

Mark A. Awabdy

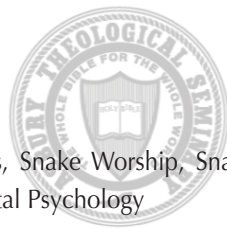
*Snake Iconography, Mythology, and the Meaning of the Bronze Snake Image in Numbers 21:4–9 and 2 Kings 18:4*

**Abstract:**

This study pursues the question of why YHWH, who in the Decalogue prohibits the creation and worship of divine images, would order Moses to create a snake image as the mode of healing snake bites in the desert (Num 21:4–9). This question is legitimated as the Judahites subsequently burn incense to Moses' bronze snake, which Hezekiah destroys as an act of loyalty to YHWH (2 Kgs 18:4). Adopting a definition of meaning from symbolic action theory in cultural psychology, this essay explores what the bronze snake image would have meant for the earliest audiences of these stories. In the core of the essay, the biblical, iconographic, and mythologic contexts are investigated and prove to be suggestive for identifying the meaning(s). In the conclusion, recent studies in psychology offer insight for canonical reflection.

**Keywords:** Snake Images, Snake Worship, Snake Cults, Bronze Serpent, Aniconism, Developmental Psychology

**Mark A. Awabdy** graduated in 2012 and teaches Old Testament in the Middle East and South Asia. He is the author of *Immigrants and Innovative Law* (2014), *Leviticus* (2019), *Numbers* (forthcoming), and is now researching Abraham (in Tübingen biannually).



### “Make a Venomous Snake”: An Exception to Aniconism?

In a dense cloud on Mount Sinai, YHWH communicates ten words, the Decalogue, to the prophet Moses that would indelibly influence the world forever. In an apodictic legal form not clearly paralleled in the ancient Near East (Alt 1953: 278–332), the second word—by the count of Jewish and some Christian traditions<sup>1</sup>—binds the Israelites to the following prohibition:

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ:

You must not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of what is in the sky above or what is on the land below or what is in the waters under the earth (Exod 20:4).

A “carved image” (פֶּסֶל) was conventionally made from wood, nowhere conclusively from stone, and then could be overlaid with metal.<sup>2</sup> The tripartite classification here naturally refers to images of arial (“in the sky above”), terrestrial (“on the land below”), and aquatic (“in the waters under the earth”) animals, as such images are commonplace in ANE iconography. What is not said in this verse but is clear from the ANE and the direct context—“you must not have other gods before me” (20:3) and “you must not bow down to them or worship them” (20:5)—is that the forbidden images are not merely aesthetic sculptures, but representations of deities. In the ANE, an image of a god or goddess could be theriomorphic (animal form), anthropomorphic (human form) or therianthropic (animal-human hybrid) (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 135–6, 273–4). The Decalogue prohibits crafting cult images that are theriomorphic (sky, land, water animals) and anthropomorphic (humans on land),<sup>3</sup> and by implication, also images that are therianthropic (sky/land/water + humans on land). Moreover, although the syntax of the prohibition conveys a general or permanent prohibition, but not necessarily both,<sup>4</sup> its permanency is underscored by the narrative context which presents the Decalogue (and Book of the Covenant) as coming directly from the finger of God (Exod 24:12; 31:18; 34:1).

As the Torah story unfolds, however, this straightforward interpretation of the Decalogue’s aniconism is challenged for the Israelites and readers alike. After about eleven months at Mount Sinai, the Israelites finally depart for the promised land (Exod 19:1; Num 10:10). Yet on the

opening legs of their journey, Israel violates the covenant through their ingratitude, insubordination, and faithlessness (Num 11–14), and YHWH curses them to wander for 40 years in the wilderness and die (14:26–35). Almost 40 years later, approaching the completion of YHWH's curse, the Israelites leave Mount Hor, where Aaron had died, and attempt to circumvent the land of Edom (21:4).<sup>5</sup> Culminating the Egypt-nostalgia motif in the Moses story (Römer 2013: 70–72, 81–3), the Israelites complain one last time that they have no bread or water and detest the food they do have (21:5).<sup>6</sup> Instead of supplying water or a new source of food for them as he had before (11:31–34; 20:11), this time YHWH responds to their ungratefulness and faithlessness by commissioning venomous snakes to bite the people (21:6). Many Israelites died as a result (v. 7). Complaining *against* God (פְּאַלְהֵיִם), not *to him* like the God-fearing psalmists, was deeply offensive to YHWH. This is not only because he is holy (deity) and good, worthy of glory and trust, but also because, as the great king, he reserved the right to destroy those vassals who dare to malign him (Mendenhall 1954: 59; Parpola and Watanabe 2021). However, in the face of imminent death, the surviving Israelites—some of whom belonged to the exodus generation cursed to die in the wilderness (14:26–35)—shockingly confess their sin to Moses and plead with him to intercede with YHWH to remove the snakes (21:7). Moses, now himself bound to die outside the land of Canaan because he did not treat YHWH as holy in the eyes of the people (20:10–12), does not burst out in anger, but carries out the Israelites' request and prays to YHWH (21:7).

Even more stunning than the Israelites' confession is YHWH's merciful response. By means of the snakes, YHWH could have seized this opportune moment to finish off the cursed generation and move on to the second generation destined for Canaan. Instead, he listens to their cry through Moses and exhibits once again his remarkable longsuffering and mercy (à la 14:17–20; also, Exod 32:30–34). What perplexes the reader aware of the prior Sinai instructions, and I will argue would have perplexed the Israelites and early audiences aware of their own ancient Near Eastern world, is *the means of mercy* by which YHWH chose to heal those bitten by the venomous snakes. The same YHWH who spoke the second word of the Decalogue issues the creation of a theriomorphic image as his means of healing:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לְךָ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ עַל־נֹס וְהָיָה כָּל־הַנִּשְׁחָד וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ וְחָיָה:

YHWH said to Moses, “Make a venomous snake<sup>7</sup> and put it on a pole. When anyone who was bitten looks at it, they will live” (21:8).

YHWH does not specify how to make this snake, and within the Moses story perhaps the most natural and orthodox approach would have been for Moses to make a snake from his staff, as Aaron had done in Egypt (Exod 7). Instead, Moses, as if he knew instinctively what YHWH wanted, forges the snake out of bronze (v. 9). Those bitten by a venomous snake who looked up at Moses’ bronze snake lived, which implies that YHWH authorized the bronze snake image as the mode of divine healing (v. 9). No evidence can be marshalled that YHWH hypostatically indwelt the snake image (see Hundley 2013, 185–87; Mettinger 1982: 129–31), but why would he endorse such an image at all, especially when the Israelites, prone to crafting and worshipping molten theriomorphic images (Exod 32), could be tempted to worship it as a divine form? After all, subsequent Judahites up until Hezekiah’s time fell into that very temptation:

הוא הסיר את־הַכְּמוֹת וְשִׁבְרָתָאֶת־הַמִּצְבֹּת וְכָרַת אֶת־הָאֲשֵׁרָה וְכָתַת נָחֹשׁ  
הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה כִּי עַד־הַיָּמִים הַהֵמָּה הָיוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִקְטָרִים לּוֹ  
וַיִּקְרָאֵלוֹ נְחֹשֶׁתֶן׃

He removed the high places, smashed the sacred pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He also demolished the bronze snake that Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been offering incense to it—it was called Nehushtan (Snake-Bronze; 2 Kgs 18:4).

Justin Martyr (2nd cent. CE) has captured the enigma of YHWH’s orders to craft the snake: “Tell me, did not God, through Moses, forbid the making of an image or likeness of anything in the heavens or on earth? Yet didn’t he himself have Moses construct the brazen serpent in the desert? Moses set it up as a sign by which those who had been bitten by the serpent were healed” (Leinhard 2001: 242–3). For Justin, the sign of Moses’ snake serves only to prefigure Christ, whereas for others, like Moroccan Rabbi Or HaChaim (1696–1743 CE), the intermediary snake image remains inescapably perplexing:

Furthermore, we must try to understand why G’d decreed that an object such as this, which resembled a form of idol, had to be made altogether and why looking up to it would heal a person who had sustained a bite. Our

sages in *Rosh Hashanah* 29 claim that as long as the Israelites looked heavenwards this was a demonstration of their faith in G'd, etc. If indeed this was all that G'd had in mind, why did He not order them to look straight at heaven instead of looking at the snake as an intermediary?

That question will drive the present study. Of course, one can silence HaChaim's question simply by claiming that Y<sup>HWH</sup> as deity, acting in total freedom, makes an exception to his prior aniconic prohibition "without reason, explanation, or accountability, seemingly beyond any purpose at all."<sup>8</sup> While Y<sup>HWH</sup> owes no explanation for his ostensible exception to aniconism, his orders to craft a snake (image) and heal by means of it would have had a perlocutionary effect on the ancient Near Eastern audiences of this story. Our aim in this essay will be to explore what that meaningful effect of Y<sup>HWH</sup>'s and Moses' snake image must have been. First, we will observe how the biblical contexts around Num 21 and 2 Kgs 18 underscore forbidden image worship. Next, we will investigate the cultural context of snake iconography, especially in snake cults, and mythology in the ancient Near East. In the conclusion of the essay, we will draw insights from psychology to reflect on the formative impact of the religious symbolism of Moses' snake image as an antecedent to the Son of Man.

### **Moses' Snake Image: The Biblical Contexts**

What *meaning* did the Israelites in the desert in Num 21:4–9, the Judahites in 2 Kgs 18:4, and the early audiences of these texts assign to Moses' bronze snake image? Research on modern icons has shown that semantic distance—the nearness of the relationship between the icon and the function it represents—is initially an important factor in how well an icon performs in a culture. However, later on, the users' familiarity with the icon becomes more important to its performance because of long-term memory (Isherwood, McDougall, and Curry 2007: 465–76). For contemporary readers, therefore, the semantic distance between Moses' snake image and the function(s) it represented may be too vast for it to perform independently as a visual symbol today without any explanation of what it connoted in its Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern settings. Also, the function that an icon's designers assign to it originally may be very different than the meaning that the icon's users assign to it subsequently (Isherwood, McDougall, and Curry 2007: 467). By analogy to our study, Moses' snake

image initially exhibited that YHWH's snake of gracious healing subverts, for the onlooker, YHWH's snakes of horrible judgment. That is, "the symbol of their suffering was now the focus of their faith" (Card 1989). In this we see a twist on the *lex talionis* principle: It is not the punishment, but the healing that resembles the crime. Subsequently, however, the meaning must have shifted, as the Judahites began burning incense to the bronze snake (2 Kgs. 18), detaching the icon from its original, nonrepeatable function as YHWH's prescribed instrument of healing the snake-bitten Israelites in the desert.

According to symbolic action theory in cultural psychology, meaning implies that the symbol—whether an action, object, or object-constellation—relates to an actor's subjective experience of themselves and to the world that the actor experiences (Boesch 1991: 60). We may extend these implications of meaning to our study: How did YHWH who sent the snakes (object) and healed by means of a snake image he prescribed (actions), and how did the snake image (object) that Moses crafted and raised up (actions) relate to the early audiences' subjective experience of themselves and of their world? In this essay, I will argue that with respect to Israel's self-experience, Moses' actions to craft and elevate a bronze snake would have reminded the Israelites of their predilection toward theriomorphic image production and worship. With respect to Israel's world-experience, YHWH's judgment by the snakes and healing by means of the snake image exhibited that YHWH supplants the status of snakes, snake deities, and snake-healing deities. These relations of meaning emerge clearly from the ancient Near Eastern iconography and mythology but are intimated in these stories and elsewhere in the aniconic texts of Numbers and Kings.

