

Snake – symbol of healing and harm

Charles Garner considers the Palestine Viper!

Worshippers at Jerusalem's Western Wall were terrified when a large snake emerged through the cracks as they were praying quite recently. It's not a good idea to get too close to these reptiles until the time of the Millennial reign of the Prince of Peace when a "*young child will put its hand into the viper's nest*" and not be harmed (Isaiah 11.8f).

Although the snake has the dubious honour of being depicted as Satan in the Bible, its status was somewhat redeemed into a symbol of healing as a result of God's instruction to Moses when the Israelites were dying of snakebite in the Wilderness. He was told to make a bronze serpent which, if victims focused on, would heal them from the poison. (Numbers 21.8f) This is still symbolised on the badges of the military medical services.



The Palestine Viper!

Many Israelites had died from snakebite as a result of a plague of venomous snakes sent among them by the Lord himself because they were complaining against God and Moses. In the event they subsequently acknowledged their sin and repented, causing the Lord to instruct Moses: *“Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”* And that’s just what happened.

This incident clearly foreshadowed what Jesus did for us all on the cross – that all who believe in him, who mark their hearts (or doorposts of their soul) with his atoning blood, will inherit eternal life. Jesus told the believing Pharisee Nicodemus: *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”* (John 3.14)

It was through an explanation of this verse that Nick Howard, son of former Conservative Party leader Michael Howard, became a committed follower of Jesus. Nick had been impressed by the claims of Christianity at a meeting he attended in school, but didn’t think it was for him because he was Jewish.

He had been very conscious of the suffering experienced by his family during the Holocaust, but it hadn’t given him the answers to life’s biggest questions. Then, at 15, he went along to a meeting organised by a Christian group where a pastor named Jonathan Fletcher spoke on the gospel verse quoted above.

“Jonathan explained that our rebellion against God was more serious than a lethal snakebite, but that Jesus was willingly nailed to the cross to solve that problem by taking the punishment for sin that we deserved. All we have to do is ‘look and live’.”

He then reassured Nick that being Jewish was no obstacle – far from it, in fact. “Jesus himself was Jewish!” he explained. “He’s the Jewish Messiah – the one the Jews were waiting for down the centuries. If you follow him, you’ll be following your own Messiah.”

When Nick read Isaiah chapter 53, he was amazed to discover it was all about Jesus. A friend of his, who is also a Jewish believer, likes to say that Jesus fits the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah like a finger fits its own fingerprint.

Now an Anglican minister in New York, Nick says: “In the light of all this, you might well ask why so few Jews believe in Jesus. One answer is the sad history of persecution by Christians, and another is because so few have heard that it is possible.”

Isaiah 52.7 says: “*How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news...who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’*” We need more Jonathans in the world, Nick concludes. “May God raise up many others like him to tell Jewish people throughout the world to look with faith at Jesus, their Messiah, and live forever.”¹

As Nick discovered, the figurative serpent lifted up for all snakebite victims to be healed just by looking at it is a prophetic picture of the Messiah to come, Jesus, who would atone for the sin of all who put their trust in his blood. Indeed, he is also healer of body and soul, as another Isaiah 53 verse plainly tells us: “*The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*” (Isa 53.5b) The Bible further tells us that there will come a day when “*all Israel will be saved*” in this way when they look upon “*the one they have pierced*” (Zech 12.10).

The devil wants to destroy Israel, but God will turn even the worst intentions of the enemy to good as the brothers of the Jewish Messiah recognise him as their Saviour (see Gen 45.4-8).

As it happens, the Palestine Viper has recently been recognised (by Israel’s Society for the Protection of Nature and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority) as Israel’s national snake, provoking the farcical, though not entirely surprising, response from the Palestinian Authority accusing the Jews of stealing their snake!²

So now they are fighting over a snake. Someone is sure to get bitten.

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