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The Healing Snake

21: 1-9

The healing snake DIG: What did it mean to “completely destroy” a city or people? Why did God approve of, even command, that the Israelites completely destroy whole cities? After destroying ‘Arad, why do the people complain (again) about the manna? How was the healing snake Moses put on a pole a type of Messiah and His ministry? Why and how does he provide relief from the snakes?

REFLECT: What does ADONAI do when you need discipline? When you need relief? How does this compare to God’s actions in this passage? Despite their victory over ‘Arad, the people’s trust lacked endurance. What can you do to build endurance in trusting ADONAI? What use of this incident does Yeshua make? Have you taken advantage of the lifted up Healer and the Bread of Life?

All who looked upon the healing snake lived.

‘Arad destroyed (21:1-3): Chapter 21 describes the first “official” encounter with **the Canaanites** on the battlefield. **Isra’el’s** victory against **the Canaanite** king at **Hormah** provided a glimpse of what should have happened in **Isra’el’s** first attack into **Canaan** (**to see link click Cc - Defeat by the Canaanites and Amalekites**). **Then the king of ‘Arad, a Canaanite who lived in the Negev** about twenty miles south of Hebron, **heard that Isra’el was approaching by way of Atharim, so he attacked Isra’el and took some of them captive (21:1).** The news of **Isra’el’s** march from Egypt to Kadesh had gone before **them** and the rulers of the city-states in **Canaan** weren’t going to give in to those intruders without a fight. Apparently **Isra’el** wasn’t initially prepared because some of **them** were **taken prisoners**.⁴¹³ But instead of proceeding without **God’s** presence or counsel as **Isra’el** had done in **Isra’el’s** first attack into **Canaan**, **the leaders** now consulted with **Ha’Shem**. **Isra’el vowed** to follow **ADONAI** in a holy war (see **Deuteronomy Ag - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**) and **dedicated all the cities they captured to YHVH** by utterly **destroying them** (see **Leviticus Ff - Cherem**). **Isra’el made a cherem vow to ADONAI, “If you will hand these people over to me, I will completely destroy their cities” (21:2).**

We need to remember that **the Canaanites** were not a highly unified war machine. **Their cities** were spread throughout **the Promised Land**, mainly in the valleys and the Jordan Valley. They were largely **city-states**, some walled, some not. When there was a common enemy, **they** tended to unify, but not all the time. Remember also that the term "**Canaanite**" was a generic term for the tribes of the descendants of **Canaan**. Hence, we find the names "Jebusites," "Amorites," "Girgashites," and the "Hivites" all representing the larger term "Canaanite."⁴¹⁴ **The Canaanites** did not unite and **the Israelites** defeated **the king of 'Arad**. **ADONAI listened to what Isra'el said and handed the Canaanites over to them, so they completely destroyed (cherem) them and their cities and named the place Hormah** (Hebrew: *chormah*, meaning *devoted, the implication is devoted to complete destruction*) **(21:3)**. The association of the victorious battle with **Isra'el's** earlier defeat was made certain by the use of the name of this place. Therefore, one might hope that perhaps the wilderness generation had finally begun to develop a sense of trust and obedience to **God**, but the story that follows about **the bronze snake** quickly dashes those hopes.⁴¹⁵

The people complained (21:4-5): This passage has a geographical and logical connection to the account of **the death of Aaron** on **Mount Hor** (see [Df - The Death of Aaron](#)), and to the rebuff of **Edom** in not permitting **Isra'el** to pass through **its** territory even though **they** were right at the edge of **the Promised Land** (see [De - The Resistance of Edom](#)). There is no real connection indicated with the little account of the victory over **the Canaanites** of **'Arad** as seen above. These accounts are separate but contrasted for effect. **The people** had to travel on a detour because of the stubborn attitude of **Edom**. Each step **they** took south and east, rather than north and west, must have seemed unbearably tedious. **They** once again traveled the road to **the Sea of Reeds** to make a broad journey around **Edom**. **Then they traveled from Mount Hor on the road toward the Sea of Reeds in order to go around the land of Edom; but the people** knew there was a shorter way and, as a result, **grew impatient because** it was at least a two-hundred mile detour **(21:4)**.⁴¹⁶

