

Serpent to Savior

The article titled, *Serpent*, in the [New World Encyclopedia](#) makes a number of interesting observations showing how cultures around the world have viewed snakes and serpents:

Serpent (from Latin: *serpens, serpentis*) is a word used in [mythological](#) or [religious](#) contexts to denote a being that looks like a snake but has a heightened sense of intelligence. Serpents are found in the mythology of many cultures and world religions, and are associated with both negative and positive connotations. On the one hand, serpents are commonly connected with regeneration, renewal, and health (which is still implied by the modern medical symbol); yet, on the other hand, they are frequently seen in [Judeo-Christian](#) and [Islamic](#) cultures as symbols of [evil](#) and wickedness. Such ambivalent viewpoints reflects the fascination that humanity has placed in these creatures over the ages. Overall, few cross-cultural symbols have played such a widespread role in evoking a range of attitudes from fear to loathing to **admiration**. (bold added)

A prominent archaeologist and theologian recently noted that the bronze image of a snake on a pole in Moses' time “focused the Israelites' faith on God, who pledged that everyone bitten would look to His promise and live. ... [Interestingly,] snake cults existed in the Bronze Age prior to the Israelites' arrival [in the promised land]. Excavations have uncovered snake cult objects in (five Canaanite) cities. Because the bronze serpent (preserved from Moses' time) became like an idol, Hezekiah destroyed it. (2 Kings 18:4)” ([From Snake to Savior](#), by Randall Price)

Snake cults and serpent symbols are not only found in the ancient past; they exist in modern times. Interestingly, in the city where I live we have 600 newcomers who have traditionally venerated the (black) snake, “one of the enigmas and mysteries of Yezidism.” (p.49, [The Serpent Symbolism in the Yezidi Religious Tradition and the Snake in Yerevan](#), by Dr. Peter Nicolaus)

The author further explores the **brass** image of a sacred serpent and bamboo stick associated with a Yezidi cult which he, himself, discovered in Yerevan, Armenia. Nicolaus also notes that “Any visitor to Lalish in Northern Iraq will be stunned ... by the image of a huge black snake that greets them on entry into the courtyard of the Yezidi main sanctuary.... In addition to these snake images carved into the walls of ... many sanctuaries, the Yezidis also possess at least one statue of a snake cast in **bronze**.” (p. 50, bold font added for emphasis) Isn't this fascinating?

These last few years I've been asking God for wisdom to make the most of the opportunities – not only in terms of building genuine friendships with Yezidis but also pointing them to Jesus. While reading the article by Randall Price I was reminded of John 3:14-16, where Jesus “used the fiery serpent incident to explain how He interceded for us. We were fatally bitten by that old serpent, the Devil, through the fall (Rev. 12:9; 20:2) and were dying from the poison of sin. ... Once we realize we are doomed to die for our sin (Rom. 5:12) and look to the One God has raised up, Christ on the cross, to heal us, we will live (eternally).” (Price, op. cit.)

Mystery

The Scripture passage which instructs us to relate to unbelievers in a gracious, seasoned-with-salt manner also mentions the “mystery” of the gospel. (Colossians 4:2-6) Indeed, the Bible often talks about the gospel as a **mystery** that we need to present in a clear, understandable way.

Dr. Peter Nicolaus notes that Yezidism acknowledges senjaqs (like peacock and snake) as “symbols of the supreme divine being (Xwade, Allah, etc.) ... the symbolism of the snake remain(s) **mysterious** and inaccessible for non-Yezidis.” (bold added) This emblem is shrouded in secrecy as

Nicolaus has carefully documented. For example, he recounts a conversation in 1846 between Yezidi leaders and the famous archaeologist, “Sir Austen Henry Layard, whose excavations greatly increased the knowledge of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia. ... Layard was invited to participate in almost all events connected with the celebration of the principal feast of the Yezidi religious year. The religious leadership appeared to reply openly to all his questions in the friendliest and frankest manner. Nevertheless, they did not tell him the full truth. For instance, when he saw a black snake carved into the wall near the doorway of the main temple at Lalish ... Layard considered it 'particularly conspicuous' and suspected that the snake and the other figures on the same wall were emblematical. However, he could 'obtain no other explanation from Sheikh Nasr, than that they had been cut by the Christian mason who repaired the tomb some years ago, as ornaments suggested by his mere fancy.’” (Layard, 1882: 184)

More recently Joanna Bochenska probes the fascinating, if perplexing, snake symbol in her article, *Following the snake: Yezidi Interpretations in Contemporary Literature*. Bochenska cites three modern Kurdish authors (Mehmed Uzun, Hesene Mete & Jan Dost) who “admit that many [Yezidi] symbols are 'mysterious' and one is unable to understand them fully.” So she suggests that creative new interpretations of mythical Kurdish stories “await to be discovered in its intertextual dimension. That is why the modern interpretation should rather expand the borders and seek new perspectives and approaches.” (p.124)

The Paradoxical Symbolism of Snakes in Yezidism

Bochenska cites a snake fairy tale titled, Cilkezi, which involves a black and white snake. Then she “underline(s) a few meanings which can be connected with the Yezidi tradition where the **snake is a significant symbol associated with Good rather than Evil** as is widespread in Christian and Muslim traditions.” (p.127, bold added) She continues to explain that it “would be more appropriate to say that the snake's 'natural evil' is understood as the source of Good not Evil.” (p.128) In the final analysis, Bochenska endorses a conundrum/paradox, “based on the co-existence of opposites and implies the close relationship between God and Satan.” (p.146) Nevertheless, instead of resolving the tension between these opposites, her approach ends up blurring the distinction between Good and Evil!