In the text of Num 21:4–9, one finds two details that expose the Israelites' vulnerability to serve other gods. Israel's henotheistic devotion to YHWH was, once again, compromised. First, they regretted that YHWH had delivered them from Egypt (v. 5), which means that, among other things, they were not grateful that YHWH had "executed judgments on their [Egyptian] gods" (33:4). Second, they complained about the food and water they did not have and detested the food they did have (v. 5). Such ingratitude could become an impetus for turning to other deities for provision, a causation that Deut 11 would elucidate: "...then he promises, 'I will send rain for your land...I will provide pasture for your livestock and you will eat your fill! *Make sure you do not turn away to serve other gods!*'" (Deut 11:14–15\* NET). In the ancient Near East, "contact [with the deity] primarily took the form of service [of the cult image in the temple] so that the resident

deity remained resident and favorably disposed to bless the community around it" (Hundley 2013, 134). Thus, by the time Num 21 arises in the storyline, Moses, Aaron, and the Levites had been serving Y<sup>HWH</sup> in the Tent of Meeting (cf. esp. Exod 33, 40; Lev. 1–16, 21–22; Num. 3–4, 8, 18), and the people expect Y<sup>HWH</sup> to reciprocate with his blessings of food, drink and protection. The subtext of their complaint in 21:5 is either that Moses was failing to keep Y<sup>HWH</sup> favorably disposed, or Y<sup>HWH</sup> was failing to bless the community. In that moment, the Israelites were vulnerable to find fulfillment through other gods and goddesses, as they did at Sinai and would do again at Moab. At Sinai, Aaron had led the Israelites into a syncretistic "feast to Y<sup>HWH</sup>" filled with sacrificial eating, drinking, and probably ritual sex (Exod 32:5–6, 18), and in Num 25 the Israelites would prostitute themselves with the daughters of Moab, engaging in sacrificial meals and worship of the Moabite gods (25:1–3; see Exod 34:15). In Numbers, the submotif of worshipping other gods culminates in the iconoclastic orders to the second generation entering the land: "you must drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images, all their molten images, and demolish their high places" (33:52 NET). The implication of this text, together with the Decalogue and golden calf apostasy, is that Israel would be tempted to either worship other gods or worship Y<sup>HWH</sup> by representing him through indigenous cultic images.

Why, then, would Y<sup>HWH</sup> order the crafting, raising and visualizing of a snake (image) for Israelites predisposed to worshipping other gods or worshipping Y<sup>HWH</sup> through a cult image? This question arises naturally from the Num 21 story, but is validated as a legitimate question by the later record that the Israelites fell into the temptation of worshipping Moses' bronze snake image until Hezekiah's reforms in the late eighth century: "He also demolished the bronze snake that Moses had made, *for up to that time the Israelites had been offering incense to it*—it was called Nehushtan" (2 Kgs 18:4). The past continuous aspect of the paraphrastic construction—"had been offering incense to it" (הָיָה מְקַטְרֵת יָמִים)—indicates a cultic custom that antedated Hezekiah, although when the custom originated remains unclear. The people had become accustomed to burning incense to the bronze snake, thinking they were ritually manipulating the snake's magical powers (Johnston 2004: 147–9), or appeasing Y<sup>HWH</sup> through serving his cult image (2 Kgs 17:32–33; 18:22), or invoking a snake god for their benefit (2 Kgs 17:33–38).<sup>9</sup>

### **Moses' Snake Image: The Iconographic and Mythologic Contexts**

To demonstrate that Moses' bronze snake related in the minds of the Israelites and Judahites to their own theriomorphic image production and worship, and related to YHWH's sovereignty over snakes, snake deities, and snake-healing deities, one must discover compelling evidence that snake iconography and mythology would have pervaded the world of the early audiences of Num 21 and 2 Kgs 18. The approach taken here will not be to reconstruct the history of snake images and cults, which others have attempted,<sup>10</sup> but to summarize the snake ideologies that permeated the societies around Israel.



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**Ishtar Gate Hybrid Creature**

(Photo by Mark Awabdy)



Snake iconography was, indeed, ubiquitous in the ancient Near Eastern world surrounding the Hebrew Bible, as it was present in every major region—Egypt, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Greece. Moreover, it appeared across the eras of the storyline and composition of the HB—LB, Iron, Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic (Hendel 1999: 615–16). The claim of ubiquity is supported further by the diverse functions that snake images served in the societies in and around ancient Israel.<sup>11</sup> Snake amulets were worn to repel venomous species. The Uraeus cobra, worn on the diadem of the Egyptian monarch, protected the king and the pantheon alike.



### Crown of Sit Hathor

(Hans Ollermann/Wikimedia Commons)

Apotropaic figurines and jewelry warded off evil, while snake images embellished bowls, and engraved snakes were raised on poles—analogueous to Moses' bronze snake raised on a pole. Finally, metallic snake statues were employed in cultic rituals.

This last function, the ritual use of snake statues in cultic zones, may be particularly germane to the meaning associated with the bronze snake in Num 21 and 2 Kgs 18. First, when the reader arrives at Num 21, Moses was still performing rituals, alongside the Levitical and Aaronic cultic functionaries, in and around YHWH's dwelling place (Num 17; 20:6–12; 31:48–54; also, Num 1:1; 2:17; 3:38; 7:89; 27:2.). Second, at Sinai the Israelites worshipped another metallic, theriomorphic image, the golden calf, through a sacrificial festival to YHWH (Exod 32:1–8).



### Brass snake at Delphi

(Kharmacher/Wikimedia Commons)

Third, customary incense burning to Moses' bronze snake, leading up to the time of Hezekiah's reforms, is a markedly cultic ritual (Exod 30:1–10, 34–38; 37:25–29; 40:5, 27; Lev 4:7; 10:1; 16:12–13; 26:30; Num 4:7, 16; 7:11–88; 16:7, 17–18, 35, 40, 46–47; Deut 33:10; 1 Sam 2:28; 1 Kgs 7:50; 2 Kgs 23:5, 14), suggesting that even in Num 21 cultic worship of the bronze snake was a latent possibility in the disordered affections of the Israelites. Here we have space to survey the snake representations found in cultic centers in Canaan, the Sinai desert, and the Arabian Peninsula.

