with skin disease should be brought to the priest to determine whether the patient has “leprosy” (טַרְסָרַת, *tsara’ath*)¹⁵ or some other condition. The leper, and persons with certain other conditions, are “unclean” and will be put into quarantine for seven days and reexamined until cured. The priest certifies that the disease has resolved and presides at the elaborate cleansing rituals, including a guilt offering and sin offering in which the priest makes atonement before God (Lev 14:1-7; 14:8-9; 14:10-18; 14:19-20). The priest anoints the former leper both with blood and with olive oil. In all of this, there is no provision for a

¹² In addition to being a place name, the Hebrew מָרָא (*mara*) can mean “bitter” or refer to rebellion and disobedience.

¹³ Translations in this paper are based on the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, 4th corrected edition and the Groves-Wheeler Westminster Hebrew Morphology, v. 4.10 with reference to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT), The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT), and to the translations of the Authorized Version and the New English Translation, along with its notes. These are found in Accordance Bible Software, version 8.2.3.

¹⁴ This paraphrase is based on the Rahlfs Greek LXX and Brenton’s English Translation in Accordance Bible Software. The section also contains the memorable sentence, “He who sins before his Maker, let him fall into the hand of the physician.”

¹⁵ The term “leprosy” does not necessarily describe the skin disease caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*, called leprosy in modern times. Additionally, it can be a metaphor for a person’s sins.

healing ritual. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the cure of leprosy belongs to the prophet Elisha, who as an agent of God healed Naaman (2 Kgs 5:10-14). Thus, this type of disease results from sin, and healing is God's work, not the work of human hands.

Miriam's attack of leprosy

The prophet Miriam appears in Exodus 15:20-21 as Aaron's sister, leading the women in a song of thanksgiving for God's rescue of the people from the pursuing Egyptians at the Red Sea. She is also the unnamed sister of Moses in Exodus 2:4,¹⁶ who returned him to their mother. In Numbers 12:1-16, she and Aaron criticize Moses for having married an Ethiopian woman, speaking against him, and challenging his authority as the sole leader of the people. YHVH hears this, calls the three to a meeting at the tabernacle, where He rather clearly asserts the leadership of Moses. YHVH then strikes Miriam with snowy leprosy,¹⁷ and a repentant Aaron asks Moses to intercede. Moses, if "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22), would have known about the Egyptian healing tradition, but it does not appear that he used it at this, or any other, time. Instead, Moses asks YHVH to heal her, and YHVH does so after the required seven-day quarantine. Numbers 20:1 records her death, and the Torah recalls her punishment in Deuteronomy 24:9; Micah 6:4 affirms that God had sent her to the people, along with Moses and Aaron. Christian typology relates her to Mary, mother of Jesus, and also to the other Marys.

Illness curses in Deuteronomy

The closing sections of Deuteronomy contain sublime blessings for those who follow the Law, and impressive curses directed toward those who do not listen to God and who do not observe the Law. Moses is the speaker (Deut 1:1), but presumably God has told him what to say. The curses impose pestilence (Deut 28:21); death from relentless weakness, fever, and pallor (Deut

¹⁶ Numbers 26:59 reports that Aaron, Moses, and Miriam were children of Amram and Jochebed.

¹⁷ Numbers 12:12 suggests that she had a quite severe skin condition.

28:22); the Egyptian boil (see Ex 9:9-11), tumors,¹⁸ a scab, and itching that cannot be healed (Deut 28:27). There are also psychiatric illnesses (Deut 28:28, 34), and more incurable boils from head to toe (Deut 28:35). God will punish the sinner with severe illnesses, including all of the diseases of Egypt and diseases not named (Deut 28:59-61). God says (Deut 32:39), “I kill and give life. I wound severely and I heal. None can be delivered from my hand.”

