

## “Antidote Savior”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

3-11-18

Based upon Num. 21:4-9: John 3:11-17

In the 1790s, a German physician named Dr. Samuel Hahnemann undertook an experiment using the bark of a Peruvian tree called the cinchona tree. He gave himself a dose of bark twice a day, and soon developed symptoms similar to malaria. The symptoms stopped when he stopped ingesting the bark. From that experience he theorized that the bark, if taken in much smaller doses by someone who was actually suffering from malaria, might stimulate the body to fight the disease better. He was right. Cinchona bark contains quinine, which has been used as an antimalarial drug. Hahnemann’s experiment led to him developing a theory called the “Principle of Similars,” or “like cures like,” which today is the foundational principle of homeopathic medicine.<sup>1</sup> Western medicine has long known that you can create immunity in a person by giving him or her a little dose of a threatening virus. This is how vaccines work, as well as allergy shots. But homeopathy, which is based more on Eastern ways of looking at health than Western, affirms that the dosing substance does not have to be identical to the pathogen. It just has to be like it in enough ways that it enables the body to heal itself. Then like can cure like.

We see an ancient and kind of divine version of this idea in today’s Scripture lessons, both of which reference a bizarre incident which took place while the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. The longer they wandered the more tired and irritable they got. So they began whining incessantly. At first, they whined about not having anything to eat, so God gave them manna. Then they whined about having nothing but manna, so God gave them quail. Then they whined that they were thirsty, so God through Moses gave them fresh spring water. But none of this satisfied the people for long. By the time we get to Chapter 21 in *Numbers* they are back to whining about the food again. They were sick of all of it and sick of the wilderness. One can hardly blame them. A generation’s worth of wandering in the desert eating nothing but the taste-equivalent of grilled chicken, with a side of tree louse secretions (which may be what manna was), would be enough to make anyone grouchy. But by Chapter 21, God had also had enough of the people’s whining and ingratitude. So according to the story, God sent “seraph” or “fiery” or “flying” serpents into the desert to attack the people. Terrified, the people repented and prayed to God to save them from the venomous snakes. God heard the people, forgave them, and told Moses that the remedy which would save them was another snake, this time a bronze one which Moses was supposed to make and lift up on a pole. God said that if the people gazed upon the fake serpent, they would be saved from death by the real ones. Like cures like.

It’s hard to know what to make of this story at first. Did our loving God really sic venomous snakes on the children of Israel? And if so, how could their looking at a bronze snake have helped them? The Sinai desert is certainly filled with snakes. One of them, a snake called the saw-scale viper, fits the biblical description of a deadly “fiery” or “flying” serpent

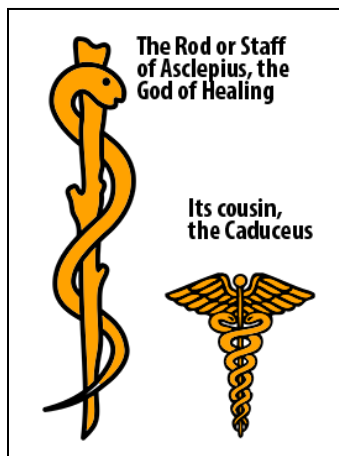
---

<sup>1</sup> Pelletier, Kenneth R., “Homeopathy: Like Cures Like”, blog, The Best Alternative Medicine, retrieved March 7, 2018 from [http://www.drpelletier.com/TBAM/excerpts/084-Homeopathy\\_Like\\_cures\\_like](http://www.drpelletier.com/TBAM/excerpts/084-Homeopathy_Like_cures_like)



quite well. **[Slide of snake shown.]**<sup>2</sup> The saw-scale viper is one of the top four most deadly snakes in the world. It makes a sizzling sound like a steak cooking when it's about to strike and causes a bite which burns like fire before it kills you. Although the snake likes to hide under rocks, it also likes to sun itself on shrubbery and can therefore strike people as high up as waist height, making it appear like it is flying at them out of the bushes. It is quite possible that the people of Israel encountered

this viper in the wilderness. People still do today. It is also likely that if the Israelites did, they would see the snakes as a punishment from God because they saw all negative events as punishments from God. Thus, this story could have been written to record a real incident.