In the land of Canaan, at the LB temple of Megiddo (Tel el-Mutesellim) an 18 cm. bronze snake was discovered in a sacred zone (stratum X, 1650–1550 BCE), while a second snake was found belonging to a subsequent period in the LBA (stratum VII B; Münnich 2008: 39). At Tel Mevorakh, near Caesarea Maritima, the LB temple yielded a coiled, bronze snake, which “provides the only clue to the rites of the temple” (Stern 1977: 90). At LB Hazor, archaeologists uncovered a 7.3 cm bronze snake with a hole in its tail, which may have been to fasten it to a staff (cf. Num 21:8–9; Koh 1994: 71). In the Babylonian destruction layer of the Philistine capital Ekron (Tel Migne, 603 BCE), an eight inch, 18-carat-gold cobra was found on the floor of a monumental palace (Unsigned 1996, 28). The cobra, associated with the Egyptian Uraeus, has a prong likely to attach it to the diadem of a statue of a monarch or deity. The elevation of this cobra above the leader's head, staring down at onlookers, may remind us of the elevation of Moses' snake visible to onlookers below. At Beth Shan, the southern temple (either Iron Age IB or IIA) contained at least five

cylindrical cult stands with carved snakes crawling around them (Mullins 2012: 145, 149).

In the Negev near the copper mines of Timna, 18 miles north of Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba, a desert temple to the Egyptian fertility goddess Hathor was discovered (c. Seti I–Rameses III?, then Midianites). The temple's *naos*—the space housing the deity's statue—contained a vertical recess hewn for a statue of Hathor, the head of which was uncovered at the site (Avner 2014: 105). In or just outside the *naos*, a small, copper snake was discovered. For all the disagreements about the site, there is a consensus that the copper snake was a votive object used in worship inside Hathor's temple (Avner 2014: 104–9). Hathor, while normally represented as a cow, was also represented as a lioness, sycamore, and relevant here, as a cobra.

In the Oman Peninsula, there is evidence of an Iron Age II snake cult with centers in Al Qusais (Dubai, U.A.E.), Al Bithna and Masafi (Fujairah, U.A.E.; Benoist 2007: 34–54). The archaeologists of Al Qusais, on the coast of the Arabian/Persian Gulf, found a stone construction on a hill—probably cultic—containing small, bronze snake figurines, and pottery with snake iconography comparable to the snake designs of Elam, suggesting Elamite influence (Benoist 2007: 34). At Al Bithnah, closer to the coast of the Gulf of Oman, a cluster of structures were designed for cultic rituals involving worship of the snake image/deity. The central zone of the site contained many pits, often of stone or clay, all containing animal bones (Benoist 2007: 40–42).





### **Open Air Altar**

(Photo by Mark Awabdy)

Wells, pools, and a canal were discovered, indicating more than just purification, but likely libation rituals to accompany the animal sacrifices (Benoist 2007: 49). In total, 56 representations of snakes were found, and by contrast, only two of humans and two of felines (Benoist 2007: 49). Roughly 12 miles from Al Bithnah is Masafi, with an Iron Age II cultic building comparable to structure H at Al Bithnah (pictured; Benoist 2007: 52). In that stratum at Masafi, the archaeologists found potsherds with snake images, and in room 386 in particular, many, tiny bronze snake figurines, as well as bronze arrowheads, knives, and ceramic vessels, most with snake representations on them (Benoist, Bernard V., Brunet, and Hamel 2012: 153–5). Whereas nearly all the vessels at Al Bithnah were heavily burnt, suggesting cultic reuse in a burning ritual to the snake deity, the vessels at Masafi were not burnt, perhaps indicating they were purposed as a one-time gift to the deity (Benoist, Bernard V., Brunet, and Hamel 2012: 156). In the desert oasis of Al Ain (Rumeliah), some of the Iron Age pottery

is decorated with snake designs (Potts 1990: 378), and in Saudi Arabia (Dammam) a golden bracelet with an ornamental snake's head was found (Potts 1990: 330).<sup>12</sup>



### Snake Decoration on Pot

(Alexander McNabb/Wikimedia Commons)

On the Island of Bahrain in the Neo-Babylonian period, coiled snakes were buried in open bowls with a ribbed shoulder, and sometimes the coiled snake skeleton was interred with a stone bead, normally turquoise, or in one instance a pearl (Potts 1990: 321). With one possible exception (below), there are no written sources to identify the snake god or goddess worshipped in the Arabian Gulf and Oman Peninsula in the Iron Age.

While the cultic functions of snake iconography often must be inferred without accompanying inscriptions, we are fortunate to have texts of various genres that elucidate ancient Near Eastern conceptions about snakes and their associations with the gods. The central, recurring ideations can be stated in four propositions.

1. *The gods create, control and deploy snakes that are frightening and deadly.*

In *Enūma Elish*, Mother Huber, associated with Tiamat, created monster serpents and “filled their bodies with venom for blood,” and

mustered an army of serpents, dragons and other terrifying creatures for battle (COS 1.111:392, 393, 395, 396). Among the gods of the night praised in an Akkadian Hymn is the “Dragon” and the “Horned Serpent” (COS 1.115:417). The Uraeus symbol, a rearing Egyptian cobra, for the serpent goddess Wadjet safeguarded kings and gods, while kings—divine and snakish in their essence—were immune from and could cure snake bites (Hendel 1999: 744–8). Hence, the Uraeus is promoted as the source of the military destruction of King Thutmose I (16–15th cent. BCE) in his Nubian campaign: “Then these [enemies (?) [...] fl]ed, weakened by his Uraeus which in a moment turned them into carnage” (COS 2.1:7). This conviction continues for Thutmose III (15th cent. BCE): “It is his uraeus that overthrows them for him, his flaming serpent that subdues his enemies” (COS 2.2B:14–15). During Akhenaten’s reign, a hymn to the solar disk Aten rehearses the negative realities of night after Aten sets, including “All the serpents bite” (COS 1.28:45). In the Ptolemaic period, Egypt’s sun god creator, Atum, self-proclaims: “When I emerged from the roots I created all the snakes and everything that evolved from them” (COS 1.9:15). In the Israelite worldview,  $\Upsilon\text{HWH}$  alone is the creator and controller of deadly snakes (Gen 3:1a; Exod 4:3; 7:9–15; Num 21:6–7).