The fiery serpents

Only a few weeks after leaving Egypt, the children of Israel complained to Moses that they were hungry (Ex 16:2-15). God responded by sending manna in the mornings, and quail in the evenings, along with commandments that would test faith and obedience. Towards the end of the journey (Num 21:4-9; see Appendix 1),¹⁹ they again spoke against Moses and Elohim regarding a lack of food and water, furthermore accusing them of taking the people out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness. Presumably, God was still providing manna and quail, but in reference to that gift, they stated, “our soul loathes at this miserable food” (Num 21:5). YHVH sent fiery serpents²⁰ to punish them, and many died. The people came to Moses, acknowledging sin and asking him to pray that YHVH would take away the serpents. On YHVH’s direction Moses made a bronze serpent, set on a pole, that could heal on sight.²¹

There are several tales of complaining in the course of the desert journey. The general pattern is that of 1) the journey, 2) the peoples’ complaining, 3) God’s judgment, 4) the peoples’ repentance, 5) intercession by Moses, and 6) God’s response.²² Not all of the incidents provoked

¹⁸ However, see 1 Samuel 6 for a possible cure for “tumors.” This will be discussed below.

¹⁹ This passage probably is from the J source. See the appendix for a rough translation and brief commentary.

²⁰ If serpents eat dust for food (Genesis 3:14; Isaiah 65:25), they would have more of a right to complain about the palatability of their diet.

²¹ The staff of Asklepios bears a single snake. The staff of Hermes, more associated with commerce than with medicine, has two snakes. The brass serpent on a staff has been a healing symbol in Jewish folklore.

²² Terence E. Fretheim, "Life in the Wilderness," *Dialog* 17, no. 4 (1978), p. 268.

God's anger, bringing about a punishment that required God to rescue the people from certain death, but this one did so. The Midrash interprets the plague of fiery serpents as punishment for those who would speak against God,²³ going on to explain that the serpent of Genesis 3 was the first to speak against God. God cursed the serpent and punished Adam and Eve, who had listened to the serpent's slander. The Exodus incident indicates that the people had not learned that lesson, so God said, "Let the serpent, who was the first to introduce slander, come and punish those who speak slander." Some rabbinical traditions and early Christian writers viewed the fiery serpents as symbolizing "evil actions, idolatries and other sins"²⁴ The Bede writes that the bite of the serpent is "the poisonous enticement of the vices, which afflict the soul and bring about its spiritual death."²⁵

In response to repentance and prayer, God might have simply taken away the attacking fiery serpents and brought about healing directly, or through the hands of the tribal leadership. In response to an intercessory prayer from Moses on behalf of the repentant people, God did not have Moses perform any act of healing. Instead, God required the people to look at the elevated bronze serpent.

Was the bronze serpent an idol?

The fashioning of a bronze serpent seems to violate the law forbidding the making of a likeness (תְּמוּנָה, *temuna*) of things in heaven or on earth (Ex 24, Deut 5:8). However, similar statements about making a likeness of a living thing found in Deuteronomy 4:16, 23, and 25 imply that the commandment applies to creation of idols for worship. Additionally, 1 Samuel 6 reports a plague

²³ H Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Numbers*, Midrash Rabbah, vol. II (London: Soncino Press, 1939), pp. 770-1.

²⁴ Justin Martyr, quoted by Joseph T Lienhard, ed. *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, ed. Thomas C. Oden, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), p. 242.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

of mice and tumors (עֲפֵל, 'ofel)²⁶ for which the remedy was the making of golden images of the tumors and mice. Other examples of graven images are the cherubim on the lid of the Ark (Ex 25:18-20) and the lions of Solomon's throne (1 Kgs 10:18-20).

