

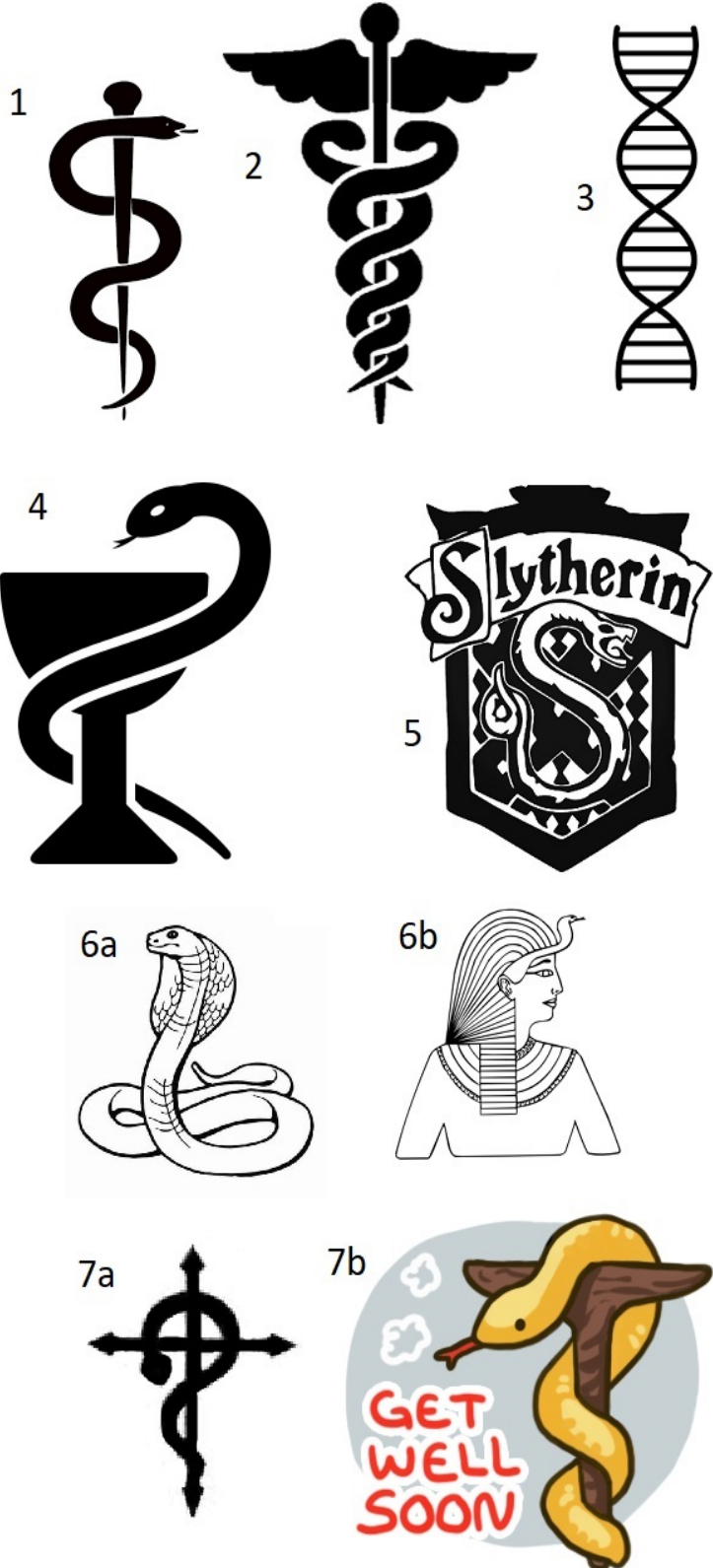
2018 03 12 TUMC Why Did It Have To Be Snakes

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:11-17

It's time to play – Know your Snakes!
7 popular snake symbols from history!

- 1) Rod of Asclepius [ash-lep-ee-us] – a snake wrapped around a rod, symbolizing the Greek god of healing and medicine.
- 2) The Caduceus [ca-doo-shush] – two snakes wrapped around a wand, with a pair of wings. Symbolizes Hermes, the messenger God, but often confused with the Rod of Asclepius and used as a symbol for medicine, especially in the United States. As Hermes was the patron of commerce and traders as well as thieves, liars, and gamblers, perhaps it is a more appropriate symbol for the US medical system.
- 3) The Double Helix – double-stranded molecules of nucleic acids, the structure of DNA. Not actually a snake but it looks a bit like the caduceus...
- 4) Bowl of Hygieia [High-jee-ee-ah] – a snake wrapped around and rearing over a bowl or chalice, representing the Greek goddess of hygiene, and used to symbolize the pharmacy trade.
- 5) Slytherin House – a snake, rearing on a shield, colours green and silver.
- 6) Uraeus [Ur-ay-ee-us] – a rearing cobra, as a charm, hieroglyph, or headpiece. Offered protection or healing, placed on the headdress of Pharaoh.
- 7) Nehushtan [Ney-hush-tan] – the bronze or brass snake on a staff, which healed and protected people from snakebites when they looked at it.



