

Numbers 21:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.

Analysis

And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole. God commands Moses to create a bronze replica of the venomous serpents that had been killing Israelites as judgment for their complaints. This strange command—making an image of the judgment instrument—becomes a means of deliverance when looked upon in faith. The bronze serpent (nachash nechoshet, נַחַשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת) plays on the similarity between "serpent" and "bronze" in Hebrew.

The lifting up of the serpent on a pole (nes, נֵס—standard, signal) made it visible throughout the camp. Those bitten by serpents needed only to look in faith toward the bronze serpent to live. The simplicity of the cure (merely looking) emphasizes that salvation comes through faith, not works. The bronze serpent didn't possess magical properties but represented God's promised means of deliverance.

Jesus explicitly identified Himself with the bronze serpent (John 3:14-15): "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up." Christ on the cross became the antitype—lifted up to bear the curse of sin (represented by the serpent) so that all who look to Him in faith might live. The bronze serpent incident beautifully illustrates salvation by faith through God's appointed substitute.

Historical Context

This passage from **Bronze Serpent and Victories** must be understood within its ancient Near Eastern context. The wilderness period (approximately 1446-1406 BCE using early Exodus chronology, or 1290-1250 BCE using late chronology) represents a formative period in Israel's national and spiritual development. Archaeological discoveries from Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia provide important background for understanding Israel's experiences.

The Plains of Moab, located northeast of the Dead Sea, provided a staging area for Israel's entry into Canaan. Archaeological surveys reveal this region was inhabited during the Late Bronze Age, with the kingdoms of Moab, Ammon, and the Amorite kingdoms of Sihon and Og controlling various territories. Israel's victories over Sihon and Og demonstrated God's power and gave them control of the Transjordan region.

The Balaam incident reflects ancient Near Eastern divination practices. Mesopotamian texts describe diviners and prophets like Balaam who were hired by kings to curse enemies or bless military campaigns. However, Numbers presents Balaam as ultimately subject to Israel's God, unable to curse whom God has blessed—demonstrating YHWH's supremacy over pagan spiritual powers. The regulations for land division and inheritance reflect standard ancient property law while being adapted to Israel's tribal system and theological commitments.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does this passage's emphasis on judgment and healing deepen your understanding of God's character and His work in His people's lives?

2. In what specific ways can you apply the principles of bronze serpent to your current life circumstances and spiritual journey?
3. What does this passage teach about the consequences of sin and the necessity of atonement, and how does this point to Christ's ultimate sacrifice?

Interlinear Text

שֶׁבֶר
thee a fiery serpent
H8314

לְבָנָה
Make
H6213

מֵשֶׁה
unto Moses
H4872

אֱלֹהִים
And the LORD
H3068

יְיָ אָמַר
said
H559

כָּלְבָנָה
when he looketh
H853

עַל אֹתְךָ
it upon a pole
H5251

בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
and set
H7760

אֹתְךָ וְלֹא
and it shall come to pass that every one that is bitten
H5391

יְנַחֲשֶׁת
when he looketh
H7200

לֹא
upon it shall live
H2425

Additional Cross-References

John 3:14 (References Moses): And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

Psalms 145:8 (References Lord): The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy.