

# **The Naked Bible Podcast 2.0**

**Number 103**

**“Moses and the Bronze Serpant”**

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**With**

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## **Moses and the Bronze Serpent**

Many Bible students find the episode in Numbers 21:1-9 confusing. Why would God tell Moses to make a bronze serpent (*nachash*)? Did God forget about the serpent of Genesis 3? Why would Jesus compare his impending death on the cross to the bronze serpent? This episode asks whether these ideas are in fact connected and how the serpent in the wilderness episode should be interpreted.

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 103, Moses and the Bronze Serpent. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing this week?

**MSH:** Pretty good.

**TS:** Good, it's been a long week.

**MSH:** Yeah, it has. I did some filming last week so that was fun. I did a few skywatch episodes to promote Unseen Realm and a book I've alluded to that I'm working on. So it was busy but it was kind of nice to get away and do a little bit of that. People on that end appreciate the podcast.

**TS:** I really enjoyed the last two episodes on eschatology.

**MSH:** I didn't get any hate mail.

**TS:** Lots of positive feedback on the last two episodes.

**MSH:** No one e-mailed me to remind me that I was giving up the faith or anything like that. I never know what to expect when I do prophecy because people just kind of go crazy with it.

**TS:** They're passionate about it. It's the end times, Mike. It's the end of the world.

**MSH:** Right, it matters.

**TS:** It's kind of a big deal.

**MSH:** Well, if the Cubs get into the World Series, I'll pay more attention because that's the harbinger of the end right there. Well, we're in Numbers 21 by request. Who would've ever thought that people would ask for a podcast episode in the book of Numbers? Well, here we are. That is the chapter, Numbers 21:1-9 of the Moses and the serpent in the wilderness, the bronze serpent episode. And we're doing this because I was asked by two or three people recently and I've had people ask about this in e-mail on other occasions. So I figured why not? This is a good kind of episode for a topical episodes so why not. Now, in these verses, I'm going to start off, we're going to read the passage.

But the first thing we're going to do is sort of talk about why people kind of wonder about this passage. It's a little bit off the beaten path. We're actually going to get into authorship issues here, but it's actually important because I think the episode in the book of Numbers here needs to be framed in a certain way. If you frame it in a certain way, it might sort of relieve some of the tension about the content of the passage and why it's sort of controversial and why people wonder about it. Here's the passage. Let's just start in verse 1 here. I'm reading ESV.

When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel, and

took some of them captive. <sup>2</sup> And Israel vowed a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction." <sup>3</sup> And the LORD heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction. So the name of the place was called Hormah.

<sup>4</sup> From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup> And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. <sup>7</sup> And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

**MSH:** So that's the story. It's a short episode. But one of the reasons why people wonder about it is the way this gets referenced in the New Testament with Jesus about the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so on so forth. So that creates kind of a conundrum in the minds of a number of people. Well, to start off, I think we need to think about our own preconceptions here and kind of examine a little bit why this particular episode gets the attention it does. And as I just noted, all of Christians find the passage confusing, maybe even troubling, not only because Jesus references this episode and they wonder what in the world is going on with that? Why would he reference that? What's the harm in referencing it? Well, that brings us to the second reason why people get kind of freaked out about it. It is because there's a serpent involved.

So there's really two reasons why people find the passage confusing or troubling and that is, it involves a serpent and the noun, *nachash*, is used, which is the term used for the serpent enemy of God in Genesis 3. So this noun is used in Numbers 21:6,7,9. There's another word also used, *seraph*, in the chapter, Numbers 21:6 and 8. But we have this reference to the *nachash* in this passage so Moses is going to build a bronze *nachash*. And also when Jesus does reference this passage, about the Son of Man be lifted up just like the serpent in the wilderness was lifted up, it just feels kind of weird that Jesus would use as an analogy to his impending crucifixion an episode that involved *nachash*, this term of the serpent because it's a term that goes back to the garden of Eden story, Genesis 3, the great enemy, the *nachash* that will be later called the Devil and Satan. So we look at it sort of this agglomeration of ideas, *nachash*, serpent, devil, Satan, Moses, wilderness, bronze serpent, Jesus, crucifixion, Son of Man being lifted up like the serpent was lifted up. It looks really confusing because all of these ideas are floating around in our head. But that's the point.

These ideas are floating around in our head. The Israelites experiencing this event in real-time know nothing about Jesus. They know nothing about the cross. They don't even know,

and this is going to sound controversial. I would suggest to you they don't even know the story of the Garden of Eden. We assume they do because we do and we assume that there's this confusion here "in the Bible" because we have the whole Bible and we have all of these things and we sort of blend them all together. They go in the same file drawer in our heads and we read the Numbers passage, or Jesus' statement about the Numbers passage, and we immediately bring the serpent enemy from Genesis 3 into the discussion. There is nothing in any of these texts that references Genesis 3 specifically. I'm going to repeat my own position here, my own thinking I started off with. I think there's a very good chance that no Israelite, none of the Israelites, had even heard of the serpent story in the Garden of Eden when this event is happening in real time. That's going to take some unwrapping because I know that in and of itself sounds a little odd.

But I'm suggesting to you, and want you to start thinking about this, that it sounds odd because you have an entire Bible. You cannot assume that an Israelite had the entire Bible, and frankly, you can't even assume that the Israelites living in Moses' day had any Bible at all. So this confusion that is in our heads about this passage and about the Garden of Eden story and about Jesus referencing this is a manufactured confusion because in our heads all those things are circulating when in the text none of those things get linked to each other, specifically. The only link that you have is Jesus saying Son of man is going to be lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness was lifted up. He has no reference back. He's not talking about Satan. He's not talking about Genesis 3. He's talking about Numbers 21. Numbers 21 is not talking about Genesis 3. And in real-time, the people living, Numbers 21, the people who were getting bitten by the serpents, and Moses do something before we die. Moses creates the bronze serpent. They look at it and they live. None of those people were thinking about the Garden of Eden, either, because they didn't have the story. And chances are they'd never even heard of the story. Now, let's unpack that a little bit.