It turns out that snakes are very popular symbols through history and in many cultures. It can be very bewildering. For us, it's just a long list of Snakes on a Cane.

That concludes the fun portion.

We didn't even get into Ouroboros, or Jörmungandr, or the Lambton Worm. There will be time later! Come see me and tell me a story about a snake.

The remainder of this sermon will involve me grappling with the Old Testament text, trying to suggest different ways to read it. I will ultimately argue that none of these texts are about the crucifixion, but that they reveal an important truth about the crucifixion that we must consider as part of our Lent theme of covenant, exploring the relationship between God and (as we say in Canada) Personkind.

So this story from the Book of Numbers of the people of God in the wilderness. After the death of Aaron, the people complain about the food and their future prospects. God sends a bunch of 'fiery serpents' to bite them. Lots of them die, and they ask Moses to pray for God to relent. God tells Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten can look at it and live. And that's what happens, and they go on with their journey.

And Jesus later refers to this story and uses it to illustrate his own identity as the anticipated Son of Man, fulfilling God's plan to save the world. Although he does not directly mention the crucifixion, it is a powerful image that connects to Moses' story and echoes his death on a cross, lifted up for all to see.

Both these stories have a lot to tell us about covenant because they show the relationship between God and the people of Israel and between God and all humanity. But they are both difficult texts to engage.

The first problem I have with the wilderness story is – what do we make of the snake symbol? It's such a broadly used symbol, throughout the Bible and throughout paganism. The more research I did, the more I found myself asking: "Why did it have to be snakes?"

Why is there such a connection between snakes and healing, or the body? Part of it is the idea of the '*pharmakon*' a substance that can be both a poison or a remedy. It is the skill of the physician and the pharmacist that makes the difference. To make a cure out of a deadly substance. And snake venom is the classic example of this – too much of it will kill but a small enough amount can be used to heal. That's quite a magical power, even today. Think about radiation or chemotherapy, using a poison to fight a cancer.

And there is another magical principle at work here – sympathetic magic, where the image of a thing gives you power over the thing itself. In this case, Moses creates a snake and those that witness his creation are immunized from the snakebites. It would be easy for me to describe sympathetic magic in terms of voodoo dolls and black magic. But after so many years of Hollywood interpretations of African-derived spiritualities, it's time to look closer to home. In Britain we have quite the tradition of burning people in effigy. Usually infamous public figures like traitors, politicians or terrorists. As far as I know, this tradition goes back to the days when we just burned the individuals. Where the state-led, church-sanctioned pursuit of public peace, justice and righteousness meant burning away the poison in our midst.

Do you remember the *pharmakon* – the substance, like snake venom or radiation, that can be both poison or remedy? *Pharmakon* has a third meaning – the scapegoat. The thing that carries the sins of a community. The thing that is made into poison, driven away or killed, and which thereby heals the community. Another type of magic that digs into the spaces between human souls and the things they fear and works itself out in the words, deeds and averted glances of the larger community.

Snakes, magic and death. It's a powerful mess. And Jesus says – “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

The meaning is clear, isn't it? Jesus must be crucified, mocked and reviled, lifted up so that all can see his humiliation, and he can be the scapegoat for the sins of the world. His death will be the gateway to heaven for us all. By looking upon his broken body, taking it in, we can have life.

Looking back on the story in Numbers it seems to make sense. This is the anticipation of Christ, who saves us from the results of our disloyalty and disobedience. God would kill us all, except that God has provided a way for us to be saved, if we just look and believe.

We could leave the story there. But it seems to me that this interpretation is more poison than cure.

Consider the account in Numbers. It seems to fit nicely in with the other stories of the 40 years in the wilderness. More than once, the Hebrews complain, and start to idealize their generations of captivity in Egypt. More than once, God responds with violence, or Moses does. More than once, the dust settles and the journey goes on, until the next time that grumbling breaks out, and we readers roll our eyes at the fact that the people don't seem to learn anything.

But we also do not learn anything from this story. God doesn't provide sustenance in the wilderness. There seems to be no lesson, harsh or otherwise, about abandoning the ways of Egypt. And Moses has nothing to say. What is this story about?

It may have some of the same language, but it doesn't rhyme with the other stories. It is discordant.

The creation of Nehushtan doesn't seem to fit with the ways of the God who is being revealed through scripture. God turned Aaron's rod into a snake, just like the Egyptian conjurers, but then Aaron's snake ate their snakes. God was surpassing, not endorsing, their wizardry. But here it seems to be the same old sympathetic magic. In the Book of First Samuel, centuries later, the descendants of these desert-wanderers are facing a Philistine army and decide to bring the Ark of the Covenant to the front lines, so that God will help them. They try to use God's own instrument to compel divine assistance.

When the Philistines see the Ark, they become afraid and fight even harder, winning the battle and stealing the Ark! The Israelite's attempt to direct God's power utterly backfires.

Meanwhile, the victorious army take the Ark to their own temple and install it, but calamity follows, and they move it from city to city, in each place suffering from tumorous growths and infestations of mice. Finally the Philistines decide to make gold models of mice and tumours, and put them with the Ark on an unmanned wagon and see if God will take it back. The oxen head for Israelite territory and the lesson is clear – this type of magic is something God isn't impressed with.