The story also could have been written, according to some scholars, to explain how for a time snake worship was a part of Israel's worship practices, even after they made a covenant with Yahweh. It was a big part of the culture of the region both to fear and worship snakes. The Egyptians worshiped a snake god named Apep. In Greek mythology, Aesculapius, the god of medicine, was represented by a snake on a pole that looked a lot like the one associated with Moses, and Hermes, a divine messenger with the power of healing, was represented with a symbol called the Caduceus, which looks like a winged staff surrounded by two snakes. (Incidentally, the American Medical Association and the U.S. Army Medic Corps still use versions of both of these symbols for their healing ministry.) **[Slide of the Rod of Aesculapius and**

**the Caduceus shown.]** Perhaps the Israelites brought the snake worship idea with them when they left Egypt? Perhaps Moses' snake on a pole was later confused with Aesculapius so people started worshipping it? It's not clear which image was the first or when the worshipping started. All we know is that centuries later, when good king Hezekiah was determined to rid the nation of idols and idolatry, one of the first things he did was destroy a pole with a bronze snake on it that was kept in the Temple. He called the pole *Nehushtan*, "the bronze snake thing." "Get rid of that bronze snake thing," he commanded. "He and his subjects would worship Yahweh." (2 Kings 18:4).

The critical lesson of the *Numbers* story is neither that we better be good or God will sic snakes on us, nor that a traumatic experience in the desert somehow encouraged pagan snake worship to infiltrate Israel's worship of Yahweh, however. The lesson is that God desires to heal, not harm. Nothing we do is beyond God's power to forgive, and God will always be for us a source of healing and help. God provided the people of Israel with the antidote to the poison which threatened their lives because God wanted them to make it to the Promised Land. But they needed to learn that the only way they would do this was by putting their trust in God and God's way, even if they did not always like it or understand it.

<sup>2</sup> Haldar, Tanmay. "Echis carinatus (Saw Scaled Viper) Shot in Phansad wild life sanctuary in Maharashtra," September 28, 2013, Wikimedia, retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Echis\\_carinatus\(Saw\\_Scaled\\_Viper\)\\_Phansad.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Echis_carinatus(Saw_Scaled_Viper)_Phansad.jpg)

This is the message that Jesus was building on when he talked to Nicodemus one dark night. People love to quote *John* 3:16 famous words, “For God so loved the world...,” but you cannot really understand how God loved the world without also understanding 14 and 15 and 17 as well. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake,” Jesus said to Nicodemus, “So must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Again, some bible scholars have focused more on the snake here than on the message. They have either been shocked that Jesus would equate himself with a snake, because Christians typically associate snakes with evil or sin thanks to *Genesis* 3, or they have found the snake to be an apt metaphor for Jesus because there is enough countercultural bite to the Gospel that people have always felt threatened by his teachings. God loves all people not just some. God calls upon us to beware of riches. God demands that we love our enemies as ourselves, and seek to serve and not be served. The Gospel can seem life-threatening not life-giving if you are wedded to the ways of the world and don’t know Christ or trust God.

But I don’t think that we have to be quite so literal in our interpretation of Jesus’ snake analogy to understand his meaning. He wasn’t saying that *he* was a fiery viper or that the Gospel is threatening. He was trying to tell Nicodemus that just as God had provided the people of Israel with the antidote for the poison which threatened their lives, so God was going to provide in him the antidote to the sin which plagued humankind. “For God did not come to condemn the world,” he added, affirming the same message that the bronze snake had conveyed, “but so that the world might be saved through him.”

When we understand the passage this way, it is clear that the role for Christ which John was emphasizing with this story was the role of Savior. Jesus did not come to liberate the people of Israel from Roman oppression; he came as divine Savior to save all of humanity from the sting of life as well as the sting of death. I say life as well as death because in John’s gospel, “eternal life” is not a synonym for heaven or life after death. It is a term John uses primarily to describe living in relationship with God now. (See *John* 17:3). But both understandings of the term are implicated in this passage. So the story affirms that Jesus came to save humanity from being poisoned both currently and eternally by our sins.