This gets us into this whole Mosaic authorship issue, at least peripherally, at least a little bit. But this topic and passage invariably takes us that direction because we have the whole Bible and so we're naturally thinking that everybody else does, too, or did. When it comes to the issue of Genesis 3, did they know about that? You basically got two options. I'm going to exclude higher critical schools here. JEDP kind of stuff because it's speculative about sources that existed and how sources were mixed and matched and all that kind of stuff. Excluding that, if you're sort of a person with a high view of Scripture, you basically got two options. One is that Moses wrote Genesis 3. You accept that out of the gate. That's your starting point. Moses wrote Genesis 3. Moses is the guy in the story of Numbers 21 and so, mentally, you assume without any actual data, that Moses, this is going to sound comical, that Moses had written Genesis 3 and that everybody there had read it. Aside from the point of that being logistically impossible, how would Moses write this?

Here we have one copy of it now, I wrote the story Genesis 3, and now, if you take the low estimate of the numbers, if you don't take the numbers literally for the wandering Israelites, if you have a few hundred thousand of them, what are they doing, passing a stone tablet around? Are they passing the text written on the animal skin, are they passing it around? It's absurd to think that, even if Moses wrote it right there, right before the event in real time, that anybody knew it. You have to make amazing logical leaps to get to that position, that idea. If it's a few million people, then the problem becomes even more absurd. I'm hoping you get the picture. So even if you think Moses wrote Genesis 3 and this is the standard view, you have problems. But let's

think a little bit more about the standard conservative view here. Standard conservative view would say we got Moses, wrote the Torah, which includes Genesis, and when did Moses write that? Probably, if you read conservative books about this, Moses would've been writing the content of the Torah and Genesis, at least the stuff that wasn't the law and the legal stuff, during the wilderness wanderings. He probably wrote the law when they're at Sinai. But now here we are wondering around in the desert. Moses has lots of time. I don't know how he's got lots of time while he's walking around for miles, but we'll just say he has lots of time to write. Maybe he's doing it at night.

He has his day job leading the people through the wilderness and his night job was writing the Torah or whatever. But he has lots of time to write, so he's writing during the wilderness wanderings. So the standard view also, if you think about it, actually has to argue that God kind of mentally downloaded the content of Genesis 1 to 11 into Moses head. In other words, Moses couldn't write Genesis 1 to 11 by experience or by the traditions of his own people because this is all primeval history. This is the standard conservative view, that part of the doctrine of inspiration would allow them, at least the way they understand it, allow them to say when Moses was writing the Torah, a lot of that stuff from Genesis 12 on, you've got family history, the history of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the descendants of Jacob going down to Egypt, the 12 tribes and all that stuff. And so you're getting into contemporary material for them. But the Genesis 1-11 stuff, the stuff before Abraham, there's no sense that anybody has any record of that so God has to give it directly and he gives it directly to Moses and Moses carefully writes it down. This is the standard view of how we get Genesis 1 to 11 in terms of a total commitment to Mosaic authorship, part of the standard sort of traditional conservative model. So Moses gets this information, didn't know it himself, God has to provide it. Genesis 12-50 is a little different because Moses could get this information from his ancestors or his ancestor's ancestors.

The standard conservative view is that the stories of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were orally transmitted by the family, by the members of the Israelite nation because this was their family history. They tell it to each other. They pass it down from generation to generation, the stories of how Abraham was called and what happened to him and Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and the 12 tribes and Joseph's trip to Egypt. This is all something they knew by oral transmission. And in Moses day, Moses codified it. He writes it down. It's very possible. This is how oral traditions, oral cultures work. Oral transmission is done with a high degree of accuracy and then eventually gets written down. For those of you who are over 40, maybe over 50, this is takes your mind back maybe to the scene in Roots, when that was big on TV. That's how the author Alex Haley finds his relationship to Kunta Kinte because he goes to Africa and he sits there for days listening to this guy recite the oral family history. Then he finally comes to Kunta Kinte's name and says I found you. That kind of thing, that's real. When it comes to oral cultures, that is how it's done and it's done with an amazing amount of accuracy because that's all they have. They don't have TV.

They don't have books. It's an oral culture. So they put their mental energy, there are a select people who do this, to memorizing the entire history of the clan. And so this is something well-known anthropologically speaking from all over the world and the Israelites don't have to be an exception here. So the standard conservative view is that this is how Moses, when he sat down to write, got the information about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He had someone transmit it to him orally. He writes it down. Genesis 1-11 though has to sort of drop from heaven because

that isn't part of the family history. That is something that God has to tell Moses. After you get to the end of Genesis, where are you at? You're in Moses own day, Exodus 1. There arose a Pharaoh in the day who didn't know Joseph, and then we get into the history of Moses. So Moses can write that stuff. And then you get the law, the story of the Exodus. Moses is there for all this. He's there for the giving of the law. He's there for the wilderness wanderings and all this stuff. So everything else in the Torah, in this standard conservative view, is easy to attribute to Moses until you get to Deuteronomy 34 when he dies.