Typically, **the people** complained against **Moses**, and sometimes **Aaron**, but rarely did **they** complain directly against **YHVH** as **they** did here. **The people spoke against God and against Moshe: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt? To die in the desert? There's no real food, there's no water, and we're sick of this miserable manna we're eating" (21:5)! They**, like **their** fathers before **them**, asked why **they** had not been left in **Egypt** and why **they** should be brought to this awful place **to die**. **They** dragged out the same old laundry list of complaints about the lack of **food** and **water** and the monotony of **the manna**. If the preceding story of the conquest of **the Canaanite king** was a hopeful

glimpse of what **Isra'el's** obedience could have been, then this complaint story is a tired old snapshot of what **Isra'el's** disobedience had been all along (**11:1-4, 14:2-4, 16:13-14, and 20:3-5**).⁴¹⁷



The healing snake (6-9): Once more **God's people** had rejected **Him**; again **He** brought judgment on **their** heads. The pattern of rebellion by **the people** followed by **God's** judgment is well established in the book of **Numbers**. It is possible that the basic trigger that provoked the outrageous actions and words of **Moshe** in **his** rebellion against **YHVH** in **20:9-11** was precisely because **he** felt this pattern had been broken at that time. **ADONAI** had not brought **His** wrath against **the people** as **Moses** might have expected in **20:2-5**. So, **Moshe** raged against **them**, and in the process **he** forgot who **God** was (and is). **He** confused the holy with the profane. For that moment it seemed like **he** didn't believe that **Ha'Shem** would **demonstrate His holiness to the people of Isra'el (20:12)**. But this time, **God** acted as **Moses** expected. **He** brought a new instrument of judgment on **the people**. This time it was **snakes**. **In response, God sent poisonous snakes among the people; they bit the people, and many of Isra'el's people died (21:6)**. **They** received a string instead of a blessing.

Nevertheless, there was a change of sorts in **the people** as **they** are described in this chapter. **They** continued to rebel (see [Ea - Taking a Stand for God](#)), but now they asked for forgiveness. **They** were **sinners**, but **they** were confessing **their wickedness**. **The people came to Moshe and said: We have sinned by speaking against ADONAI (Psalm 51:3-4) and against you Moses. Pray to ADONAI that he rid us of these snakes (21:7a)**. In this act of repentance, we can see the seeds of renewal. In **their** desire for forgiveness, there was hope for **their** future. So **Moshe prayed for the**

people (21:7b) as **he** had **prayed** for **them** before (for example **11:2**). And **YHVH** answered, but in a most unusual way. In the case of **the fire** that came down out of heaven at the beginning of **their** troubles (**11:1-3**), **the prayer** of Moshe put **the fire out**. In this case, however, **the snakes** did not slither away, nor did **they** lose **their** fangs; **the** fiery **snakes** continued to plague **the people** with **their** horrible bites, and **the people** continued to grow ill and **die**.⁴¹⁸

And ADONAI answered Moshe: “Make a poisonous snake and put it on a pole. When anyone who has been bitten looks (Hebrew: *raah*, the general word for looking) **at it, he will live.”** Obediently, **he made** the **bronze snake (21:8-9a)**. The phrase **a bronze snake** is a wordplay since the words **snake** and **bronze** are closely related in Hebrew: *nehash nehoshet*. Several hundred years later in **Isra’el’s** history, **King Hezekiah** destroyed what was alleged to be **the bronze snake**. **He removed the high places, smashed the standing-stones, cut down the Asherah and broke to pieces the bronze serpent that Moshe had made; because in those days the people of Isra’el were making offerings to it, calling it Nechushtan**, sounding like the Hebrew for both **bronze** and **snake (Second Kings 18:4)**.⁴¹⁹