In the ancient Near East, the snake was an almost universal fertility symbol,²⁷ also appearing as a symbol of healing and healing deities (see Appendix 2). Castiglioni writes, "The symbol of the serpent as a healer has been universally accepted at all times and in all places."²⁸ A plain reading of the text, or a reading influenced by pagan thought, might lead one to assume that the serpent was a magical object that conveyed God's healing power. The Mishnah interprets the healing as resulting from the people's looking up towards God, submitting to God's commandment, rather than coming from, or through, the serpent itself.²⁹ Although the text states that looking at the serpent was sufficient, the Mishnah observes that action of gazing without "intention of heart" would not be successful.³⁰ The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan adds to Num 21:8, "...if he intends his heart towards the Name of God," and to Num 21:9, "...and intended his heart towards the Name of God, he lived."³¹ The Jerusalem Fragment adds to Num 21:9, "...and his face was lifted in prayer to his Father who is in heaven, and he looked upon the bronze serpent and lived."³² Of

²⁶ Tumors, boils, hemorrhoids (TWOT, entry 1662b). See Deut 28:27.

²⁷ Reviewed in detail, Karen Randolph Joines, "Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87, no. 3 (1968). The serpent often appeared in association with the bull, another fertility symbol. Also, an image of two entwined serpents would be a fertility symbol. See Karen Randolph Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological, and Literary Study* (Haddonfield, New Jersey: Haddonfield House, 1974), p. 87.

²⁸ Quoted by Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological, and Literary Study*, p. 86.

²⁹ Jacob Neusner, ed. *The Mishnah: A New Translation*, Accordance Bible Software, version 1.8 ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), Rosh Hashanah, 3:8H.

³⁰ Amy Birkan-Shear, "Does a Serpent Give Life? Understanding the Brazen Serpent According to Philo and Early Rabbinic Literature," in *Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity, and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2006), p. 421.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 424.

note, this was not a healing miracle bestowed on the people at large. It only worked for individuals who looked up. Each person had to decide whether to follow this commandment.

The deuterocanonical Book of Wisdom uses the story of the bronze serpent, described as a sign of salvation, to teach about the need to have faith in God (Wis 16:5-13). Likewise, Philo saw the elevated serpent as indicative of an individual's having achieved self-mastery³³ over the serpent on the ground in Eden, that is, various types of seduction and worldly temptations.³⁴

Thus, the rabbis teach that the bronze serpent was a symbol, not an idol or magical object. As it was not the bite of the fiery serpents that killed, but rather sin, it was not the serpent that heals, but God; "illness resulted because of sin and the only way for the illness to be taken care of was for the sin to be forgiven."³⁵ That interpretation amplifies the theme that illness, physical or spiritual, can result from sin, as seen in the above review of other sections of the Torah.

Fate of the bronze serpent

A plain reading of 2 Kings 18 indicates that the Israelites kept the serpent,³⁶ ultimately bringing it to Jerusalem, and at some point beginning to offer incense to it. The use of an incense offering suggests that the people had come to worship the bronze serpent as a deity, forgetting (or not having been taught) that it was a symbol of their need to lift their eyes heavenward and trust in God. Hezekiah crushed it to pieces, calling it נְחֻשְׁטָן (*nechushtan*). This name is a double pun that fuses the components of the paronomasia from the Hebrew words for bronze and serpent.

Writing in the fifteenth century, Rashi considered it derogatory usage.³⁷

³³ Marc Turnage, "Is It the Serpent That Heals? An Ancient Jewish Theoloumenon and the Developing Faith in Jesus," in *Israel in the Wilderness*(Boston: Brill, 2008), pp. 74-5.

³⁴ Patrick J Willson, "Snake on a Stick," *Christian Century* 111, no. 7 (1994), p. 223.

³⁵ Turnage, p. 77.

³⁶ However, all scholars agree that there is no mention of the serpent from the time of Moses until the time of Hezekiah. Some assert that they are one and the same, and others claim that they are not. The Basilica of St. Ambrose in Milan has claimed to have the actual serpent of Moses, mounted on a granite column.

³⁷ Rashi, Commentary.