Sometimes the snake was associated with magic or beauty. In the Gilgamesh epic, for instance, a snake carries off the plant that rejuvenates, which serves as an etiology for why snakes molt and regenerate their skin (ANET, 71). Also, in building the temple for Ningirsu, patron god of Lagash, King Eninnu describes the transport of the cedars like “majestic snakes floating on water” (COS 2.155:425). However, the prevailing disposition toward snakes was to fear them for their wild and dangerous power. Thus, a Sumerian epic begins in primeval time with no snakes, scorpions, hyenas, lions, dogs, or wolves (COS 1.547). In one Sumerian fable, the quarreling, accursed turtle twice mocks the heron as having the eyes, tooth, and tongue of a snake (COS 1.178:572; also COS 1.131:453–8), and in another, the wheat reminds the ewe that she fears three enemies who threaten her life in the desert, “snakes, scorpions, and robbers that dwell in the plain” (COS 1.180:577). In a Middle Kingdom Egyptian manual of dream interpretation (possibly originally 12th dynasty), if one dreamt of killing a snake, that indicated good fortune, but of getting bitten by a snake, bad fortune (COS 1.33:53–4).<sup>13</sup> In a Hittite edict, king Hattušili I twice calls the mother of his adopted son a “snake,” a pejorative for her powerful sway over her

son against the king's wishes (COS 2.15:79 §2, §4; cf. Gen 3 and COS 1.103:356).

A Hittite law reveals the belief that killing a snake could invoke magic powers: "If a free man kills a snake, and speaks another's name, he shall pay 40 shekels of silver. If it is a slave, he alone shall be put to death (COS 2.19:116; Greengus 2011: 272). In a Middle Babylonian hemerology, one who kills a snake on day twenty of the month of Ajaru "will go forth pre-eminent" (Greengus 2011: 272). Perhaps to disassociate his healing power from such magical powers, Y<sup>HWH</sup> did not kill the snakes in the desert, but provided a cure. Finally, in the Aramaic Sefire treaty, king Bar-ga'yah king of KTK invokes divine curses on his vassal, Mati'el king of Arpad, if Mati'el is unfaithful: "May the gods send every sort of devourer against Arpad and against its people! [May the mou]th of a snake [eat], the mouth of a scorpion...And may a moth and a louse and a [...] become] to it a serpent's throat!" (COS 2.82:214). By analogy, Israel's divine king Y<sup>HWH</sup>, likewise, commissions venomous snakes against his unfaithful vassals. Or by analogy to Egyptian thought, Y<sup>HWH</sup> subsumes the power attributed to Egyptian kings and their Uraeus snake icon, to destroy his recalcitrant people acting as his enemy.

## *2. The gods defeat the venomous serpent-dragon monster.*

In the mythologies of India, proto-Indo-European cultures, Iran, and the ancient Near East, the snake figure appears most saliently as a serpent-dragon monster that a nation's belligerent gods must fight and slay (Miller II 2018). For the Egyptians, the sun god Re, with militant god Seth and his magic, defeat the serpent-dragon in the mountains (COS 1.21:32), and for the Hittites, the Storm-god repeatedly struggles with and ultimately defeats the sea serpent, who represents chaos (COS 1.56:150–1). For the Ugaritians, warring Ba'al and Môt "bite each other like snakes" (COS 1.86:272), and Ba'al defeats Yam (Sea), who is identified as "the dragon," "Lôtan" (cf. Leviathan), "the fleeing serpent," "the twisting serpent," and the "close-coiled one with seven heads" (COS 1.86:252, 265, 273). At the core of what is claimed in the dragon-slaying myth is a deity's victorious power over the serpent-dragon, who is always conquered in the end (Miller II 2018). With unchallenged sovereignty, Y<sup>HWH</sup> subordinates not only the Pharaoh, who wore the Uraeus, the Sea (Exod. 14–15; Ezek 29:3; 32:2; Isa 27:1; 51:9–10), and Egypt's gods (Num 33:4), but also the venomous snakes that he had sent to punish his rebellious people.

### 3. *Certain gods heal venomous snake bites.*

Along with Egypt's divine, snake-natured king, certain gods and goddesses also possessed the power to heal venomous snake bites. A myth of Isis and Re illustrates this and serves as an etiology for divine snake healing. The Egyptian fertility goddess, Isis, forms a serpent by kneading the ground moistened by the spit of the sun god and creator Re (COS 1.22:33–4). The serpent poisons Re, he suffers, and Isis pledges to cure Re if he reveals to her his true name. He pronounces his name, “the Great One of Magic,” and she renders the venom in his body innocuous. Consequently, to cure a venomous snake or scorpion bite of a human, this myth was to be recited as an incantation over images of the gods, drawn on the ill person's hand and licked off, or on a cloth and placed on their throat, and the victim would imbibe a “scorpion plant” ground with beer or wine (COS 1.22:34). The implication of this myth is that Isis who created the venomous snake is sovereign over it and can reverse its lethal affects. It is hard to miss the analogy between snake-creating, snake-healing Isis and YHWH in Num. 21. Discovered at Ugarit, two narrative liturgies and incantations pertain to how to counteract snake venom (COS 1.94:295–8). In one of the liturgies, by analogy to the Isis-Re story, the core deities of the pantheon respond to a venomous snake bite like conventional snake-charmers, but are ineffective (cf. Re), whereas the god Ḫōrānu (cf. Isis) performs an incantation that renders the snake venom innocuous (COS 1.94:295). In the Akkadian poem of the righteous sufferer, Marduk sends a favorable sign, a healing serpent that slithers by the sufferer, and quickly thereafter he was healed of his illness (COS 1.153:490). In this example, no snake bite is mentioned, but the deity Marduk reveals his healing through a snake, not unlike YHWH in Num. 21. Later in Greek mythology, the healing god Asclepius is represented by the symbol of two entwined snakes (Hendel 1999, 615). With just these illustrations, the parallel with YHWH is unmistakable. Yet for the scribes of the Hebrew scriptures, instead of the divine Egyptian monarch, instead of Isis, Ḫōrānu, Marduk, or Asclepius, it is YHWH alone who heals his people of venomous snake bites (Num. 21:8–9; cf. Acts 28:3–6).

