

Nehushtan

By Allen Dvorak

As Israel traveled from Mount Hor (where Aaron died) to go around the land of Edom, the people began to complain that they had no food and no water. All they had was the manna which they called “worthless food” (Numbers 21:4-5). The response of the Lord was to send fiery (“venomous”) serpents among the people. Bitten by these snakes, many people died. When the people confessed their sin to Moses and asked him to pray on their behalf to the Lord, Moses interceded for them (21:6-7). Although the people wanted the Lord to “take away the serpents” from among the people, the Lord instructed Moses to “make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole.” Anyone bitten by one of the snakes could look at the bronze serpent and live. This Bible story about the bronze serpent took place during the wilderness wandering, or about 1400 B.C.

Fast forward about 700 years, to the time of king Hezekiah of the southern kingdom (2 Kings 18). Although the son of Ahaz, one of the worst kings of Judah, Hezekiah was an exceptional king, leading numerous reforms in the kingdom. The author of 2 Kings offered him high praise in the following passage:

5 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. 6 For he held fast to the Lord. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments the Lord commanded Moses. **(2 Kings 18:5-6)**

The author of 2 Kings also cited some of the specific things that Hezekiah did. . . .

He removed the high places and broke the pillars & 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). **(2 Kings 18:4)**

Incredible! 700 years after Moses made the bronze serpent, it still existed and the people were burning incense to it (NKJV).

They called it “Nehushtan,” literally “bronze thing” (note in the NKJV). The Hebrew word transliterated “nehushtan” also sounds like the word for “serpent” (similar root). The bronze serpent had become a sacred object, an object of worship!

Remember that in Moses’ time the bronze serpent was the avenue of divine grace to the people in danger of physical death. Looking at the serpent on the pole demonstrated the faith of the people in the Lord’s instruction and His power to save them from the venom of the snakes. Over time the power of the Lord associated with the bronze serpent was transferred, in the minds of the people, to the image of the serpent itself. **The serpent became an object of worship!**

One of the things that Hezekiah did was break into pieces this bronze serpent. Imagine the conviction and courage that it must have taken for Hezekiah to destroy an object that was so venerated by the people! The antiquity of the bronze serpent probably contributed to its veneration... yet Hezekiah correctly recognized such worship as idolatry and destroyed the image, likely to the dismay of many.

The longer that people are immersed in error, the harder it’s to make corrections. Small changes to truth accumulate over time and the movement away from truth becomes almost imperceptible.

At some point, it is assumed that the present error is actually the original truth! **Antiquity of practice is considered to be proof of truth.** Anyone who attempts to direct people back to truth is viewed as the troublemaker. “Why, we’ve always offered incense to the bronze serpent!”

Jesus mentioned the bronze serpent in His conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:14-15; *some question if the last section of chapter three is actually the words of Jesus or commentary by the gospel writer John*).

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. **(John 3:14–15; ESV)**

As the bronze serpent was lifted up in the wilderness so that all who looked upon it would receive life, i.e., healing from their serpent bites, so Jesus had to be “lifted up” (crucified) so that all who believe in Him can receive life (eternal life).

People today make the same mistake that the Israelites did with the bronze serpent. The physical cross (the crucified Christ) was merely the avenue through which God’s grace was extended. In the minds of some, a physical cross (or some size-reduced replica of it) has some mystical power; they have transferred the power of the sin sacrifice offered on the cross (Hebrews 9:22) to the cross itself. Witness those who kiss the cross or use a cross to “ward off” evil.

The original Declaration of Independence is preserved and is protected with great care. People flock to see the actual document, but the principles conveyed are what’s significant. *Nehushtan* – a Bible example of misplaced veneration. Let us be careful we do not make the same mistake!