It seems odd that Hezekiah would vilify and destroy a historical relic of Israel's journey out of Egypt if he had believed it to be authentic, but 2 Kings 18:3 states that Hezekiah did what was proper in the eyes of YHVH, as had David. He took away the "high places" (בָּמֹת, *bamah*), a technical term referring to pagan worship platforms,³⁸ and destroyed their associated structures. The *matzevah* (מַצֵּבָה) was a pillar,³⁹ or pillars, dedicated to the male deity, and the *asherah* (אֲשֵׁרָה) was a wooden pole that symbolized Asherah, the Canaanite goddess of fertility.⁴⁰ The association of the serpent image with these other symbols suggests that Hezekiah believed that the Nechushtan was also a pagan object. If he had thought that it was the authentic bronze serpent of Moses, that had come to be venerated as if it were a pagan object, one would speculate that Hezekiah would have attempted to reeducate the people about the actual origin and nature of the image, rather than destroying it.

There are many alternative hypotheses, none supported by concrete evidence. Three of these warrant brief examination. First, it is possible that Hezekiah's serpent was a relic of a Canaanite healing cult that had become associated with the wilderness story,⁴¹ resulting in a syncretism of Canaanite and Jewish beliefs,⁴² and, perhaps, the writing of the Numbers passage as an etiological account.⁴³ Archeologists have found pagan bronze serpent figures throughout the region,⁴⁴ including two each at Megiddo, Hazor, and Shechem. Rowley speculates that Zadok

³⁸ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Electronic text as found in Accordance, Version 1.4 ed.(Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), entry 253.

³⁹ The word refers to various types of cultic pillars, including those set up by Jacob in Genesis 28, and Moses in Exodus 24:4.

⁴⁰ Harris, Archer Jr., and Waltke, entry 253. Asherah was the consort of El, and the mother of Baal.

⁴¹ Philip J Budd, *Word Biblical Commentary: Numbers*, vol. 5 (Waco: Word Books, 1984), p. 235.

⁴² Roger S. Borass, "Of Serpents and Gods," *Dialog* 17, no. 4 (1978), p. 275.

⁴³ Fretheim, p. 269.

⁴⁴ Joines, "Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult," pp. 245-6.

was a former Jebusite priest who introduced the serpent-deity from that tradition in the time of David or Solomon.⁴⁵ It is also possible that Hezekiah mistook the serpent for a Canaanite cultic figure, and destroyed it in zealous iconoclasm. Second, Shanks, who believes that the bronze serpent was an Egyptian symbol, observes that the Deuteronomic writings often refer to the *bamot*, *matzevot*, and the *asherah*, but only mention the Nechushtan in this one passage, suggesting that the statement regarding the offering of incense to the figure might not be historical.⁴⁶ Lastly if the Nechushtan were authentic and if Hezekiah gave it a derogatory name, it is possible that the passage in 2 Kings reflects a contemporary anti-Mosaic tradition linking Moses with idol worship.⁴⁷ In other words, Hezekiah destroyed it because it was a relic of the Mosaic era.

Restoration of the Nechushtan

If Hezekiah would take the bronze serpent and its lore from the people, the Gospel of John and subsequent post-Apostolic writers would restore it. In the discourse (John 3:1-21) with the learned Nicodemus, a Pharisee who would have been thoroughly acquainted with bronze serpent lore, Jesus teaches that a person must be born again, from above, in order to see the Kingdom of

⁴⁵ Harold Henry Rowley, "Zadok and Nehustan," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58, no. 2 (1939). (The ILL request for this is pending. Joines and Rosenbaum cite it.)

⁴⁶ Hershel Shanks, "Response to Slippery Nechushtan," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 33, no. 4 (2007).

⁴⁷ Diana Edelman, "Taking the Torah out of Moses? Moses' Claim to Fame before He Became the Quintessential Law-Giver," in *Construction De La Figure De Moïse* (Paris: Gabalda, 2007), p. 31. Edelman offers an extensive discussion of possible reasons that Hezekiah might have felt a need to destroy the image.

God. Jesus states that nobody has ascended to heaven except for the Son of Man,⁴⁸ who has descended from heaven.⁴⁹ He then states,

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,⁵⁰ so that whoever trusts shall in him have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever trusts in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who trusts in him is not judged. He who does not trust is judged already because he has not trusted in the name of the only Son of God.