We pray that this time **all Isra’el** will look to the real **Healer** lifted up on a crucifixion stake, affecting **healing** from the most poisonous snakebite of them all . . . **sin** (see the commentary on **Romans Da - The Redemption of Isra’el**). **And put it on the pole (21:9b)**. It is fascinating that the Hebrew word translated **pole** (Hebrew: *nes*) is also the same word for *miracle*. Therefore, the complete answer to this mystery **pole** is found in **John 3:13-15: No one has gone up into heaven; there is only the One who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. Just as Moshe lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life**. Just as **the pole** in the wilderness was a *miracle*, so was the atonement of **Messiah**. **ADONAI** accepted the blood of one perfect **Man** in the place of **sinners**. But **He** did not keep the sacrifice dead! Three days later, **Yeshua** rose from the dead! This was, indeed, a great *miracle*! Hence, **the pole (snake, cross, tree)** became a *miracle* as it helped to bring about the perfect atonement accomplished by **the Son of God** for all who would put **their trust** in **Him**.⁴²⁰

If a snake had bitten someone, then, when he looked (Hebrew: *hibit*, meaning to pay close attention and emphasizes a fixed gaze) intently **toward the bronze snake, he stayed alive (21:9c)**. There were two aspects of **looking** at work here. One was physical; health not heaven was involved. Many would **die** in the wilderness of the fiery venom of those **snakes**. But not all had to **die**. **ADONAI** would keep many alive if **they** would only do as **He**

demanded. It is important to note **that the bronze snake** did not save anyone. But secondly, this **look**, that is what saved them, involved **trust**. Those who **looked with a fixed gaze** were healed.⁴²¹

The Talmud asks how a copper snake could control life and death (Rosh Ha'Shanah 29a). The answer given is that when the Israelites raised their eyes to Ha'Shem they were healed. There is, however, an even more ancient Jewish commentary on the story of **the copper snake**. I am referring to a passage from a **Pseudepigraphic writing** from the first half of the first century AD called **The Wisdom of Solomon**. The writer says this about *the miracle* of **the healing copper snake**. **Only for a while were they thrown into disarray as a warning, possessing as they did a symbol of Your salvation to remind them of the commandment of Your Torah. For whoever turned towards it was saved, not by the sight beheld, but through You, the Savior of all (Rabbi J. H. Hertz, The Pentateuch and Haftarah, page 660).**

Notice several things about this comment from **The Wisdom of Solomon**. First, it refers to granting eternal life and delivery from **death**. This is in keeping with the comments expressed in **The Wisdom of Solomon** when it refers to **God** as **"the Savior."** **Yeshua, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Messiah**, is also called **"The Savior."** After all, that is the literal meaning of **His** name, **Yeshua**. Thus, just as **The Wisdom of Solomon** was directing people to view **God** as **the Savior** when **they** thought of **the copper snake**, even more so does **John 3:13-15** (above) do the same. **The real Savior of the Israelites** is the same **One** who spiritually saves all who **trust Him** from **death** and grants **them** the gift of eternal life.

We learn from **Numbers 21:7** that **the snake** was not upraised until after **Isra'el** repented of **their sin**. In other words, the benefits gained from looking at **the snake** were not effective until the issue of **sin** was dealt with. This is the same way for **the One** who was **lifted up** in **John 3:13-15**. In order to receive the gift of eternal life through "looking" to **Him**, the issue of **sin** has to be taken care of first. In fact, that is the reason why **He** was **lifted up** on the cross . . . to **die** for **sin**.

