

# The Brazen Serpent

Rod Reynolds

**Question: God commanded that no carved images were to be made (Exodus 20:4). Yet God told Moses to make a “serpent of brass” -or brazen serpent- (Numbers 21:9, KJV). Why?**

Answer: The episode concerning the “brazen serpent” (as it’s sometimes referred to)[1] does seem a little strange, perhaps, at first blush. The area through which Israel traveled to get to the promised land was a harsh environment, dry, and with dangerous animals such as poisonous snakes, lizards, and scorpions (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown *Commentary*, and other sources). Where this incident took place seems to have been particularly infested with such creatures (Deuteronomy 8:15).

Heretofore, God had evidently protected the camp from being infested with poisonous reptiles. But upon their complaining and rebellion God removed his protection (Numbers 21:5-6).

The people, apparently realizing their error in opposing God and Moses, asked for forgiveness (Numbers 21:7). God could have simply restored the protection that they had enjoyed previously. But he apparently wanted to teach them a lesson. He had Moses make an image of a serpent and set it upon a pole, that could be seen from the entire camp. Then if someone was bitten, he was to look at the image, and would live (Numbers 21:8-9).

Having to look at this image would have reminded the Israelites of their previous complaining and rebellion, and the outcome. It would remind them that they were under God’s supervision and protection, and that in order to enjoy his favor they would be wise to obey his commands, as only by following his command to look at the fiery serpent image could they be assured of being healed of the bite of a poisonous reptile. It was a symbol of God’s punishment, the bite of the poisonous reptile, and as God had sent the punishment he could remove it or cure it if they had faith in him.

Of course it would be a test of faith for them to look to God for their healing, and not begin to believe the image itself was the source of their healing.

God knew how shallow their repentance was, and how fickle they were. This was a way of disciplining this unruly crowd and keeping them under control. Remember, very few among them were actually converted, as demonstrated time and again by their conduct.

This was not intended to be something permanent, but a temporary reminder for them in the wilderness.

The fundamental commands concerning idolatry include:

“You shall have no other gods before Me [or ‘besides Me,’ as it could be translated, cf. [Deuteronomy 32:39](#)]. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” ([Exodus 20:3-6](#)).

The command is that only God is to be worshiped, and no image is to be made intended to picture God, or represent God, or to be worshiped.

Based on these principles, we also read the following instructions from God through Moses: “Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth. And take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them, which the Lord your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage” ([Deuteronomy 4:15-19](#)).

So we see that the worship of any image, or anything, person or object, is forbidden. Only God himself is to be worshiped, and not in the form of any image or created thing whatsoever.

There is no prohibition against images for purely decorative purposes, or as ensigns, etc., (compare [Numbers 2:2](#); [1 Kings 6:29, 32](#)), but none is to be worshiped nor intended to picture or be a likeness in some way of God. None of the images or objects associated with the temple service were to be worshiped. The “Cherubim” mentioned in 1 Kings 6 had four faces: of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle ([Ezekiel 1:10](#)). Perhaps these are what were carved on the temple walls and doors (cf. [Ezekiel 41:18-20](#)).

In any case, we advise against harboring of images or pictures of “angels,” as first of all we don’t really know fully what they look like. There’s no indication in the Bible that any of them look like some of the images often purported to be “angels,” such as women or babies with wings. Moreover, such images lend themselves all too readily to superstition and idolatry ([Colossians 2:18](#)).

God was no doubt aware of the Israelites’ propensity toward the worship of idols. But it was not his intent that the brazen serpent become an object of worship nor be considered an image of any god, much less himself.

Of course, the Israelites did what they typically did, they disregarded God’s commands and made an object of worship out of the brazen serpent ([2 Kings 18:4](#)). Did God know or was he able to predict with relative certainty that they would eventually do this? Very likely. But he also placed the sun, moon and stars in the heavens, and knew the propensity of mankind to worship these, yet commanded them not to do so ([Deuteronomy 4:19](#)).

As in other matters, the Israelites had a choice: They could either obey God or reject his commands concerning the brazen serpent. As time wore on, they chose the latter, although the righteous king of Judah, Hezekiah, eventually destroyed it so it could no longer be misused in that way ([2 Kings 18:4](#)).

Jesus later used the episode of the brazen serpent as an analogy of how he was to be “lifted up,” and thus be the one through whom salvation was possible ([John 3:14](#); [8:28](#); [12:32-34](#)). Of course this analogy soon breaks down, as the brazen serpent was not intended as a representation of God, nor did it have any capacity whatsoever, of itself, to save anyone. But Christ is God, and he does have the power to save ([John 1:1, 10-12](#); [Acts 5:31](#)). The only real similarity is that both were “lifted up.”

The lesson in this is that we should always be careful to reverence and obey God. It is through him alone, not some idol or other means, that we can have salvation ([Acts 4:12](#)).

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Notes

[1] The Hebrew is variously translated “brass,” “brasen,” “bronze,” “brazen.” It indicates copper or a copper alloy.

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Messenger Church of God  
PO Box 542  
Peculiar, MO 64078  
USA