We are used to hearing in the Church that Jesus died for our sins. One of the classic theories of atonement, known as substitutionary atonement, holds that Jesus “took on human sinfulness,” serving as a substitute sacrifice to appease God, so that humankind would not be condemned. But that theory, which over the past century has been increasingly under attack by contemporary theologians, views God in such a harsh, wrath-filled way. It affirms that “like cures like,” but only in the legal sense of vicarious liability, or in the sense that Jesus had to be fully human so that he could take on the sins and punishment of humanity.

In today’s passage, in contrast, Jesus’ act as Savior is painted in a much more positive way which is consistent with the loving God we know in Christ. Jesus is a divine antidote. He is our source of healing, like us in so many ways, but different from us because he was without sin. He is the medicine that we need. I don’t know about you, but for me this totally changes how I see and understand sinfulness. Classic atonement theory makes sins seem like crimes.

You break the rules you've got to pay your dues, or someone does. Sin is all about the things you can't do or must do or else you'll be in trouble and deserve punishment. But when we think of Jesus as Antidote Savior, then sin becomes about sickness. It becomes about the poison which threatens our lives. "Don't you see?" Jesus was saying. "Your ways are the way of death. God's ways are the way of life. Look at me. Believe in me. Listen to me. I am the cure. Take me into yourself so that you may live and thrive."

You don't have to look closely to see how sin is poisoning our world. All around us is evidence of the toxicity of uncontrolled anger, of the destructiveness of greed and covetousness, of the cancers which grow from human arrogance and selfishness. These sins do not simply poison the lives of those who feel them, they poison others as well because they inspire destructive behavior. In effect, they turn human beings into vipers, (or for the younger set here, they change sweet, helpful minions into scary purple monsters.) We need something to save us from ourselves. Yet if you tell people that God's Law says that we shouldn't judge each other or make our lives about material things, and that we must care for each other, even those we do not like, there is a good chance they will get their backs up and say "Mind your own business; I will do as I please." Human beings have always wanted to be our own bosses. We want to make our own choices, and will stubbornly insist on our poor choices just to defend our independent right to do that. But if you tell someone that what he or she is doing will make him or her sick, that certain behaviors will lead to serious illness or death, then the odds are better that the person will listen. Not everyone does of course. There will always be lung cancer victims who keep on smoking and people with heart disease who choose to eat Big Macs every day anyway. But I think that more people are willing to change their behavior to ensure their good health than are willing to change their behavior because a religious rule tells them to do so. That's why we need this concept of Jesus as Antidote Savior to become better known. It makes us fear or resent God less, and listen more. Jesus came to show us how to have good health, emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

When it comes to defeating the fiery snake of Sin and not the fiery saw-scale viper however, it isn't really sufficient for us simply to look upon Jesus as the Israelites looked upon the Nehushtan. It isn't even enough for us to believe in Jesus, either, at least not when it comes to being healthy in this life. If we really want to be free of the poison of sin, then we need to listen to Jesus. We need to do as he says. We need to put our trust in God and God's way even when we do not always understand it or like it. None of us will ever be able to do this to the degree that this side of heaven, we are completely sin-free. But with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can reach the point that the sin in our system is not as threatening to us or others.

What is the venom that most threatens your well-being? What is the poison in your heart and mind? Is it anger? Is it arrogance? Is it your unwillingness to change how you see others or your unwillingness to change how you see yourself? Perhaps you even worship the very things that harm you as the people in Moses' day did: money, power, control, food, or some other addictive substance or practice. Whatever it is, trust and believe that Jesus did not come to condemn you, he came to save you from it. "Those who are well have no need of a physician," Jesus said. "But those who are sick do. I have come to call not the righteous, but the sinners." (*Mark 2:17*). Jesus came so that we would have the antidote we need to defuse the venom,

defeat the snakes, and be able to move with God into the Promised Land. Look at him, believe in him, listen to him, and follow him, so that in this life and the next we may all have healthy life, and have it abundantly. Amen.