Notice the irony of the whole story. **The snake** caused terror to **the Israelites**. It was **the Snake of old** who is behind such terror - **Satan himself**. But neither of those **"snakes"** could do anything apart from **Divine** permission. It was **the Holy One Himself** who was, and is, in control. Both **"snakes"** are merely pawns in the eternal plan of **the Ancient of Days**. And, in this plan **He** promised that although **the snake** would inflict a wound upon **the people**, it would be a perfect descendant of Adam - **the Messiah** - who would inflict

upon **the snake** in the garden the devastating blow. **The Seed of the woman, the Messiah, will crush the head of the evil one (Genesis 3:15)**. Instead of **the Israelite people** looking at a **snake** and remembering all the terror **he** caused, **ADONAI** arranged it so that **the uplifted snake** would cause **their** thoughts to be directed towards **Him, the Savior** of all who would believe (**John 3:16**). In doing so, **they** would see **the One** who was promised to inflict the deathblow upon all **“snakes,” the Son of Man Himself, Yeshua Messiah.**⁴²²

If I asked you if you were a **sinner**, what would you say? **Romans 3:23** says: **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** That includes you and me, doesn't it? Most people feel that being good gets you into heaven and being bad keeps you out. That simply is not true; **we all have sinned.** What would you say sin is? I think we can agree that we are both sinners; now let's define **sin**. Some have said, "I'm not perfect," or "I have made some mistakes." But what do you think the Bible means by sin? Well, the Bible says that **everyone practicing sin breaks God's law - indeed, sin is lawlessness (First John 3:4)**. Have you ever disobeyed your parents? Have you ever misused the name of **God**? Have you ever told a lie? This is what **sin** is. It's breaking **God's law**. And any time you break a **law** there is a penalty. If you run a stop sign, the penalty is a fine. If you rob a bank, the penalty is jail. What is the penalty for breaking **God's law**?

The Bible teaches us that **the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23a)**. **The wages** of work is money, but the wages of sin is death. In other words, what I earn - the penalty, the punishment of **sin - is death. Death** is separation. The Bible speaks of two kinds of **death** that are two kinds of separation. The first **death** is separation of the body and the soul. If I were to die right now my body would fall to the floor, but my soul, the real me, would go somewhere else. But the Bible speaks of another **death**, one it calls **the second death**. This is separation of the soul from **God**. Now, the penalty of sin is death, spiritual death, and separation from **the LORD**. To put it simply - hell. All this is really bad news. But there is good news.

But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). We were spiritually dead and unable to make the first move toward **God** because we inherited Adam's **sin** nature that rebelled and separated us from **Him**. So, **God** made the first move toward us by sending **His** one and only **Son** to die in our place for the payment for our **sins**. We stand before **the Son of God**, guilty of **sin**, and facing a death penalty. But **Yeshua**, as **judge (John 5:27)**, comes down from behind the seat of judgment, takes off **His** judicial robe and stands beside us. It is there that **He** says to us, "I will take your place. I will die for you." And if you were the only person in the

world, **He** still would have died for you. The penalty for **sin** is death, but **Messiah** died and paid for **sin** so we do not have to go to hell.

It is not what you do for **God** that saves you, it is what **God** has already done for you. You don't get to heaven by what you do; you get to heaven by what you **believe**.

What is it that you need to **believe** in, to **trust** in, to have **faith** in, to be saved?

Do you have your Passport to eternity?

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son who died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16 and First Corinthians 15:3b-4). If you **believe** this, you are saved.

Nothing else matters.

Salvation = faith + nothing (not baptism, not good works, nothing means nothing).

Without

faith it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to Him must believe that

He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. Now is the day of salvation (Hebrews 11:6 and Second Corinthians 6:2c).

Would you like to be saved right now?

Pray this simple prayer in **faith**. But before you do, I want you to remember that saying a prayer does not save you, **trusting** in **Jesus Christ** does. **God**, I admit that I have sinned. I **believe Yeshua Messiah** died for my **sins** and I want to **trust Him** to save me right now. **Lord**, please come into my heart and make me a new person. I accept your **gift** of **salvation**.

If you were to die right now, where would you go?

Why should **God** let you into **His** heaven?

That's right, because **Yeshua** died to pay for your **sins**.⁴²³

If you prayed that prayer in **faith** see my commentary on [The Life of Christ Bw - What](#)



God Does for Us at the Moment of Faith.