Did Moses write the account of his own death and all that kind of stuff? So this is a very typical way of looking at Mosaic authorship of the Torah. And so when it comes to Genesis 3, those who believe Moses wrote that would say that God gave him that story, gave him that information, and he wrote it at some point during the wilderness wanderings. Well, all of that means, all of that leaves you I should say. All of that leaves you with the realization that we don't really have any actual evidence that the Israelites living the events of Numbers 21 would ever have heard the story of Adam and Eve before they're getting bitten by these fiery serpents to make some sort of association. An association we make because we read Genesis 3 before we hit Numbers 21 and these two things sort of glom onto each other in our heads. For the Israelites, this isn't happening because you don't know when Moses wrote it. You can't say there's nothing in the Bible that points to the idea that Moses had already composed Genesis 3 and then this incident in Numbers 21 happened. We have no idea. There's actually nothing to hang this hat on. It's all entirely unknowable.

The odds are just as good that the Israelites would've never read Genesis 3 and the account didn't even exist for them to read. Even if it did exist, are they passing it around all few hundred thousand or few million people? It's just kind of ridiculous to assume that they knew this story of the *nachash* in Genesis 3. Of course, once it does get written down and depending on when you think that is then that's going to be part of how the Israelites think about not only their own history but the history of everything, the history of the whole world, the human condition, and all that, just like we do. They're going to have that material to read and reflect on. The second view other than Moses wrote Genesis 3 is, surprise surprise, Moses didn't write Genesis 3. And I actually think this one makes more sense. This is actually my preference, and that is this view. I have expressed this view before on the podcast that Genesis 1 to 11 was written later than Moses lifetime. I personally think Genesis 1 to 11 was written during exile in Babylon since A, there are many specific textual philological, that's linguistic kind of stuff, philological connections, very specific connections, to Babylonian or Mesopotamian literature in general in these 11 chapters.

And secondarily B, my other reason for thinking it was written during the exile is that there are very few specific Egyptian connections in Genesis 1 to 11, which you would sort of expect if it was composed in the immediate Mosaic era. Instead of Genesis 1 to 11 taking shots at the Mesopotamian gods and the Babylonian stories, you would expect it to be taking shots at the gods of Egypt because we just left Egypt. God picked on them and beat up on them and we had the Exodus, and here we are at Sinai, all that kind of thing. But you don't get that. You get a very distinct Mesopotamian flavor to Genesis 1 to 11. And so that's where the Israelites are in exile. They are in Babylon. And a lot of the material in Genesis 1 to 11 is specifically dissing Babylonian religion, Babylonian deities, all this sort of stuff. It's to blacken their eye, so to speak, and you don't really get, really, there's very little that could be sort of tied into Egyptian material in Genesis 1 to 11. So that's why I think it makes more sense to have Genesis 1 to 11 written later

than the Mosaic era by someone else in the believing community God chose to write that, chose to, in my view actually chose to append it to material that begins with the family history of Israel, Genesis 12 onward. I don't have any trouble assuming that you could've had Mosaic authorship of a lot of that or a Mosaic hand directly involved. Who knows? Ultimately we don't know but what I'm talking about here is Genesis 1-11.

I'm not in the JEDP camp and I'm not in the traditional conservative camp either. Frankly, I think both views have points that just don't make much sense. One other comment just by way of illustration. You say Babylonian flavor to Genesis 1-11, what are you talking about Mike? Genesis 1, there are specific points of contact to Enuma Elish, the story of Marduk's elevation to supremacy. Marduk was the chief deity during the Babylonian era, 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E. Lo and behold, that's the time of the exile. And when I say specific connections, there are places in Genesis where the Hebrew of Genesis mimes or mimics the syntax of Enuma Elish, specifically Genesis 1:1-3, by the way you have that happen. There's even grammatical congruence in the way the writer wrote. Where's the position of the verb? Where's the position of the conjunction? Where's the position of the noun? It mimes certain lines in Enuma Elish. And to a literate reader, someone who knew both texts, the reason for doing that would've been very evident and would've been very obvious as well that the writer of Genesis wants you to think of the Babylonian story because he's going to poke it in the eye.

He's going to dis it. He's going to turn it on its head and make a different theological point. You need the text of Enuma Elish to do that. So is Moses carrying one around in the desert? He couldn't in this case because it hadn't been written yet. Enuma Elish, the elevation of Marduk was written in the 6th century. This is centuries after Moses lived and died so it's a clear point of incongruence. Another example, Genesis 2 and 3, Garden of Eden story. You have the serpent story in the garden. There are some clear similarities between that material and Gilgamesh. Another one called Adapa, a text called Adapa and the south wind. Genesis 5, the list of genealogies, scholars have known for couple centuries since the Sumerian King list was discovered that the list of Kings in the Sumerian King list pre-and post-flood, that there's a relationship between the list of names and the events in Genesis 5. There are just connections there. So for that to make any sense, the writer would have to be doing something deliberate with that text, with that Sumerian text. Genesis 6:1-4, we talked about this before in Unseen Realm and on the podcast, the story of the Apkallu drawn directly from Mesopotamian material. Genesis 6-9, the flood story, you have parallels in the Eridu Genesis, the epic of Gilgamesh, the Atrahasis epic, down even to the birds that get let go and they come back and the building of an Ark and the animals, the whole thing. It has differences.