Interfaith-Intertext

Tragically, Bochenska overlooks two stories about serpents from the writings of Moses that can provide a key to unlock the paradox involving opposites: God/Satan, Good/Evil. In the first story YHWH, the one true God, confounds and overpowers Pharaoh's false gods by miraculously turning Moses' rod into a snake which ultimately devours the inferior snakes belonging to Pharaoh's magicians.

The second Bible story which conveys positive snake symbolism is summarized in *The Action Bible* as follows (based on Numbers 20:22-21:22):

The Israelites travel on. When they come to Mount Hor, God tells Moses that Aaron will soon die, and he should take Aaron and his son Eleazer to the mountaintop.

“Eleazar, take your father's robes. You will take his place as High Priest of all Israel.”

Aaron dies on Mount Hor and Israelites mourn for 30 days. Then they move on. A cloud leads them by day, and a pillar leads them by night. But the people soon forget God's care

... and again they complain ...

“There's not enough water I'm always thirsty.”

“Hasn't God always given us water when we needed it?”

“Yes, but the food-- I'm always sick of this stuff that we have to gather every day and make into bread. I want food like we had in Egypt – melons, fruit ...”

“And you said God would give us freedom! Do you call this freedom? Wandering around the wilderness?”

Suddenly, as punishment for their grumbling, the camp comes alive with poisonous snakes.

“Help! I've been bitten!”

“Help me or I'll die!”

Moses, we've sinned against God and against you. Forgive us and take away these snakes! Please!”

“I will ask God to help you.”

Moses prays and God tells him to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole.

“Listen to me, everyone who has been bitten by the snakes. God said that if you look at this bronze snake, you will be well again.”

“I'm well! God has healed me.”

Everyone who looks up at the snake is healed.

We know that snakes were a common symbol in the ancient world. More especially, and in the time of Moses, various snake cults were known in and near the land of Canaan. Why then, did God use the image of a bronze snake lifted high on a pole in a positive manner, signifying deliverance?

While this story strikes many moderns [and even contemporaries] as some form of ancient magic, the text is clear that it is actually the Lord's solution and works only because of his power. By having the Israelites look at the very symbol of their judgment, the Lord is having them acknowledge, “This is the judgment that you, Lord, have justly brought upon us, and only you can deliver us from it.” Jesus uses this event to explain his death on the cross. (John 3:14-16) [Footnote to Numbers 21:8-9, NIV Zondervan Study Bible, D.A. Carson]

Connecting the dots: SNAKE to SAVIOR

Christ's disciples found it extremely difficult to comprehend what Jesus was saying even when he clearly predicted that he would be killed and rise again three days later. (Luke 18:33-36; cf. John 20:9) If Jesus' closest associates struggled to grasp this teaching we mustn't think it will be easy for modern unbelievers, including Yezidis, to recognize how the bronze snake which Moses lifted up corresponds with Jesus who was lifted up (on a cross). This challenge calls to mind the earlier statement from Colossians 4 describing the gospel as a **mystery** thus implying that we need to present the good news in a way that is meaningful and understandable to our audience.

I've been in the home of certain Yezidis who have displayed a snake symbol on a wall-hanging beside a depiction of their main sanctuary at Lalish. On another occasion, while in the home of another Yezidi friend, they gave me a 'virtual' tour on a cell phone showing pictures of this special temple to which every devout Yezidi is encouraged to make pilgrimage.

In these pictures I noticed an image of a snake next to the entrance of their temple, not unlike the one Sir Austen Layard observed 180 years ago. As a friend it would have been natural for me to make an observation or ask questions out of genuine curiosity (without judgmental overtones), but sadly, I missed that opportunity.

In such circumstances it is appropriate to comment as follows; “Seeing the snake reminds me of a story about a bronze snake that God told the prophet Moses to mount on a pole.” “Have you heard about this story?” Then, if/when the door opens one could read the story as recorded in Numbers chapter 20 & 21.

After reading this riveting story we need to consider, “How can we make stimulating (seasoned) conversation with our Yezidi friends?” Allow me to suggest a simple question, “What do you think (or how do you feel) about this story?” Then, give a sincere listening ear. (This may also include exploring some impromptu remark from your friend involving a peculiar facet of Yezidi snake tradition.)

After listening carefully, be alert to an opportunity for posing a question based on the Bible story, “Why did the Israelites ask for advice from Moses?” ... “Do you think they were looking for a quick and easy solution or did they sincerely want healing for the sin they committed?”

Obviously, a superficial solution for outward symptoms would be pointless. This raises another question, “How do you think God's servant, Moses, would be able to discern people's heart motives?”