In the post-apostolic era, the serpent story appears in the Epistle of Barnabas (Barn 12:5-10) in the context of a series of typological references to Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures,⁵¹ and in various Patristic writings. Such associations are easy to make, and in doing so one can incorporate material from the classic rabbinical sources. For example, the Zohar teaches that souls will ascend in order to be judged and punished for sins; yet everyone who is bitten will become afraid, repent, follow God's command, and be saved from everything.⁵²

⁴⁸ Written Scripture does not clearly explain the term, "son of man" and any attempt to do so here would go far beyond the intent of this essay. In the absence of clarity, Jewish and Christian scholars have proposed various *theologoumena*, or learned opinions, throughout the centuries. Concisely, the term Son of Man may refer to the second Person of the Trinity, or to a person whom God designates as a son of man (e.g., Ezek 2:1).

⁴⁹ Proverbs 30:4. Who has gone up into the heavens, and has come down? Who has gathered the wind by the handful? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who rises up over the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if you know?

⁵⁰ Isaiah 11:10. In that day, a root from Jesse will stand as a *nes* for the people. Nations will seek him, and his rest will be glorious. Isaiah 52:13. Behold, my servant shall be wise. He will go up (be exalted), and be lifted, and be very high.

⁵¹ Clarence L. Lee, "Moses' Serpent as a Patristic "Type", " *Dialog* 17, no. 4 (1978), p. 252.

⁵² Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans., David Goldstein (Oxford: OUP, 1989), p. 1184.

Thus, not to believe in Jesus, the Son of Man, is not to trust in God. No idol brings salvation, only Jesus, who is God.⁵³ Unlike the uplifted serpent, Jesus is not merely a sign of salvation. Jesus is salvation. However, just as having faith in God's Word resulted in salvation from the burning bite of the fiery serpents by gazing on the bronze (a mixture of copper and tin) serpent in the wilderness, so having faith and looking up at the Son of Man (a fusion of divine and human), lifted on the pole, will heal the people from the bite of sin.

Conclusion

These passages present ample sermon opportunities on themes of sin, repentance, prayer, and salvation. However, the primary objective of this essay is to discuss healing in the Torah and the associated rabbinic tradition.

Illness can affect body, mind, and soul in interacting ways. Sin clearly affects the soul. The rabbis teach that physical and mental illness might result from sin, and that God is the only effective physician. The prescription for illness that results from sin is study of the Torah, prayer, acknowledgement and repentance of sin, further prayer for forgiveness of sin, and the making of appropriate offerings to God. Healthy individuals should recognize that their health is a gift from God, and that they should visit and comfort the sick.

The Amidah prayer of Judaism petitions, "Heal us, YHVH, and we will be healed. Save us and we shall be saved, for You are our praise."⁵⁴ Grant complete healing to all our wounds, for You, Almighty King, are a faithful and merciful healer. Blessed are You, YHVH, who heals the sick of His people Israel."

⁵³ A common typology notes that the Hebrew name Yeshua (Latin, *Jesus*) means salvation, and that the divine nature of Jesus is YHVH, who has mercy on the world.

⁵⁴ See Jeremiah 17:14.

Those called to a ministry of healing will remember that God says, “I YHVH am your healer,” that God is the source of all healing, and that God equips healers for their ministry by giving them knowledge and skill, so that their works will glorify God, not the healer. Just as an ill person might pray that God will send a physician, the physician will offer intercessory prayer, additionally asking that God will use his or her hands to assist in healing.