There are differences in the accounts, differences in the story and the way they're told but there's a lot of specific connections. If anybody has taken sort of a Bible class even in high school really but in college, this is the kind of thing that professors love to harp on because then they're going to say something stupid like the Israelites were copying. Israel alone had people so stupid they couldn't have an independent thought. They just go the other way with it. They don't really think about what's happening in the text because frankly, they're not biblical scholars. But anyway, they're usually religion scholars or something like that or someone they just stuck in a humanities class to destroy somebody's faith. That's just the way it goes. Genesis 10-11, Babylonian map of the world that was Genesis 10, the Table of Nations. The Table of Nations show is that Israel's not included in that table but it has the same orientation, the whole Mediterranean but largely the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Babylonian map of



the world has some congruence's there. You have the stories of Nimrod. The closest candidates to identifying Nimrod come from Assyrian material. It's Mesopotamian material. You have a reference to a ziggurat, the Tower of Babel. It's Mesopotamian. Genesis 1-11 is littered with Mesopotamian elements and so I doubt that Moses was hauling a library of cuneiform tablets around with him in the desert while delivering Israel in the Exodus from Egypt. Moses maybe could have read Akkadian. Akkadian was the language of the day, kind of like English is the language of correspondence. The best evidence for this is actually evidence that aligns with the late date for the Exodus, which a lot of conservative Bible believers don't like because they want to go with the early date chronologically. But regardless, Akkadian was the language of international correspondence.

If Moses is raised the household of Egypt, then he's going to be somebody important. He may have learned Akkadian, at least enough to read a letter or whatever so that he knows what's going on in certain parts of the empire. I get that but some of these things that I just mentioned in this list were not composed during the new kingdom period during that same time period. They were composed later and so it just doesn't make sense to argue for Mosaic authorship of these things. To me, the biggest argument is that Genesis 1-11, the collections that are there are polemic. And you would expect if Moses is writing it in an Egyptian context, their deliverance from Egypt, that he'd be dissing the Egyptian gods but that isn't what happens. That happens in Exodus 15, Exodus 12, this night I will have victory over the gods of Egypt. All that kind of stuff happens with the plagues but it doesn't happen in Genesis 1-11 is the point we're making. So what's the point of this whole discussion? What about the story? What I'm saying is that in either view, whether you think Moses wrote Genesis 3 or you think Moses didn't write Genesis 3, either view, it's really, really, really difficult, even impossible, I would frankly say it is impossible because you have to be omniscient, to establish the notion that the Israelites who are experiencing the Numbers 21 episode, being bitten by the serpents, that they had ever heard of the Genesis 3 story.

My money is on they never heard it at all, which in part explains why there are no specific connections between this story and Genesis 3 other than the term *nachash*. *Nachash* just means serpent when it's used as a noun and very clearly it is here. We don't have a talking serpent. We don't have any indication Numbers 21 that we're dealing with a divine being. People are getting bitten by serpents, by snakes out in the desert. That's where lots of snakes live, and the thing that Moses is asked to fashion is very clearly a serpent on a pole, not a divine being. It's just a serpent. That's all it is. So in our head, reading Numbers 21 makes us think of Genesis 3 and then we go this is a spooky passage. Does it have anything to do with Genesis? An Israelite's never even asking that question. It's not even on the radar. So that's the first thing we need to sort of get straight in our heads. I think that the point of the story, if you're able to do that, the actual story itself is pretty self-explanatory. I hate to be a downer here but it kind of means exactly what it says. There are a few things may be lurking in the background we'll talk about over the next few minutes but there's no mystical mysterious cryptic connection between Numbers 21 and Genesis 3, and therefore, since that's the case, when Jesus uses Numbers 21 for an analogy about the crucifixion, he's not taking some mystical swipe at the devil or something weird going on. That's just a product of our imagination. It's not a product of the text. Let's go to Numbers 21 and spend the rest of our time actually in the story. Let's just go to verse 4,

<sup>4</sup> From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup> And the people spoke against God and against Moses,

**MSH:** Anytime you speak against God, it's probably going to draw a reaction, and in this case it does. Sometimes it's compassionate, sometimes its judgment, here we got a case of judgment. They ask why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in this wilderness. Now commentators have noticed that the way this is worded in Hebrew, and you can sort of get it in English as well, it's very close to the Dathan and Abiram language, the language of complaining back in Numbers 16. That would sort of connect the two episodes being another one of these episodes where the people are not only grumpy and impatient, but they're of the mind that we had it better back in Egypt, which by implication is you're in slavery and the gods of Egypt are your superiors, and that's offensive. That's going to draw a reaction from God. It's not only a rejection of Him, it's not only rejection of the events that preceded, like the crossing of the Red Sea, it's also very clearly a rejection of the provision the manna where the people say we hate this, we loathe this worthless food, the stuff that God has been giving them.

They don't like it. They grumble about that. So in response to hearts that are hardening, to borrow another Exodus metaphor here, in response to the Israelite grumbling and unbelief, Yahweh sent *ha-nechashim* and *ha-seraphim*. You have both terms, both plural used side-by-side. So we have the typical translation, fiery serpents, *ha-nechashim ha-seraphim*. So fiery serpents, that's an okay translation. I don't think there's anything really terribly weird going on. I think the fiery part would refer to the burning metaphorically of the venom because they're getting bitten by snakes. I don't think we have anything strange here like because *seraphim* in Isaiah 6, they were divine beings. Now here we have like divine beings that are serpent people or dragons or fanged demons. No, they're just snakes. This language is used elsewhere of just snakes that when they bite you, it burns because they're venomous. So really it's all it means. Now in regard to this though, there are some people who would try to make it more than that, not only on the basis of the *seraphim*, just the term, but they would look back in Isaiah 6 and say the *seraphim* had wings and they're flying around. And back in Moses day, snakes must have been able to fly if there just snakes. And then they'll point to Isaiah. There are two passages in Isaiah that marry these terms, the *nechashim* and the *seraphim* to another term, *m'opheph*, which means flying. So Isaiah 14:29 just to quote it for you in the ESV,

Rejoice not, O Philistia, all of you,  
that the rod that struck you is broken,  
for from the serpent's root will come forth an adder,  
and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent.

**MSH:** Isaiah 30:6 has similar language.

<sup>6</sup> An oracle on the beasts of the Negeb.