Any Israelite who was willing to gaze with a contrite heart at the bronze serpent – the very symbol of their judgment – would humbly acknowledge, “This is the judgment that you, Lord, have justly brought upon us, and only you [Lord] can deliver us from it.” However, for those who were unrepentant and only wanted relief from bodily pain, probably they refused to heed Moses instruction. They were not interested to look with faith at the uplifted bronze snake. But whoever **did** look in faith was healed. This response demonstrated which people humbled themselves.

Making the connection between the **uplifted** serpent and the **uplifted** Son of Man may not be easy but remember that Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would guide us. Four Scriptures as quoted below are especially helpful in clarifying this challenging comparison:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” Galatians 3:13

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness... 2 Peter 2:24

Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who

hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ... Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am **lifted up** from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. The crowd spoke up, “We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be **lifted up**’? ... Who is this ‘Son of Man’?” (bold added for emphasis) John 12:23-34

Fanciful Christian ornament?

Earlier we noted how leaders in Lalish gave archaeologist Layard an evasive answer in response to his curious query, “Is there any significance to the snake emblem at the shrine entrance?” They explained that it was “cut by the **Christian** mason who repaired the tomb some years ago, as ornaments suggested by his **mere fancy**.” (bold added for emphasis) Were these Yezidi leaders inadvertently pointing in the right direction?

Furthermore, we have noted Joanna Bochenska's suggestion that creative new interpretations of mythical Kurdish stories “await to be discovered in its **intertextual dimension**.” (bold added) Undoubtedly this is true, but sadly, Bochenska (unwittingly or cleverly?) limits the scope of her “intertextual dimension” to Kurdish and Muslim writers. The fact is: most modern scholars use the term *intertextual* in the context of interfaith dialog. Therefore, Bochenska would have been wiser if she had included Jewish and Christian Scriptures (Old and New Testament) in her discussion. Clearly the Bible is the true compass enabling lost humanity to find our way home.

Final destiny of the devil

The last book of the Bible records the final events of world history, in line with the divine verdict against Satan as predicted earlier by Christ in John 12:31 and indeed, as foretold by God in Genesis 3:15.

The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient **serpent** called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. ... He seized the dragon, that ancient **serpent**, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ... And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. (Revelation 12:9, 20:2,10, bold added)

All Bible quotes are taken from the New International Version.

If you have questions about the article or would like to discuss these themes further please contact me [here](#).

Postscript

The basic purpose of this article is to explain the redemptive analogy in John 3:14-15 where Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Much of the discussion focused on how this principle applies to Yezidis, however, we should not underestimate its relevance to people from other cultures who also venerate/admire snakes. Indeed, the Serpent-to-Savior analogy has profound worldwide relevance, if only, because most humans harbor deep feelings of fear and or hatred toward snakes.

However, it is also important to bear in mind: snake cults, like Yezidism, are painfully aware that

snakes can be very dangerous. Dr. Peter Nicolaus has documented this at length in, *The Serpent Symbolism in the Yezidi Religious Tradition and the Snake in Yerevan*. He explains on page 57 that “according to Yezidi lore and the *Black Book*, the serpent, or at least its offspring, caused harm to man and was **finally caught and burned**. According to one account even the intentions of the serpent that rescued the ark [of Noah] were from the outset sinister and evil.²⁴” (bold added) Nicolaus continues by quoting from two researchers who cited a tradition which involved the eminent trio Sheikh 'Adi, Melik, Sheikh Sin and Sheikh Shems. These three dignitaries encountered a snake while walking on a road and each of them, in turn, recoiled from the snake, not allowing it to kiss his hand. Why?

“so that respect and awe for you [snake] would remain among humans forever, and they would fear you.” [Therefore] From that time onwards, according to Yezidi mythology, the snake is left alone and people fear it and recoil from it. When a man sees a snake, even when he know(s) it is not poisonous and cannot harm him, still he will recoil and be afraid” (Kreyenbroek/Rashow 2005: 391-392). ...

[In conclusion, Nicolaus says,] In view of the above quotes from the Yezidi religious oral tradition and from ad hoc statements of Yezidis concerning snakes, it becomes evident that the serpent represents opposing principles. On the one hand, the serpent is seen as frightening and dangerous ('they'll build him a house from scorpions and snakes'). ... Recalling the above briefly outlined dichotomy, as well as Yezidi secretiveness it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to decipher the exact symbolism of the serpent in Yezidi mythology.⁴¹ The serpent is a very ancient and universal symbol built upon the chthonic nature of the snake.⁴² [p.57-58, Nicolaus, op cit. Note: according to Oxford Languages Dictionary *chthonic* means; “concerning, belonging to, or inhabiting the underworld. 'a chthonic deity'”.]

Point to ponder: The Christian Bible is not the only Scripture declaring that the serpent will be “finally caught and burned.” Ironically, this is even embedded in Yezidi folk lore and in their *Black Book*. Therefore, I want to urge readers to take to heart what Jesus declared right after comparing the ancient iconic healing imagery of an uplifted snake with himself being lifted up. We read in John 3:16;

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.