Appendix 1. Numbers 21:4-9

21:4 wayyis'û mēhōr hāhār derek yam-sûp
lisbōb ʾet-ʾereš ʾēdōm wattiqšar nepeš-hāʾām
baddārek:

21:5 way^edabbēr hāʾām bēʾlōhîm ūb^emōšeh
lāmâ he^elîṭunû mimmišrayim lāmût
bammidbār kî ʾên lehem w^eʾên mayim
w^enapšēnû qāšâ ballehem haqq^elōqēl:

21:6 way^ešallah yhwh bāʾām ʾet hann^ehāšîm
hašš^erāpîm way^enašš^ekû ʾet-hāʾām wayyāmāt
ʾam-rob mîisrāʾēl:

21:7 wayyābō⁷ hāʾām ʾel-mōšeh wayyō⁷mrû
hāṭā⁷nû kî-dîbbarnû bayhwh wābāk hitpallēl
ʾel-yhwh w^eyāsēr mēʾalēnû ʾet-hannāhāš
wayyitpallēl mōšeh b^eʿad hāʾām:

21:8 wayyō⁷mer yhwh ʾel-mōšeh ʿāšē l^ekā
šārāp w^ešîm ʾotō ʿal-nēs w^ehāyâ kol-hannāšûk
w^erāʾâ ʾotō wāhāy:

21:9 wayya^eʾas mōšeh n^ehaš n^ehōšet
way^ešîmēhû ʿal-hannēs w^ehāyâ ʾim-nāšak
hannāhāš ʾet-ʾîš w^ehibbîṭ ʾel-n^ehaš hann^ehōšet
wāhāy:

21:4 And they set out from the mountain Hor
by way of the Red Sea [sea of reeds],⁵⁵ to go
around the land Edom, and short was the soul⁵⁶
of the people with the way.

21:5 And the people spoke against Elohim⁵⁷
and with Mosheh, “To what have you (pl.)
brought us up from Egypt to die in the
wilderness, for there is not food and there is
not water, and our soul loathes at this
miserable bread [food].”⁵⁸

21:6 And YHVH sent fiery serpents⁵⁹ with the
people and they bit the people, and many
people from Israel died.

21:7 And the people came to Mosheh and said,
“We have sinned because we have spoken
against YHVH and against you. Pray to YHVH
that he would turn aside the serpent from upon
us, and Mosheh prayed through the people.

21:8 And YHVH said to Mosheh, make to you
a fiery one and put it upon a pole,⁶⁰ and anyone
bitten and sees it shall live.

21:9 And Mosheh made a bronze⁶¹ serpent and
put it upon the pole, and it was if the serpent
bit a man, and looked to the bronze serpent,
and he lived.

⁵⁵ Either translation is possible.

⁵⁶ נפש־הָעַם נִקְצַר And short was the soul. קצר (*qtzr*). Short, reduced, diminished (HALOT). Impatient, vexed, grieved (TWOT); used in idioms (TWOT). נֶפֶשׁ (*nefesh*). Soul. Life, creature, mind (TWOT).

⁵⁷ אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*). “The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to those, You want to know my name? I am called according to my actions. When I judge the creatures I am Elohim, and when I have mercy with My world, I am named YHWH” (Ex R. 3:6).

⁵⁸ לֶחֶם (*lechem*). Bread, or food in general. Also a reference to the manna.

⁵⁹ נָחָשׁ (*nachash*). Snake, serpent. שָׂרָפָה (*sarap*) fiery. See the notes for a discussion of these terms.

⁶⁰ נֵס (*nes*). Standard, flag, ensign. A pole for these. A sign or symbol. See the notes for a discussion.

⁶¹ נְחֹשֶׁת (*nechoshet*). Bronze, brass. Discussed in the notes.

Notes

1. The word *sarap* suggests fire or burning. In that sense, “fiery” might refer to the appearance of the serpents, or to the venomous nature of their bite. Milgrom notes that, in combination with *nachash*, it might be a technical term describing a particular type of winged serpent (cf. Is 14:29; 30:6) found in the Egyptian religion as well as on an eighth century bronze bowl excavated at Ninevah.⁶² The Midrash explains that the fire of the *sarap nachash* burns the soul. It can also be translated as seraph (the heavenly being with six wings) in the sense of Isaiah 6:2, 6.