Through a land of trouble and anguish,  
from where come the lioness and the lion,  
the adder and the flying fiery serpent,

**MSH:** All the other animals in that list are normal, by the way. But the argument goes that we have a dragon here or we have something weird going on. The terminology, and I've referenced this article before and if you have Unseen Realm and you're reading the little section talking about the *seraphim*, you're going to get this article. But there is a really nice article in the journal *Biblica* on the *seraphim*, the fiery serpents and he goes into the iconography and what not. What the flying description is really pointed at is not a dragon. It's not like a fanged demonic bat winged extraterrestrial or something like that. Let's try to get the cartoons out of our head. What it's aimed at is if you've seen like an Egyptian Uraeus, the winged cobra as we modern people like to call it. We know cobras don't fly. We know they don't have wings.

What we do know they do have is they have these flaps of skin on their side that expand. That's what it's talking about. They look like wings. So these descriptions of flying fiery serpents are those guys. They're serpents with these sort of wing flaps on the sides of their head that extend down the body a little way and it creates the visual impression that they have wings. That's all it's talking about. And these are common, these kinds of serpents are common in the region. They're common in Egypt, common in the Negev because that's where they're walking around here in Numbers 21 and they're poisonous. So God sends a bunch of these kind of serpents, cobras, whatever if you want to use that term, but venomous snakes against the people to punish them. So that's the story. It's pretty straightforward, pretty self-explanatory. In response to their repentance, in verse 7,

<sup>7</sup> And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

**MSH:** So in response to their repentance and Moses intercession, God tells Moses to make a *seraph* and put it on a pole or banner. That's the term there, at least one of them is used here. But when Moses actually makes it, it's called the *nachash nechoshet*, the bronze serpent. And these two verses here versus 8-9, show us that *seraph* and *nachash* are being used interchangeably for a normal snake. But when Moses fashions it, he's going to fashion it out of bronze and mount it on a pole. Now here's where you actually start to get into I think some worthwhile questions. The story is kind of straightforward but what's the meaning of it? What's going on? What are they thinking? Why is God telling them to do this? And in the academic discussion, you get some variance of opinion. A lot of overlapping but there is some variance here. Serpents most scholars will point out were associated throughout the Ancient Near East with healing.

You ask why, what is there about a serpent that an ancient person would look at and associate it with healing or, I'm going to give you some hints here, rejuvenation, or even the spontaneous appearance of life, the origin of life, that kind of thing. Why would a person look at a serpent, why would an ancient person, why would Egyptians, why would Mesopotamians, why would Hittites, why would Canaanites look at serpents and associate them in some way with healing, with fertility, the bringing forth of life and rejuvenation? It's because they shed their

skin. It's like they become new and to the ancient mind, to the ancient eye, it was like a rebirth. It was a new thing coming out of the old thing and the new thing's better than the old thing. Rejuvenation, it's the origin of life and this whole healing idea. So this is why the ancient people tended to look at serpents this way and this belief, belief is probably the wrong word, but this notion, this conception of what was happening to the snake would shed its skin is reflected in Ancient Near Eastern iconography in many places. There are many examples. I'm going to give you a couple of quotations here. The first one is from DDD, Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible and the entry says,

“The use of snake images to affect the cure of venomous snake bites is consistent with the ritual symbolism of snakes in the Ancient Near East. In Egypt, snake amulets would be worn by the living or the dead to ward off venomous snakes. **[MSH: By the way, the dead reference there, in some of the books of the dead, the big enemy to getting into the positive afterlife was the serpent. You had to wear the serpent thing to ward off the other serpent but let's not rabbit trail too much on that.]** The Uraeus serpent protected gods and kings from danger. Because of his snake nature, the king was immune to snake venom and could cure others. **[MSH: because he had aligned himself with the snake god who was his protector; that the king was immune to bad snakes and could heal and all this kind of stuff. This is part of Egyptian religion, part of Egyptian mythology.]** Protective snake figurines are also found in Mesopotamia including reliefs and amulets of two snakes entwined. **[MSH: We've all seen the symbol of the two snakes going up the pole wrapping themselves sort of together.]** The symbol was later inherited in Greek culture as the healing symbol of Asclepius.”

**MSH:** We refer to as the caduceus and you'll still see it in medical insignia today. It's a very old symbol. Another quote, this is from Karen Joines book, “Serpent symbolism in the Old Testament.” This isn't a direct quote. I'm going to summarize here. She's citing a guy named William Ward who was an expert in Egyptian scarabs. But Joines citing Ward notes that the caduceus has been found on Babylonian cylinder seals as well, not just scarabs but Babylonian cylinder seals from as early as the fourth millennium BC, so into the 3000s BC. In that case, it was probably a fertility symbol though and not a healing emblem. Serpents were widely associated with life, that is, the origin or the springing to life, the rebirth of life because of the things we've talked about. They were often fertility symbols and that's typically what you see in the Mesopotamian context but you also get healing there, too.

So with that as sort of a backdrop, what's going on here with Moses and the Israelites in their context, some have taken this propensity or this ancient, this common conception that serpents were associated with healing. They look at what's going on in the Numbers episode and to many scholars, it's a fairly clear example of something called sympathetic magic. Now if you're unfamiliar with that term, sympathetic magic is where the cure for a problem is achieved by fashioning a physical object that relates to the problem or looks like the problem or in some ways associated with the problem in order to combat the problem. You can also produce an object in sympathetic magic that would produce a certain result after some ritual. Now I think the latter, this doing something to get a desired physical effect, I think sympathetic magic in that

sense is almost definitely what's behind the Jacob and Laban story, if you remember Genesis 30 I believe it is, where they're laying out rods or these little, for lack of a better term, these pieces of plants, these stems, these rods or whatever, before the sheep, the flocks to produce the kind of offspring that would belong to Jacob, the spotted, the speckled, and all that stuff. He does this but later Jacob says he gets the idea from God to do this, to outwit Laban.