Of course the conclusion of Nehushtan's career shows the problem clearly. It looks like an idol, works like an idol, and people end up making offerings to it, until King Hezekiah destroys it. Case closed, we might say. We might be tempted not to wonder why God would create something so utterly self-defeating.

But if we read it the other way around, there are other ways to understand. Maybe Nehushtan was nothing to do with Moses. Revering snakes for their power to healing or harming seems to be pretty commonplace. Perhaps this snake was an artefact from a cult that existed before the Temple or alongside it. Or perhaps it was something taken from Egypt – a token of respect for an Egyptian ally, a sign of sovereignty and power, naturally placed in the temple. Maybe it was up there on the wall for years and people forgot where it came from, and started to tell stories, using the old familiar form of wilderness grumbling to give some legitimacy to the incongruous idol.

And maybe Hezekiah's motives weren't so pure. There are always other reasons for kings to interfere with religion. Destroying religious sites away from Jerusalem as part of the long process of centralizing the power of the Temple, binding it more closely to the royal line. If Nehushtan was inspired by or representative of the Egyptian Uraeus [Ur-ay-ee-us] cobra charm, perhaps it is not surprising that Hezekiah got rid of it. During his reign he allied with Egypt to rebel against Assyria – a ploy which failed miserably. Forced to pay a tribute in precious metals he stripped the temple and no doubt symbols of Egyptian influence would have been first to go. In that light, his decision to break up and destroy the copper-alloy snake has a different feel.

We can seek out that kind of explanation. However it happened, Nehushtan got into the Temple, and someone spun a story to legitimize its presence, describing its origins in the wilderness years. Later on, a new king tries to stabilize his shaky power and collect tribute payments by stripping Egyptian images from the Temple. That's certainly one way to look at it. It helps us know what to do with the story.

But then, this discordant story gets thrust into the foreground when Jesus references it.

And he references it right beside that most famous of mission statements – For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever would believe in him might have eternal life.

It is hard to read it as anything else, once you know the story of the crucifixion. Just like those generations of Temple workers quizzically squinting at Nehushtan, until their confusion was resolved with another story about Moses and the grumbling people. What else could this passage be, except Jesus cryptically revealing a necessary crucifixion, God's plan to redeem the world with the scapegoat of scapegoats, the ultimate anti-*pharmakon*, the loving, healing goodness that is so powerful that it kills death.

It is so hard, once you know about the crucifixion, not to see it everywhere. Never mind that the lifting up that Jesus was describing was ascending into heaven, not dying on a cross. No one has ascended into heaven except

the Son of Man who descended to earth. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. So that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Once you know what the crucifixion means, you stop noticing it. Once you know that Jesus rose again on the third day, and ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father... it just becomes part of the story, the journey to the promised land, and the violence stops being such a big deal. It's easy to see Nehushtan on the wall and come up with a story to make it okay. It's easy to read about God smiting disobedient people with snakes, and decide that it must have been a late addition. We're like that, us humans. We reach for a comfortable answer, a way to feel like the world is normal.

Is this a world we want to feel is normal? Is crucifixion something that we need to be okay with?

Look deeper. Feel deeper. Find the place where it doesn't sit right.

The snake sculpture in the temple, year after year, just part of the scenery. If someone new asks a question, everyone looks blank. It's always been here, they say, it's part of our heritage. Moses made it, they say, I think I heard a story about it from the wilderness days. Don't worry about it. It keeps away the snakes – when was the last time you saw a snake, eh? It's no big deal.

Jesus stares down from walls and statues and icons across the world, his wounds visible, his heart open and vulnerable, his eyes open and searching. And somehow this moment of torture becomes part of the scenery. Part of how things look, how we think the world ought to be. If we are theological, we do our theology in a world where the crucifixion happened. If we are artistic, we re-imagine it, represent it, subvert it, explore it. We sanitize and normalize it. We bring the abomination of murder, stripped of its corpse, into our own sanctuary, and we notice more the new flowers, the changing seasons, the lightbulb that needs replacing, instead of the horror of the cross in our midst.

So it is that something strange, discordant and unacceptable becomes normalized, part of the usual way of things, and we stop noticing it for what it really is.

Don't get me wrong. I like the flowers. The lightbulbs do need to be changed. The crucifixion isn't the end of the story, but the story is not over yet, and we can't get comfortable.

We humans have tried to get comfortable with Nehushtan. But Nehushtan has always been an idol. As a bronze snake; as a story about a snake; and as a story that symbolizes the crucifixion. Nehushtan has been a decoy, pointing us towards a God of vengeance who is eager for our deaths. Nehushtan, a mere thing of brass, has been a distraction from the truth at the centre of existence.

That God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

That Jesus came into a world that offered only death, and offered instead life, and truth, and righteousness. That he was lifted up, and through his ascension into full relationship with God, we are invited into our fullest life. May we accept his guidance and accompaniment along this way. Amen.