2. The word *nechoshet* can be translated as “copper,” “brass,” or “bronze.” In modern times, bronze is an alloy of copper and tin in an 88:12 ratio, and brass is 90:10 alloy of copper and zinc. TWOT (1349) doubts that Moses used pure copper to fashion the serpent, and states that the use of brass was not prevalent until the intertestamental period. Milgrom, however, argues that the serpent might have been fashioned of copper.⁶³ The area around Edom was an important area for copper mining and smelting,⁶⁴ and a copper serpent figure found at Timna in this region dates from 1200 to 900 BC. The word for serpent (*nachash*)⁶⁵ comes from the same root as bronze.⁶⁶ The term “bronze serpent” is thus a paronomasia.

3. In the Hebrew, there is a preponderance of sibilant sounds in Numbers 21:4-9, mostly due to frequent use of the words for bronze, serpent, and fiery,⁶⁷ particularly in verses 8 and 9, in which

⁶² Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1990), p. 174.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 173, 175.

⁶⁵ The gematria of nun-chet-shin is 50+8+300, 358. That of mem-shin-yod-chet (*mashiach*) is 40+300+10+8, also 358.

⁶⁶ There are at least ten Hebrew words for “snake.” See Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological, and Literary Study*, pp. 2-11.

⁶⁷ In the Masoretic text, I count 3 samech and 1 shin in v. 4, 3 shin in v. 5, 5 shin in v. 6 (the appearance of the fiery serpents), 1 samech and 3 shin in v. 7 (take the serpents away), 1 samech and 5 shin in v. 8, and 1 samech and 10 shin in v. 9.

God prescribes the cure and Moses carries out God's instructions.⁶⁸ Sibilant sounds are also features of Ugaritic and Akkadian incantations for treatment of snake bite.⁶⁹ A Ugaritic text tells how the "Mother-of-horses" calls out to the sun-goddess Shapshu, who asks other gods and goddesses to heal her foals, who are dying from snake bites.⁷⁰ The magic of the deity Horon is successful.

4. The Hebrew word *nes* can take on various meanings, depending on context. It might refer to a flag, ensign, or standard or to the pole on which such an emblem would be raised;⁷¹ the Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, however, state that the serpent was set on a high, or elevated, place.⁷² The word can also mean "sign" in the sense of "signs and wonders" in the sense of the Greek *σημείον* (*semion*; sign, miracle); the LXX uses this word to translate the Hebrew *nes* in this passage.⁷³

⁶⁸ Victor Hurowitz, "Healing and Hissing Snakes: Listening to Numbers 21:4-9," *Scriptura* 87, no. (2004), p. 280.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁷⁰ Baruch A. Levine and Jean-Michel de Tarragon, "Shapshu Cries out in Heaven: Dealing with Snake-Bites at Ugarit," *RB* (1988).

⁷¹ TWOT, entry 1379a.

⁷² Birkan-Shear, p. 424.

⁷³ Turnage, p. 73.

Appendix 2. Some pagan deities and demons associated with snakes⁷⁴

Male deities and demons	Female deities and demons
Babylonian, Mesopotamian	
Marduk	Lamashtu
Ningishzida. A serpent-god of spring and fertility, symbolized by a caduceus. ⁷⁵	
Pasusu. <i>The Exorcist</i>	
Egyptian	
Apophis	Hathor
Atum	
Horus. Son of Isis and Osiris. Seen as a conqueror of snakes and scorpions.	
Thoth. A serpent and staff, as a symbol of healing.	
Greek	
Asklepios. A deified human, a god of medicine.	Athena
Hermes Trismegistus. A serpent and staff, as a symbol of healing.	Hygeia. A Greek goddess of health, daughter of Asklepios.
Other (including Semitic)	
Baal	Anat
Eshmun. Phoenician god of healing	Astarte (Ishtar)
Horon	Qudshu (also found in Egyptian sources)
Nergal	
Nirah	
Resheph	

⁷⁴ Adapted from Edelman., p. 34.

⁷⁵ Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological, and Literary Study.*, p. 87; 114-9.

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