To me, that's a very clear example of sympathetic magic and what's going on there is God tells him to do this and Jacob believes God. So this kind of thing would've been familiar culturally because of you have other people doing this kind of stuff. And so God says here's what you do. Here's what you do to outwit Laban. You make this stuff, you put it in front of flocks. They'll do their breeding thing and lo and behold, this is what you're going to get. So Jacob believes that God will do this and so he responds to this idea, does what he's told to do, and God produces the results. Is that what's going on in Numbers 21? Well, if you read it that way, kind of. God says make this serpent. Put it on a pole. People look at it after they're bit and they'll be okay. So the notion of sympathetic magic in and of itself, if you believe the source of the power is the God of Israel, is not a theologically offensive idea to an Israelite. To us it's really foreign but we don't live in this culture. We're not dealing with this kind of mode of communication. We don't have God telling us to do these sorts of things.

This is God telling someone to do something that would've sounded familiar, would not have been completely bizarre in their context. And Jacob or here Moses, God told me to do this and I believe that God is going to do something with it so let's do that because God is powerful. God is able to do whatever he's going to do through this means and I'm going to listen. I'm going to do it. I'm going to make that thing, in Jacob's incident, I'm going to lay this stuff down for the sheep and let him breed and I expect that God will produce the result that I'm going to like and he does. Well, it's kind of the same thing with Moses so I can see the synthetic magic idea here in their context. Milgram has an interesting quote here in his Numbers commentary. Milgram was a Jewish scholar. I don't know if he's still alive or not but he has a very well-known commentary on Numbers in the Jewish publication Society Torah series. He writes,

“The homeopathic use of snakes is a distinctive feature of ancient Egypt. A serpent shaped amulet was worn by the living to repel serpents and also by the dead, often mummies, to ward off attacks by serpents and other reptiles in the netherworld. Thus, at the time of Moses, the belief prevailed in Egypt that images of serpents would repel serpents as well as heal wounds caused by them. It is likely no accident that a copper image of a snake was found at Timnah, the copper mining region near Eilat on the Red Sea dating from between 1200-900 BC.”

**MSH:** So sort of a contemporary example. Obviously not the one associated with the story. Now Baruch Levine comments on this in his Numbers commentary and I think it's important to hear Levine as well.

“The incident of a bronze serpent is an excellent example of the interaction of prayer with magical praxis and in no way assails the power of the God of Israel. On the contrary, it reaffirmed Yahweh's power. The many attempts to explain away the account of this incident on the grounds

that if taken at face value it would conflict with biblical monotheism reflect a basic misunderstanding of Ancient Near Eastern magical phenomenology as known to us from comparative sources.”

**MSH:** That's Levine's more flowery way of saying what I said a few minutes ago. When Yahweh tells you to do this, you're not going to look at Yahweh and go like is there wax in my ears? Can you repeat that again because that's just really weird? No, they're going to know, Moses is going to be familiar with this idea. Jacob is going to be familiar with the idea with this sympathetic magic. That's the term modern anthropologists' use. But your God is telling you to fashion an object that your God is going to use to heal your wound or fix your problem or to deal with the evil thing that is troubling you and so you have to choose to either believe what your God is telling you, to believe that your God is powerful or not. Jacob believed and did it. Moses believed and did it. And Yahweh used their obedience, they're following the procedures to produce the results he said he would produce. So for an Israelite, this isn't strange. This is something culturally normative, culturally familiar.

To us, it looks bizarre and when you get anthropologists running around saying this is sympathetic magic because we're moderns and this isn't our world, you get a lot of people running and they'll seize that point saying you can't have monotheism but this, you can't have a belief in Yahweh. It's exactly the opposite. Yahweh is asserting his power over the situation. And the spiritual lesson, frankly, in Numbers 21 is the God who caused you judgment, the God who caused you pain and harm and death is the same God who can take it away. He has power over death and power over life. Life and death are in his hands and so there is, by definition then if you can fix that in your mind, you'll get the ancillary point here. By definition, you can't appeal to any other power. God sent the serpents to punish you. The only thing that will take them away is God. The only solution to the problem is Yahweh of Israel. There is no higher authority. There is no alternate source of power that can undo what Yahweh did. Only Yahweh can undo what Yahweh does. And so you are dependent on his goodness to relieve the problem and this is what he's asking you to do, end of story.

So the theological point is very consistent with the elevation of Yahweh, what scholars would call biblical monotheism. It's not contrary to it in any regard. But you got a lot of fruit loops running around the Internet that take a story like this, the terms that anthropologists use, and they rip it out of context to argue whatever flaky point is that they want to argue from the passage. It's not legitimate, it's not good scholarship. That's probably the most succinct way to put it. Now when Jesus references this, I think the associations are quite plain. If you don't have the Genesis 3 serpent floating around your head, there's no problem. And you shouldn't have the Genesis 3 serpent floating around your head because there's no indication the Israelites had even heard the story and there's no links in Numbers 21 back to Genesis 3. There's no sense of divine evil beings here. They're just snakes. That's what they are, and God provides the solution. But when Jesus says just like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, that anyone who looked upon it was cured and that was the power of God that was undoing the problem of death because they were going to die from the bites if they weren't treated.