### 4. *Certain gods were associated with snakes and represented by snake images.*

The snake is often associated with particular deities and demons, and the “symbolic associations of the snake include protection, danger, healing, regeneration, and (less frequently) sexuality” (Hendel 1999: 744).



In Mesopotamia, the Elamite chief deity was commonly enthroned on coiled snakes, and the god MUŠ/Niraḥ could be represented as a snake or hybrid snake (Hendel 1999: 744). Just south in the Arabian Gulf, on Bahrain, a god named MUŠ is attested and could be identical to the snake god MUŠ/Niraḥ (Potts 1990: 307). The Sumerian goddesses Inanna and Nisaba were exalted in Sumerian hymns: “Like a dragon you have deposited venom on the foreign land” (COS 1.160:519), and “Dragon, emerging brightly on the festival, Mother-goddess of the nation” (COS 1.163:531). Moreover, the god who guards the underworld demons and the gates of heaven, Ningishzida, is depicted with a horned, venomous snake ascending from his shoulders (Hendel 1999: 744). Lamashtu, the female demon, clasps snakes in her hands, and Pazuzu, the male demon, has a phallus like a snake (Hendel 1999: 744). The snake-headed hybrid, *mušḫuššu* (Akk. “furious or reddish snake”), became the symbolic animal of the god Marduk and his son Nabû (Wiggerman 1992: 168–9). In an inscription, King Ibbi-Sin of Ur III announces his extravagant worship of the moon god Nanna by crafting from the war spoils of Susa a golden *šikkatu* vessel with the images of a bison, snakes and vibrant dark rain clouds (COS 2.141B:391).

In Egypt, in addition to the abovementioned pervasive Uraeus cobra and the occasional representation of Hathor as a snake, the Egyptian goddess, Qedešet, had Hathor-like hair and was often depicted grasping snakes (Budin 2015: 1–2). Beyond this, frightening snakes protected the gates of the underworld, the *bas* of the gods reside in snakes, and the deceased become snakes in the Netherworld (Hendel 1999: 744). Notably, the Kṛht serpent was a guardian spirit (COS 1.42:96). The snake was rooted in Egyptian mythology, as Hendel explains:

The sun-god in his nightly passage through the primeval waters of Nun is rejuvenated inside the body of a snake before his reappearance at dawn. The primeval gods at the beginning of time are embodied as snakes in the primeval waters, and time itself can be depicted as a snake. At the end of time Atum and Osiris return to snake-beings in the eternal waters. The deadly and the regenerative powers of the snake occur in varying proportions in these instances; hence the complexity of the snake symbol. (Hendel 1999: 745)

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Also important is the myth of the cosmic snakes, Apopis and Ouroboros, who challenge the order of the sun god as they represent the forces and

limits of chaos (Hendel 1999: 745). In Canaan and Phoenicia, the Levantine counterpart to Qedešet is Qudšu, who holds either lotus or papyrus, but in an Ugaritic image of gold foil, she is grasping snakes (Budin 2015: 3). There is, however, insufficient evidence to link Qudšu with Asherah as some have done.<sup>14</sup> The Ugaritic god of magic, Ḥōrānu, who heals snake bites, was a huge serpent who tried to usurp El’s throne (Korpel 2016: 24–33).

In summary, the actions and powers conventionally assigned to snake gods, goddesses, and demons, accessed by humans through mythical reenactment, incantations and other magic, are transferred exclusively to Israel’s deity, YHWH. The events of Num 21 and 2 Kgs 18 have been shaped and transmitted for posterity as theological stories. As a result, we encounter the events today through the worldview of the Israelite and Judahite scribes, who honor YHWH as their deity who subverts the threat of lethal snakes, the status of the prevalent snake deities, and human reliance on magical snake rituals for healing and welfare. The powers assigned to deities to create, control and deploy deadly, terrifying snakes is conferred upon YHWH alone. While supreme deities subdue the venomous serpent-dragon monster in the cosmic realm, YHWH subdues the venomous snakes in the desert on earth. The former could not be tested empirically even by the mythologists, whereas the later was encountered through the sensory experience of YHWH’s people in the desert. It is not the Egyptian king or goddess Isis, nor Ugarit’s Ḥōrānu, Babylon’s Marduk, or Greece’s Asclepius, but YHWH who powerfully heals venomous snake bites for those who look to his provocative means of healing. Alas, we return to our opening question, why would YHWH commission Moses to craft a snake image when the Israelites had demonstrated a propensity to creating and serving theriomorphic images? This question is even more acute now that we have surveyed the various snake gods and goddesses whom their devotees worshiped through snake cults and represented through snake images.

### **Conclusion: Reflections through Psychology**

Appropriating the definition of “meaning” from symbolic action theory in cultural psychology (Boesch 1991: 60), we have contemplated how the paradoxical snake image of YHWH’s judgment and grace related meaningfully to the Israelites’ experience of themselves and of their world. Regarding Israel’s self-experience, the data—the biblical, iconographic and mythic contexts—indicate that Moses’ work of creating and raising the bronze snake would have reminded the Israelites of their proclivity to create

and worship theriomorphic images. Regarding Israel's world-experience, the evidence points toward YHWH supplanting the status of snake deities and snake-healing deities. This symbolism correlates with the Torah's recurring testimony of YHWH's supremacy over all other panthea (Exod 15:11; 18:11; 20:3; Num 33:4; Deut 10:17; 32:37–9).

