COMMENTARY ON NUMBERS 21:4-9

When Hezekiah became the 14th king of the southern kingdom of Judah in approximately 716 B.C., one of his first acts, according to 2 Kings (18:4), was to destroy Nehushtan, "the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it." Today's reading from the book of Numbers (21:4-9) is the etiological explanation for the origin of the cult object idolized by the Israelites and destroyed by Hezekiah.

Nehushtan is a play on the Hebrew root for both "snake" and "bronze," although there is some question whether both words can be traced back to the same root (BDB lists four different roots with the letters n-ch-sh; see the lexicon Brown-Driver-Briggs, pp. 638-39). Whether the roots are linguistically the same, the popular etymology clearly linked them and their attendant stories.

The bronze serpent fashioned by Moses is referred to five times in the Bible: Numbers 21:4-9; 2 Kings 18:4; Wisdom of Solomon 16:5-7; John 3:14; and 1 Corinthians 10:9. Of the five, the account of Hezekiah's reforms probably contains the most reliable historical kernel, for which the Numbers story is explanatory (etiological) and the Wisdom, Johannine and Pauline references are theologically interpretative.

Serpent imagery is widespread in world religions, and copper alloy or bronze representations of serpents have been found in numerous Bronze Age sites in Syria-Palestine (e.g., Megiddo, Gezer, Hazor and Shechem). The serpent appears to have been a stock religious image in Syria-Palestine from the middle of the second millennium B.C. through the first millennium B.C. (see L. K. Handy, "Serpent, Bronze," Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. V, [New York: Doubleday, 1992],1117). Serpents were associated with various deities, often with healing aspects (the best known to contemporary westerners, of course, being Asclepius).

Although both literal and metaphorical serpents are generally depicted negatively in the OT -- beginning with the wily talking serpent in the Garden of Eden, Genesis 3:1-5 -- the story of the bronze serpent appears to be the Israelite version of the widespread association of a healing serpent with a patron deity, in this case, Yahweh. Literal serpents were ordinarily regarded with fear in the biblical text, and serpent imagery usually conveyed danger, surprise, mystery, pain, disgust, and death (e.g., Genesis 49:17; Exodus 4:3; Deuteronomy 8:15; Psalm 140:3; Proverbs 30:19; Ecclesiastes 10:8, 11; Isaiah 14:29; Jeremiah 8:17, 46:22; Amos 5:19; Micah 7:17; Ecclesiasticus 21:2; Matthew 7:10, 23:33; etc.).

In its current literary context, the Numbers passage is an episode in the long wilderness narrative, which recounts the experiences of the Israelites from the time of their liberation from Egypt in the exodus (Exodus 12:33ff) to their arrival at the edge of the promised land (at the end of the book of Deuteronomy). One of the leitmotifs running through that narrative is the "murmuring in the wilderness" theme, a series of vignettes in which the people of Israel complain about their hardships, are punished, repent and are restored to divine favor. (See, for example, the stories in Exodus 14:10-12, 15:24-25, 16:2-3; Numbers 11:1-3; etc.) Today's reading is the last and most serious of the complaint
stories insofar as the people complain not just against Moses, as they ordinarily do, but also against God (v. 5, using the generic Hebrew word for God, ‘elohim, rather than the personal name of Israel's patron deity, Yahweh).

Where, exactly, the Hebrew people are when the incident occurs is uncertain, as the location of "Mount Hor" (v. 4) is not known. The place name "Hor" always occurs with the definite article in Hebrew, suggesting not necessarily a single mountain but rather a mountain range. All the biblical references point to a location somewhere on the border of Edom, and of the two locations commonly posited -- Jebel Nevi Harun and Jabel Madurah -- the latter is the more likely candidate.

Although the references in the exodus narrative to the "Red Sea" translate the Hebrew words yam suf, "Sea of Reeds" (e.g., Exodus 10:19; 13:18; 15:4, 22; Numbers 14:25; 33:10, 11; Deuteronomy 1:40; etc.), in this particular case, a location somewhere near the Gulf of Aqaba, the eastern branch of the Red Sea, makes sense. (The western branch of the Red Sea is the Gulf of Suez.) The Hebrews have been denied passage by the Edomites through their country, which touches the Gulf of Aqaba, so movement toward the actual Red Sea would make sense as a backtracking maneuver.

The people's complaint has the ring of a joke about it: There's no food here, and it's miserable (v. 5). The people had voiced similar complaints before (see, e.g., Exodus 15:24, 17:3 [lack of water]; Exodus 16:2; Numbers 11:1-4 [lack of food]), which were always understood by the biblical writers as evidence of the people's lack of faith in both Yahweh and his servant-prophet, Moses.

The deity's response to the people's complaint is punitive: "Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died" (v. 6). The words translated "poisonous serpents" are literally "fiery serpents," using the Hebrew word seraphim, the plural substantive from the verb meaning "to burn," found also (and only) at Isaiah 6:2, 6, Isaiah's famous temple vision. The English nouns "seraph" and "seraphim" are transliterations of the Hebrew words, which apparently referred to something like winged cobras, represented in Egyptian, Syro-Phoenician and Israelite art. Neither the seraphim in Isaiah nor the cherubim guarding the gate to Eden (Genesis 3:24) and the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:18) were the ethereal singing angelic beings or chubby babies of later western art; they were ferocious mythological beings (probably derived from deities) in service to Yahweh as protective attendants.

Snakes abound in the Sinai; estimates place the number of different species at somewhere between 30 and 40, of which about seven are poisonous. From an ancient Egyptian manual on the treatment of snakebites now in the Brooklyn Museum (the Brooklyn Medical Papyrus, from the 30th dynasty, c. 380-43 B.C.) we learn that the horned viper (Cerastes cornutus and Cerastes cerastes) was one of the most feared serpents, in part, perhaps, because of its habit of hurling itself at its victim during its strike; perceiving that this dangerous serpent was flying would have been an obvious (and not grossly inaccurate) conclusion of a terrified victim or bystander (see touregypt.net/featurestories/snakesofegypt.htm. Retrieved Oct. 1, 2011).
Moses is instructed to fashion a replica of the fiery serpents, which he makes of bronze (v. 9) and mounts conspicuously on a pole, so that a person bitten by a serpent could simply look at the serpent of bronze, and survive. The use of a physical object or gesture to ward off evil -- apotropaism, as looking at the bronze serpent functions here -- was practiced in ancient Israel and remains entrenched in folk culture around the world today. The most famous example of an apotropaic device in the biblical text is the blood of the Passover lamb smeared on the doorposts and lintel of the Israelite homes in Egypt (Exodus 12:23). That text explicitly identifies a "destroyer" who will pass over the houses protected by the lamb's blood. The same basic idea, after several permutations, is expressed in the Christian theological formulation of forensic atonement, i.e., that Jesus' sacrificial blood, remembered in the rite of the Eucharist, protects believers from the divine wrath their sinfulness merits, and is referenced by Jesus himself in today's gospel reading.