So God commands Moses to make this serpent. God says I will undo this thing that no one else can undo, no god, no deity, no person can deal with it. I will deal with it if you build the bronze serpent, lift it up, and tell the people look at it when you're bit. You will be healed. And Jesus says that's just like what God's going to do here. We have this problem that the cross

rectifies and no other thing but the cross can rectify it, this problem with death, this problem of human mortality. So the Son of Man must be lifted up and that's not a totally point-blank reference to the cross but as you're reading the Gospels, you know what he's talking about here, his own self-sacrifice on the cross. And he's saying this is the solution. Look upon it and believe. If you don't turn to it in faith and believe you're going to die. You will inherit death. So the analogy is I think a pretty powerful one but it's confusing to a lot of people in our day because we have Genesis 3 floating around in our heads and wondering what in the world's going on. Nothing's going on.

Don't throw things into the blender that the Israelites didn't have in the blender and the writer didn't have in the blender. You don't just get to throw other passages in the blender and say that looks messy now. Well it does because you just messed it up. So we need to be thinking more about the immediate and the larger context of what the writer and what the Israelites had in mind. I should say one other thing before we wrap up here. The bronze serpent is mentioned in 2 Kings 18. They had survived many years and this is the account where, specifically it's 2 Kings 18:1-6, and it's just part of the Hezekiah story so I'll read it here.

In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. <sup>2</sup> He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. <sup>3</sup> And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done. <sup>4</sup> He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan). <sup>5</sup> He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. <sup>6</sup> For he held fast to the LORD. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses.

**MSH:** So Hezekiah, as part of his campaign against idolatry, destroys the bronze serpent of Moses. Now that account raises a number of questions. By the way, *nehushtan* sounds like both the Hebrew terms for bronze, *nehushtet* and serpent, *nachash*, so they gave it a name, *nehushtan*, using it for idolatrous purposes. There are a number of questions. What does until those days mean? Does that mean that the serpent was worshiped from the time of Moses onward? Probably not. You can't see Moses putting up with that obviously. Did they worship it from the time of the construction of the temple, in other words, when they actually got a temple in Jerusalem? Did they bring this thing and start worship it? Who knows. From some other period before Hezekiah? Probably more likely because the Old Testament tells us the story of Israel's idolatry. But I think maybe a more interesting question is what did the serpent represent in the Israelite cult, Israelite ritual system, and when was it made part of that system?

The short answer is nobody knows the answer to any of these questions. It's actually very complicated because it takes you into pre, do you realize Jerusalem had be conquered. David conquered Jerusalem and it became his capital city. Before the conquest of David, before he took the city, it was called Salem. It's associated with Melchizedek. Look at the name Malki Tzedek,

it's associated with Zedok in the minds of some scholars. Remember during David's time, there were essentially two high priests, Zedok and Abiathar. So people wonder what's going on with that? Why do you have two guys instead of one? You can't really tell if either of them are Levitical. So there's a really long convoluted, and here's the key word, speculative background to what's going on in Jerusalem worship before David becomes king. If it's pre-Davidic, it's just going to be sort of kind of traditional Canaanite and so you have to ask yourself the question, after David was there and David did some good things and some bad things, he gets the idea to build a temple eventually built by Solomon.

The Ark is moved in there but that was pre-Hezekiah. So what's up with this *nehushtan*? What's up with this bronze serpent? Was that in there with the Ark? Did they put it inside the Ark? Is it some object that maybe one of the priests liked it because maybe it was associated with religion before David because the Israelites were doing something before David, and they were doing a lot of crazy things before David. Look at the period of the judges, people do what's right in their own eyes. There's a lot of apostasy going on. There's a lot of inter-marrying and interreligious mixture of Israelites thinking and Canaanite thinking. Maybe somebody saw this object one day, wherever it was kept. We're not even told where it was kept in Moses day. But somebody got ahold of it and maybe made a god out of it, made it the focus of worship. We have no idea what its history was in relationship to the Ark, what its history was in relationship to the high priesthood. We don't know any of it.

If you read the material, you're getting all sorts of speculation about what might be the history of this thing. All we know for sure is what 2 Kings tells us. Hezekiah destroyed it because it had become an object of idolatry. We don't know when it did. We don't know how that was marketed to the people, if it really even needed to be marketed in the days of the good kings. We don't know if it was used or not used, because to many, this would have been a symbol of Yahweh. That might sound shocking because isn't there a command about making no graven image? Yeah, there is but God told Moses to make this bronze serpent and Moses did and God healed the people. So when this happens, that's going to have an effect on people. It's not going to become an ordinary object. And so in the minds of even a good Yahweh worshiper, this was a, I'll use my terminology here, this would have been a special thing. This would have been a special object because this was the thing that God told Moses to build and it healed people. It's important if you're a true worshiper of Yahweh, you worship only Yahweh.

So here's the question. Would you refuse to do anything that felt like worship when this snake was involved or would you think that's just the symbol of Yahweh? We know it isn't Yahweh because it was never fashioned. God didn't say make this brazen serpent because it looks like me. This is an image of me. It doesn't say any of that so it would have associated with Yahweh and so maybe even a godly Yahweh worshiper would think there's nothing wrong with having that as part of some festival or ritual or whatever because it's a symbol of the Lord. Who knows? It's all speculation. You have to psychologize the Israelites to come up with an "answer", which really isn't an answer because it's just a guess. It's speculation of what they were thinking, faithful Israelites as opposed to apostate Israelites because they're not going to care. They're going to make it a deity and off we go. But not every Israelite is going to be thinking the same thing. And so what was going through their minds with this thing because people knew it. They saw it. When you get the temple, the Ark's there. Is it with the Ark or not? Nobody knows.