We can reflect further on these observations through correlated insights from developmental psychology. In Lev Vygotsky's model, a mediating device is a symbol, encountered in society whose "evocative power grows in proportion to its role in mediating the development of cognition and affect" (Holland and Valsiner 1988). The inverse is also true: The power of cultural models in a society's mental life—assumptions about the world that individuals in a society learn—is determined by encountering the symbols of those models (Holland and Valsiner 1988: 257–9). In this line of thought, the evocative power of the snake image for the Israelites in the desert would have grown in proportion to the image's function in mediating ancient Israel's cognitive and affective (emotional) development. On a basic level, those who were snake-bitten, whether remorseful ("we have sinned," 21:7) or just fearful, likely perceived and felt the snake image they beheld to be a symbol of divine grace subverting the venomous snakes of divine judgment. In the same way, Christ crucified, prefigured in the old snake image, invites a cognitive and affective response from those facing imminent death: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who trusts in him might have eternal life" (John 3:14–15). For old and new covenant believers, the symbol of the elevated snake and of Son of Man holds evocative power insofar as it mediates not only cognitive and affective development, but new birth by the Spirit into the Kingdom of God (John 3:3–8; cf. Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:24–27).

Furthermore, from the biblical, iconographic, and mythologic data surveyed in this article, the bronze snake image would have also held evocative power in mediating the development of Israel's mental and emotional development vis-à-vis the forbidden theriomorphic images they, their predecessors, or their neighbors have made of YHWH or other deities. Contrary to the ubiquitous divine snake representations in the ancient Near East, Moses' bronze snake image was not to be conceived as an image of YHWH—neither Num 21, 2 Kgs 18, nor the aniconic theology of the Primary History condone the imaging of YHWH—but this does not mean a bronze snake image could ever be detached mentally from the snake images that

were commonplace in and around Canaan. In effect, the same snake image that heals also evokes the memory of cult images and their inhabiting deities that could be served and manipulated to one's advantage. However, while a simple gaze at Moses' snake healed in the desert, subsequent visualization of that snake will not automatically evoke shame in the idol-worshipper, leading to repentance and faith in YHWH. Correspondingly, one study of a diversity of responses to sacred art has indicated "that attention to symbolic content or theological percepts alone was insufficient for personal identification with the meaning" (Lang, Stamatopoulou, and Cupchik 2020: 331). In the same way, looking on the image of the invisible God, Christ, can evoke shame that repels—"Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8)—or that attracts—"A woman in that town who lived a sinful life...began to wet his feet with her tears..." (Luke 7:38)—or that suppresses personal identification—"Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads...the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him..." (Mark 15:29–31\* NRS).

Vygotsky's inverse claim about mediating devices also rings true for the Israelites: The cogency of cultural models—the appeal of serving snake deities or snake-healing deities who could protect, heal, regenerate and entice sexually (Hendel 1999, 744)—in Israel's mental and emotional life would have been determined by Israel's encounters with the divine snake iconography and mythology widespread in the ancient Near East. Before Hezekiah destroyed Moses' bronze snake, the people customarily burned incense to it, imagining they were invoking the snake's magic, or appeasing the deity YHWH by serving his cult image, or serving a snake god. In any case, their behavior reveals that they had adopted a prominent cultural model, antithetical to the Decalogue's signal prohibitions, but indicative of the divine snake iconography and worship in and around Canaan. Yet if Moses' creation of the snake image confronted Israel's idolatrous tendencies with *divine grace* (Num 21), Hezekiah's destruction of the snake image confronted Israel's idolatrous tendencies with *divine judgment* (2 Kgs 18). As YHWH's royal Davidic representative on earth, Hezekiah's iconoclasm demonstrated, for the Deuteronomistic historians, that "he did what was right in the eyes of YHWH" (v. 3), "trusted in YHWH the god of Israel" (v. 5a), was an incomparably great king (v. 5b), "held fast to YHWH and did not abandon him" (v. 6), and "YHWH was with him, and he succeeded in everything he did" (v. 7).

In summary, Moses' bronze snake was polysemantic in its symbolism, but not endlessly so. While it negatively reminded Israel of its proclivity toward iconographic worship, it positively depicted YHWH's healing and supremacy. Subsequently, the meaning of the symbol morphed into an illicit image that Hezekiah had to destroy to restore aniconic and henotheistic Yahwism in Judah. In theory, one might question the likelihood of such polysemy in a single symbol. The data support it, however, and subsequently, the Son of Man, lifted up on the cross, communicates an analogous polysemy. Looking upon Jesus Christ demands a self-reflection of one's own sinfulness, but simultaneously exhibits his healing of sin and supremacy over the spiritual forces of darkness and of death. In addition, the cross, as the bronze snake in Hezekiah's day, can be perverted into a magical amulet, devoid of Christ himself. In this regard, the Catholic crucifix offers a symbolic advantage over the protestant Christless cross (1 Cor 2:2; Gal 2:20), even while, conversely, the Christless cross importantly evokes the resurrection (Heb 6:6; 1 Cor 15:14).

In closing, a recent neurological study offers us a final stimulating thought. Nine psychologists from six universities studied 20 healthy individuals from various religious backgrounds, whose beliefs about God ranged from adaptable to fixed, and who ranged from being on a quest to answer existential questions or not. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging, the study analyzed how this sample pool responded mentally to religious positive symbols (the cross, *et. al.*), religious negative symbols (a pentagram, *et. al.*), and non-religious negative, positive and neutral symbols (Johnson, *et. al.* 2014: 82–98). From 120 symbols, the researchers selected 25 based on a survey that revealed consensus about each symbol's positivity or negativity. Although the study overlooks that religious symbols are generally, but not universally, perceived as positive or negative (e.g., the cross can be a negative symbol for religious Muslims), nonetheless their conclusion remains persuasive that, "the more an individual's religion involves an open-ended, responsive dialogue with existential questions, the less activation will be suppressed in the primary visual cortex for both religious and nonreligious negative symbols" (Johnson, *et. al.* 2014: 92). Corresponding to their findings, another study interjected positive and negative symbols (Christ/heaven, Satan/hell) for its Christian participants, without their conscious awareness, and this influenced a subsequent cardiovascular response, matching challenge and threat states, when

the same participants were asked to give a speech relating to their own mortality (Weisbuch-Remington, *et. al.* 2005: 1203–16).

In our study, there is no way to corroborate how the bronze snake image, in Moses' day or Hezekiah's, influenced the activation of the primary visual cortex or cardiovascular system of its onlookers and devotees. We may, however, infer that there would have been a few predominant physiological reactions. At the outset, we should be clear that Israelite and Judahite faith was not necessarily antipathic to an "open-ended, responsive dialogue with existential questions," as they customarily adapted their faith to YHWH's progressive revelation of himself in history and in the diverse, compositional strands of the Torah (e.g., Patriarchal vs. Mosaic Yahwism) and occasionally engaged in open-ended dialogue about existential questions (e.g., Gen 18:22–33; Exod. 18; Lev 10:16–20; Num. 27, 36). Thus, when gazing at the snake image, which resembled the many divine snake images of their neighbors, the envenomated Israelites facing death had to expand the boundaries of their faith to accept this otherwise negative theriomorphic statue was now the only means of their salvation. Their primary visual cortex would have been activated for the right reasons, and their lives spared as a result. One could conceive, however, that traditionalists in the desert suppressed the activation of their primary visual cortex because Moses' iconic snake looked just like a cult image. One thinks of Ezekiel's consternation when God ordered him to eat a barley cake baked over a fire fueled by human excrement. "Then I said, 'O Lord YHWH, I have never defiled myself'" (cf. Acts 10:13–15)! Later, other religious leaders would suppress the image of Jesus as the divine Son of Man/God because Jesus was in their minds a human form that must never be worshipped (Matt 26:64–65; Mark 14:62–64; John 10:33). Yet when Moses' snake was divorced from its original function in the desert, it was also right for Hezekiah to react viscerally. He repudiated the bronze snake as a seductive image, presumably suppressing the activation of his primary visual cortex, and he expressed his loyalty to Yahweh by destroying the image, presumably triggering a cardiovascular response consistent with challenge and threat states. For those who lead God's people today, we too must safeguard our faith communities from converting forms of worship—crosses and other iconography, liturgies, music, the sacraments, ministries, and even the Bible itself—into objects of worship that undermine worship of the divine image of Christ. In the end, then, both Moses in his activation

and Hezekiah in his suppression must be regarded as vital forefathers in the shaping of our “faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> “You must not make for yourselves an image” is regarded as the *second* commandment by Philo, Josephus, Orthodox Jews (part two of the second), Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Reformed, but as part two of *first* commandment by the Peshitta, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Roman Catholics, and Lutherans (Youngblood 1994: 30, 32–4, 50, 52).

<sup>2</sup> “פֶּסֶל” *DCH* 6:726. The improper synonym, “מְשֻׁקֵּית” (*DCH* 5:501), refers to an “image” for cultic use, perhaps from stone or silver, whereas the term “צִלְמִים” (*DCH* 7:124 gloss b) in cultic settings refers more broadly to the “image” of a deity. When these terms are bound (צִלְמֵי מַסְכָּה, Num 33:52), what is in view is probably “cast images” of deities formed by pouring molten metal into a mold.

<sup>3</sup> Both creation accounts present humans as land creatures. In Gen 1:24–31, Elohim creates land animals and his image bearers, the first humans, together on the sixth day (in distinction from birds and fish on the fifth day), and in 2:7, Yahweh Elohim creates “the man” (הָאָדָם) from the dust of “the ground” (הָאָדָמָה) (cf. 3:19; 4:11).

<sup>4</sup> For אַל + *yiqtol*, see *GBHS* §4.2.11.

<sup>5</sup> On the narrative’s chronology, see Num 20:28–29; 33:38.

<sup>6</sup> Probably referring to manna, as in 11:6–9.

<sup>7</sup> The term “venomous snake” (“שֶׁרֶף” *DCH* 8:197 gloss 1) occurs earlier in apposition in v. 6, “snakes, namely, venomous ones,” which I have argued elsewhere refers to their species, not as fiery snakes, but venomous snakes (Awabdy 2022). In this essay, I will refer to venomous snakes as those that produce venom, whereas poisonous snakes will refer to species that make one sick because they are eaten.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann is writing specifically about one of three possible explanations from Scripture that he sees for the COVID-19 pandemic (2020: 10).

<sup>9</sup> The first option—the snake as a magical amulet or fetish—may be the most likely, since unlike the golden calves of Aaron and Jeroboam, nothing is said of worshipping יהוה or other gods (cp. Exod 32:1, 4, 5, 8; 1 Kgs 12:26–33).

<sup>10</sup> See Joines 1968: 245–56; Lambert 1985: 435–51; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 273–4; Beyerle 1999: 23–44; Koenen 1999: 353–72; Münnich 2008: 39–56; Schipper 2009: 369–87.

<sup>11</sup> Most of these enumerated functions are noted by Hendel (1999: 615).

<sup>12</sup> Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, 330.

<sup>13</sup> In Mesopotamian divination, if a snake crosses in front of a man from the right to the left, the man will have a good name/reputation, but if from left to right, a bad name (COS 1.120:424).

<sup>14</sup> *Contra* Maier III (1986: 94) and Hendel (1999: 745). Budin shows the lack of data linking Qudšu with Asherah (2015: 19 n. 12).

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