So you can do lots of entertaining reading where scholars will try to tie this into the Melchizedek priesthood because of Zedok being the pre, catch the wording here, the pre-



Davidic pre-national Israel priesthood and some would argue because Melchizedek and Zedok are the same consonants, that there's a priestly name thing going on here between these two guys, and Zedok was a representative of a priesthood, catch this, that was earlier than Aarons that was viewed in that sense more everlasting or more important than Aarons. So the real high priests is the line of Melchizedek and Zedok. Once you start going down that rabbit trail then you get stuff like where did the serpent show up. Nothing textually ties all these things together. Let's make that clear. Nothing textually makes the connections but this is the kind of thing you'll read. Now I do think, this is getting real far off the rabbit trail so I got to reign myself in here. I do think that this whole idea of a high priesthood after the order of Melchizedek is obviously legit, Psalm 110, and the way you get that as a superior priesthood over the line of Aaron is to, here's the harsh word, is to assume that the priesthood of Aaron was a concession to Moses way back in Exodus 4, that he needed help.

Or you could read, here's the nice word, you could read the Mosaic account and see the compassion of God in giving Moses a helper and his brother becomes the high priest. But what God really intended was since he has Abraham meet up with Melchizedek that someday Abraham's descendants would live in this city and have this priesthood, the priest of the Most High God. And that this was God's design all along for the priesthood and that is why the Melchizedek priesthood is superior and Aaron's priesthood is secondary. God gives it to Israel because he gave it to Moses. Moses needed a helper. So you can read the account that way. You can sort of make it a bit of speculation. We don't ultimately know but we do know that there was this thing called the high priesthood of Melchizedek. We do know that. There was Zedok and there was Abiathar and the whole Levitical thing. The high priesthood thing is really kind of a hornet's nest when it comes to Old Testament theology because there are lots of ambiguities built into it. And if you do any reading, I'm telling you all that to sort of condition you. If you do any reading on *nehushtan* and what's going on with Hezekiah and why he destroyed it and how in the world it became this thing of idolatry, you will invariably run into this whole discussion about Zedok and Melchizedek and the pre-Israelite, it's called the Jebusite priesthood because that was one of Jerusalem's old names, Jebus, Jebusite. It was a Jebusite land possession there.

But anyway, that's getting quite a bit off the beaten path. I'm going to add one more thought. There are some who would also say that the religious role of the serpent might be due, and I'm going to tell you up front. I think this one's far-fetched but it might entertain somebody here. There were some who would say that the religious use of the bronze serpent, either during or earlier than Hezekiah's time, had something to do with the fact that since serpents were associated with life, that we might have the serpent as being a symbol or an artifact of something that modern scholars call the Omphalos Myth. And the Omphalos Myth is a term that means the navel of the world, the center of the earth, the central point from which terrestrial life springs and originates. Think with me. Here's how people would defend this idea. They would say look at the back of the Garden of Eden. You say Mike, I thought you said Numbers 21 the bronze serpent has nothing to do with the Garden of Eden? Yes I did and I do think that. That's why I think this is far-fetched. But follow me if you will. This is how it's defended.

The Garden of Eden, that's where life's origin was and there was a tree of life in the Garden of Eden. And in Mesopotamia, the tree of life was associated with the serpent, because you got this intertwined serpent neck stuff you know as a symbol of life. Gilgamesh is searching for eternal life and he finds a sacred plant which we identify with the tree of life, and he loses that one. He loses immortality when the plant is stolen by a serpent in the Gilgamesh story. And

so like Jerusalem is the new Eden, right? Jerusalem is the new Eden and so as Eden was the center of the wellspring of all life, there would have been people who would believe that Jerusalem is the wellspring of all life and the serpent object probably helped remind people or teach people that Jerusalem was the new Eden. If I had a cricket sound I would play it right here. You'll run into that, too. The severe problem with this is how it not only links the discussion back to Genesis 3 but it ignores the evil aspect of the serpent in Genesis 3, which is really convenient, and frankly, really necessary for that discussion. Now I will say this. The Omphalos idea that Jerusalem is the center of the world, that is biblical thinking but it has nothing to do with Numbers 21. It has nothing to do with *nehushtan*. It has nothing to do with Genesis 3. Where you see it, there's a couple of passages. There's two in Ezekiel. I'll read it to you. Ezekiel 5:5 says,

<sup>5</sup>“Thus says the Lord GOD: This is Jerusalem. I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her.

**MSH:** And then Ezekiel 38:10-12,

<sup>10</sup>“Thus says the Lord GOD: On that day, thoughts will come into your mind, and you will devise an evil scheme <sup>11</sup> and say, ‘I will go up against the land of unwalled villages. I will fall upon the quiet people who dwell securely, all of them dwelling without walls, and having no bars or gates,’ <sup>12</sup> to seize spoil and carry off plunder, to turn your hand against the waste places that are now inhabited, and the people who were gathered from the nations, who have acquired livestock and goods, who dwell at the center of the earth.

**MSH:** So it's this idea that Jerusalem was sort of the center of all things, center of the earth. That idea is part of biblical thinking and it is because this is Yahweh's place. Yahweh is the source of life. Yahweh is the source from which all life springs. Everything revolves around him and where he is and that was Zion. That was Jerusalem. So this idea is part of biblical thinking and part of biblical theology but has nothing to do with *nehushtan*, the brazen serpent and all this sort of stuff. So to wind up, I think Numbers 21 makes sense just as it is. It makes sense at face value. It wasn't connected to Genesis 3 at all. You have a Mosaic Yahweh symbol that winds up getting perverted into idolatry.

Oh well, okay. The Israelites turned the whole system into an idolatrous system. Why would we be shocked that an object that in Moses day would've been associated with the power of Yahweh? Why would we be shocked to get that gets used later on for idolatry and Hezekiah has to destroy it? I don't find it shocking at all given what we read in the Old Testament about the Israelites. Basically, they're prone to do almost anything with almost anything in in terms of idolatry. I think these passages are pretty easily understandable on their own terms. The other theorized elements are interesting but they're ultimately only speculation.